

# **The War Against Parents: What We Can Do for America's Beleaguered Moms & Dads**

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*Excerpt from I. Struggling Parents Then & Now  
"Parents & National Survival"*

We parents are so used to being trampled on, sneered at, or just plain ignored that we often fail to understand how embattled we are. But occasionally some especially flagrant example of parent-bashing grabs our attention and we catch our breath.

**Sylvia Ann Hewlett:** A few months after my book *When the Bough Breaks* came out in paperback, I was invited to discuss issues of parental overload and child neglect on the Larry King Radio show. Gary called in to talk to Larry King and me. He was 27-years old and lived in Phoenix, Arizona. Gary wanted to talk about what was going on in his family.

He and his wife had just put their three-week-old baby daughter in a kennel. "A kennel!" we cried in unison, shocked and disbelieving. 'You put your baby in a kennel?' 'Hold on,' Gary said, becoming defensive. "Let me explain."

Gary and his wife, Brenda, both worked full-time. He was a maintenance person at a local office complex; she worked as a checkout clerk at a convenience store. Together they earned \$13,000 a year, a sum of money that "didn't go a whole distance in Phoenix." After taxes their joint take-home pay was just over \$400 a week, half of which went to pay the rent. When their daughter, Jenny, was born, they found themselves dealing with some heavy-duty problems. To begin with, neither of their jobs carried medical insurance, and consequently Jenny's birth triggered some huge bills: \$3,930, to be precise. As Gary put it, "Jenny will be three years old before we have paid off the obstetrician." Another problem was that neither of them was entitled to parenting leave. They worked for small employers and did not qualify for job-protected leave under the terms of the Family and Medical Leave Act, which excludes businesses with fewer than fifty employees. Brenda couldn't simply quit her job, as Gary's paycheck did not even cover rent and utilities.

They coped with the actual birth by fudging and lying through their teeth. Brenda called in sick for ten days and then used up a week of accumulated vacation. When Jenny was two and a half weeks old, they hit the day-care market in Phoenix and found that the only thing they could afford was informal family day care, which in their neighborhood boiled down to a private home where two elderly women, unlicensed and untrained, looked after eighteen babies and toddlers. When Gary dropped Jenny off, he discovered to his horror that the other children were strapped into car seats, watching television, dirty and disconsolate. Despite a frantic search, Gary and Brenda had up till then failed to find something better. Their budget was \$40 a week, tops, and this was what \$40 bought you on the private day-care market in Phoenix. In Gary's caustic words, 'Dogs and cats have a better deal-at least kennels are tightly regulated in this city and are required to live up to some kind of standard of cleanliness and care.'

Gary's parting shot was bitter: 'We're not welfare cheats, we're just regular Americans working as hard

as we know how to do the right thing for our kid. Why is it so difficult? Why is every- thing stacked against us? We feel such shame that we can't do better by our baby.' His voice rose in raw, sharp pain as he faded off the air.

Caring, nurturing, cherishing-the essential components of good parenting-have less and less support in our society. These non-market values and activities have been pushed to the margins by the dominant forces of American life. The stakes could not be higher as the painful struggle of individual adults such as Gary and Brenda is much more than a private tragedy. When parents are so seriously disabled that they cannot perform their central functions, the results are disastrous for our nation-and the fallout on children is quite lethal.

In the late 1990s, America's children are spinning out of control. Hundreds of thousands are hurting and killing; millions more are failing to thrive. Child poverty rates are up and SAT scores are down, teen suicide rates have doubled since the 1970s, and child homicide rates have quadrupled since the mid- 1980s. In the words of one blue-ribbon commission, "Never before has one generation of American children been less healthy, less cared for, or less prepared for life than their parents were at the same age."

There is an urgent and desperate need to pay attention to this state of affairs, for children are not some fringe group, some bit players. Children are 100 % of our collective future, and if we continue on our present course, this great nation will most surely tear itself to shreds.

Highlighting our problems-and our national shame--is the fact that most of these terrible trends are unique to the United States. In Germany, France, and Japan, for example, child poverty rates and school dropout rates are extremely low. A child is twenty times more likely to be killed in New York than in Paris or Bonn, and seventy times more likely to be killed in Dallas than in Tokyo.'

So why has America visited such treachery on its children? At the center of our children's agony is an enormous erosion of the parenting role. Moms and dads are increasingly unable to look after their children, with the result that our entire web of care is breaking down, blighting the lives of young people.

The fact is, too many parents have tuned out. Too many children have been left home alone, to raise themselves on a thin and cruel diet of junk food, gangster rap, and trash talk shows. More and more babies are being born without a skin-with none of that protective armor that in the past was provided by loving parents and supportive communities. Increasingly, these exposed, "skin- less' children are being buffeted by a ruthless market and a poisonous culture. Many of the more vulnerable have become infected or burned, their bodies and their souls stunted and seared by the onslaught of neglect and greed.

However devastating this burgeoning tide of parental

neglect, simply heaping blame on overburdened moms and dads will not solve our problems. Modern-day mothers and fathers, like those before them, struggle to put children at the center of their lives. But major impediments and obstacles stand in their way, undermining their most valiant efforts. From early in the morning till late at night, America's parents are battered by all kinds of pressures, most of which are not of their making. The truth is, the whole world is stacked against them. If parents cannot give a childhood to their children, it is not their fault. Over the course of the last thirty years, public policy and private decision-making have tilted heavily against the altruistic non-market activities that comprise the essence of parenting. In recent years, big business, government, and the wider culture have waged an undeclared and silent war against parents.

A myopic government increasingly fails to protect or support parents, while an unfettered market is allowed to take up more and more private space. Our leaders talk as though they value families but act as though families were a last priority. Sooner or later, worn-out moms and dads get the message that devoting their best time to raising children is a mug's game—a lonely, thankless undertaking that cuts against the grain of all that is valued in our society.

### **A Hostile Media**

Just think of the sound bites of our culture. In the opening episode of the popular television show *My So-Called Life*, the lead character, a depressed fifteen-year-old, says to herself, 'Lately, I can't seem to even look at my mother without wanting to stab her repeatedly.' In an article entitled 'Father Knows Squat,' the *Washington Post* points out that in the media, parents are one of the few remaining groups that are regularly ridiculed, caricatured, and marginalized. On television, parents tend to be blustering bores, miserly boobs, overprotective fools, or just plain dopey and twerpy. One show, *Party of Five*, has done away with parents entirely, killing them off in a car crash before the series began.

### **Government Tilts Against Parents**

The political establishment can be as hostile as the media. In recent years government has pulled the rug from under adults raising children, because neither the right nor the left of our political culture values or supports the work that parents do.

Many conservatives refuse to recognize the ways in which market values destroy family values. In elemental ways, they do not get it. They fail to understand that we need to rein in free enterprise if we are going to create the conditions that support parents and nurture children. A free and unfettered labor market, for example, can

seriously undermine family life by exerting enormous downward pressure on wage levels for young, child-raising adults. This is exactly what has happened over the last twenty years. Successive administrations, abandoning any notion of a social contract, have gotten out of the business of maintaining the value of the minimum wage, providing legal protections for labor unions, or placing limits on out-of-control corporate greed.

Conservatives who espouse family values face a Herculean challenge on the economic front. Are they prepared to redistribute income and wealth in order to relieve the pressures on young families? It seems unlikely. Redistribution requires government action and interference with market mechanisms, and today's conservatives are virulently opposed to both. Those on the right simply do not understand that government must play a pivotal role if we are to develop the social supports we need to counter the family-destroying and parent-displacing properties of the market. Bolstering the earning power of child-raising adults is just one of the ways in which government must intervene if moms and dads are to be effective and whole-hearted parents. Such intervention is taken for granted elsewhere. France and Germany, for example, have developed tax codes that give huge privileges to families with children. Other rich democracies seem to understand that parenting cannot be left to the tender mercies of the marketplace.

Not so very long ago, conservatives were willing to provide parents with serious help on the child-raising front by spearheading various kinds of family-friendly policies. Remember the 1950s, that golden age of the American family? Well, we often forget that the fifties family was a creature of supportive government programs, at least some of which were put in place by President Eisenhower an unabashed conservative. That was an era when children were this nation's most important tax shelter: parents were able to claim a deduction of \$6,500 (in 1996 dollars) for each dependent child." It was a time when the GI Bill and the Highway Act significantly subsidized the education and housing needs of millions of American families,

But myopia is not limited to today's conservatives. Liberals are also destroying the parental role. Many on the left fail to understand that we need to rein in untrammelled individualism if we are to recreate the values that nurture family life. The extraordinary emphasis in left-wing circles on the rights and freedoms of the individual has seriously compromised those altruistic, other-directed energies that are the stuff of parenting. Liberal divorce laws, for example, have produced a situation in which adults can choose marriage partners two, three, or four times with no particular penalty, regardless of how many children are betrayed or abandoned. And liberal welfare policies permit fifteen- and seventeen-year-olds to bear and raise children out of wedlock—indeed,

through Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), now called Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), government supports these teenagers, albeit grudgingly. The new freedom of individuals to choose single parenthood is, of course, not limited to poor teens. Madonna certainly didn't think she needed a husband in order to have a child.

Despite this qualification, the overwhelming message from progressive, liberal folks in Hollywood is *Who needs a husband to have a child?* The problem here is that there are real conflicts between adult rights to freedom of choice and a child's well-being. Madonna may not want to deal with a male partner, but most children do much better in life when they can count on the loving attention of both a mother and a father.

At the end of the day, both conservatives and liberals clobber children. Take your pick, right or left, it doesn't matter; in contemporary America both ideologies are dangerously blind when it comes to creating the conditions that allow men and women to give real priority to the difficult and glorious business of cherishing children.

### **Free Female Labor**

For more than a century, a variety of scholars and social commentators have paid tribute to the non-market work done by women in American society. Much more recently, the psychologist Carol Gilligan has made a distinction between the voices of men and women. In her highly acclaimed 1982 book, *In a Different Voice*, she describes how men gravitate toward the instrumental and the impersonal and emphasize abstract principles, while women lean toward intimacy and caring and give priority to human relationships.

Prior to the 1960s, when more families were organized along traditional lines than is true today, women provided this voice of care, which knitted together family and community. At least in the middle classes, a clear division of labor between the sexes allowed women to devote huge amounts of time to nourishing and nurturing: they read bedtime stories, helped with homework, wrapped presents, attended parent-teacher conferences, and taught Sunday school. But in the 1970s, the myriad selfless tasks that were the stuff of raising kids and building communities went by the board as American society underwent a sea change. Traditional patterns were broken by a liberation movement that often encouraged women to clone the male competitive model in the marketplace, and by a new set of economic pressures that increasingly required both parents to be in the paid labor force to sustain any semblance of middle-class life.

Before getting too nostalgic about traditional roles, however, we should remember that the sacrificial load carried by at-home women was often hard to bear. Many spent their entire lives laboring to serve the needs of

others. Gilligan tells us that the main change wrought by feminism was that it "enabled women to consider it moral to care not only for others but also for themselves."

Since the beginning of this nation, women of color have toiled both in the workplace—often in a white woman's kitchen—and in their own homes. In a very real sense, their contribution to family and community has been even more heroic than that of middle-class women. In sustained and steadfast ways, they have looked after the children of affluent white women in addition to their own, and they have received very little in the way of recompense or recognition. Black women thus have done double duty and been doubly invisible.

This brief historical excursion helps explain why the shortcomings of our nation on the parent-support front were until recently cloaked by the existence of a deep and largely invisible reservoir of free female labor. For generations women spent huge chunks of their lives making the non-market investments in family and community that underpin our nation. By nurturing children and by nourishing a web of care that included neighborhood and township, women created the competence and character upon which our democracy and our economy depended. Thus, the invisible labor of women comprised nothing less than the bedrock of America's prosperity and power.'

As we move into the twenty-first century, it is clear that relying on free and invisible female labor as the well-spring of our social and human capital no longer works. Modern women are intent on a fair measure of self-realization, and besides, the economic facts of family life preclude a return to traditional structures. Failing male wages and sky-high rates of single parenthood make it hard to spin out a scenario in which large numbers of women (or men) have the option of staying home on a full-time basis.

### **Fathers Under Siege**

If the work done by mothers has been rendered invisible—or used to exact a price in the labor market—fathers have come under special attack by programs and policies oblivious to the importance of the father-child bond. Over the last thirty years, divorce reform and the enormous expansion of our welfare system have conspired to make it extremely difficult for a large proportion of American men—somewhere between a third and a half—either to live with or to stay in effective touch with their children. Aid to Families with Dependent Children is a case in point. In retrospect, it seems clear that AFDC, the nationwide program that for three decades provided the lion's share of income support for poor families, was set up so as to deliberately exclude fathers. The rules held that if an able-bodied man resided in a household, a woman with dependent children was unable to claim

benefits for herself and her children. This caused men to be literally pushed out of the nest. Not only did these AFDC regulations create a huge disincentive to marry; they made it extremely difficult for poor men to become fathers to their children. These government-sponsored rules help explain why out-of-wedlock births in the black community leapt from 21% in 1960 to 69.8 % in 1996.

The anti-father bias in our public policies has found its clearest expression in the demonization of deadbeat dads. Public outrage on this subject was triggered by a 1989 Census Bureau report entitled "Child Support and Alimony," which described how more than a quarter of all non-custodial fathers were absent from their children's lives and paid nothing in the way of child support. Shocking and shameful as these findings are, some factors were overlooked. To begin with, almost 40 % of the "absent fathers" described in this report had neither custody nor visitation rights and therefore no ability to connect with their children. It seems odd to call them by the pejorative term "absent" when they have no right to be present. It is probably unrealistic to think we can keep in place all the obligations of traditional parenthood without its main reward: loving contact with a child. Yet, rather than create policies that help non-custodial parents connect with their children, all we seem capable of doing is cracking down some more on deadbeat dads.

One thing we do know: the huge increase in fatherlessness goes some distance toward explaining why so many youngsters are out of control. There is now a weight of evidence connecting fatherlessness with child poverty, juvenile crime, and teen suicide.

### **The Parent-Child Bond**

This brings us to the heart of the matter: if the center of this nation is to hold, we have to learn to give new and self-conscious value to the art and practice of parenting. It can no longer be left to invisible female labor or the tender mercies of the market. Make no mistake about it: the work of moms and dads is of utmost importance to our nation. At a fundamental level of analysis, the parent-child bond is the strongest and most primeval of all human attachments. When it weakens and frays, devastating consequences ripple through our nation, because this elemental bond is the ultimate source of connectedness in society.

Who will provide this transforming love? The obvious candidates are parents, because it is mothers and fathers, above other adults, who tend to fall crazily in love with their children. As the child psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner has shown, children thrive on huge amounts of "irrational, emotional attachment," most often the gift of a mother or a father but in exceptional cases provided by a devoted grandparent or some other caregiver. This is the magical force that provides the basis for self-love and

self-esteem. And once a child has learned to love himself or herself, that child is able to care deeply about others. Thus parental love not only contributes powerfully to the development of a fully human being, it also nourishes and sustains the larger society. When a child is deprived of parental love, that youngster is liable to grow up in an infantilized state. This is a recipe for violence, against oneself and against others, for anger and aggression remain raw and exposed, intemperate by a commitment to anyone or anything. It is also a recipe for civic collapse.

Problems triggered by divorce, teen pregnancy, school failure, and substance abuse are no longer confined to the ghetto. They reach deep into the middle class; they belong to "us" as well as to "them." Out-of-control children aren't always other people's kids. They come in all sizes, shapes, and colors, and from affluent neighborhoods as well as down-at-heel city 'hoods. Kids who do bad things have highly educated parents as well as barely literate ones. A recent Carnegie Corporation report describes the depth and reach of our child-related problems: "Nearly half of American adolescents are at high or moderate risk of seriously damaging their life chances. The damage may be near term and vivid, or it may be delayed, like a time bomb set in youth."

Substance abuse is also on the increase among teens. The use of illegal drugs by adolescents increased significantly between 1992. and 1995. This represents a reversal of earlier downward trends. In 1996 the government reported troubling increases in drug use in all age groups. For example, between 1992 and 1995 the use of marijuana by high school seniors increased by 63 %, while the use of inhalants such as glues, aerosols, and solvents by eighth-graders increased 28 %.

One thing seems clear enough from this brief survey: not only are American children failing to thrive; in several critical respects, their condition and life circumstances are steadily deteriorating. Overall, they lead more dangerous and more poverty-stricken lives than children did thirty, twenty, or even five years ago. They are also less likely to succeed in school and more likely to experiment with drugs, and many are depressed and seriously self-destructive. It is particularly distressing to realize that children in America are at much greater risk than children elsewhere in the advanced industrial world. Although the United States ranks second worldwide in per capita income, this country does not even make it into the top ten on any significant indicator of child welfare.

Unfortunately, there is much less of this precious parenting energy than there used to be. The last three decades have seen a sharp decline in the amount of time parents spend caring for their children. Stanford University economist Victor Fuchs has shown that the amount of parental time available to children fell considerably in the 1970s and 1980s; white children lost ten hours a week of parental time, while black children lost twelve hours. Us-

ing a more recent data set, economist Edward Wolff demonstrated that over a thirty-year time span, parental time has declined 13 %. The time parents have available for their children has been squeezed by the rapid shift of mothers into the paid labor force, by escalating divorce rates and the subsequent abandonment of children by their fathers, and by an increase in the number of hours required on the job. The average worker is now at work 163 hours a year more than in 1969, which adds up to an extra month of work annually.

The increasing inability of adults to devote significant time to children has left millions of youngsters fending for themselves, coping more or less badly with the difficult business of growing up in the nineties. True, some children continue to be raised in supportive communities by thoughtful, attentive parents, but this is not the overall drift of society. Contemporary America is populated by overworked, stressed-out parents who are increasingly unable to be there for their children

If a divorced father hasn't seen his son in six weeks or if a mother is working a sixteen-hour day, it's almost impossible to conjure up the sustained, steadfast attention that is the stuff of good parenting. Child-raising is not some mysterious process; adults have been engaged in it since the beginning of time, long before we had experts or manuals. At the heart of the matter is time, huge amounts of it, freely given. Whatever the child-raising technique, a child simply does better with loving, committed, long-term attention from both mom and dad.

A weight of evidence now demonstrates ominous links between absentee parents and an entire range of behavioral and emotional problems in children. A study that surveyed 5,000 eighth-grade students in the San Diego and Los Angeles areas found that the more hours children were left by themselves after school, the greater the risk of substance abuse was. In fact, home-alone children as a group were twice as likely to drink alcohol and take drugs as children who were supervised by a parent or another adult family member after school. The study found that this increased risk of substance abuse held true regardless of the child's sex, race, or economic status.

In a similar vein, a recent survey of 90,000 teenagers—the largest and most comprehensive study ever conducted on adolescent behavior—found that youngsters are less likely to engage in suicidal behavior, become violent, or use drugs if they are closely connected to their parents." This study found that the mere physical presence of a parent in the home after school, at dinner, and at bedtime significantly reduces the incidence of risky behavior among teenagers, a finding reinforced by recent research at the Harvard School of Public Health. Jody Heymann and Alison Earle show that parental evening work has extremely negative effects on the home environment and on children's cognitive and emotional devel-

opment.

A 1997 report prepared for the Department of Justice demonstrates the scope of these negative effects. According to FBI data, the peak hours for violent juvenile crime are now 3:00 PM to 8:00 PM. This can be attributed to a huge drop-off in the number of parents available to supervise their children after school. In 1970, 57 % of school-age children had at least one parent at home on a full-time basis; by 1995, this figure had fallen to 29 %. Experts estimate that somewhere between 5 and 7 million latchkey children go home to an empty house after school and that fully a third of all twelve-year-olds are regularly left to fend for themselves while their parents are at work. These children are at significantly greater risk of truancy, school failure, substance abuse, and violent behavior than children who have a parent at home.

Besides insulating a child from risk and warding off potential harm, parents make a large contribution to a child's success in school. Twenty years ago, Chicago sociologist James S. Coleman demonstrated that parental involvement mattered far more in determining student achievement than any attribute of the formal education system. Across a wide range of subject areas, in literature, science, and reading, Coleman estimated that the parent was almost twice as powerful as the school in determining achievement at age fourteen.

Therefore, the erosion of the parental function has immense implications in both the public and the private sphere: it jeopardizes our society as well as our souls. When parenting breaks down, it is an unmitigated disaster for the individual child. But it is much more than that, for the altruistic energy of moms and dads contributes enormously to our store of human and social capital and thus conditions the strength of our economy and the vitality of our democracy.

So how do we turn this thing around? How do we somehow give new and self-conscious value to the art and practice of parenting? It is not a simple matter, this task of creating a public morality and a political culture that will support the heroic work of mothers and fathers. The obstacles are enormous.

On the left, we rub up against a fierce attachment to untrammelled lives. Over the last thirty years we grown-ups have gotten used to being extraordinarily free. We have cut ourselves loose from most moral and religious constraints and acquired a new set of emotional and sexual liberties. Many of us revel in an unprecedented range of choice. In the spirit of Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*, we have tasted our new freedoms and find them 'quite glorious.'"

On the right, we rub up against a blind faith in markets and a deep distrust of state intervention. In recent years conservatives have badmouthed government so thoroughly that it has become extraordinarily difficult for anyone on the right to acknowledge that government is

capable of doing any good-that it can be instrumental in providing indispensable social support and in creating a public morality that supports the sacrificial energy of parents. Conservatives seem light-years away from acknowledging that contemporary parents need enormous amounts of help-not grudging help, not marginal help, but big-time heavy lifting-if they are to conjure up the altruistic energies that allow children to thrive. In the manner of the fifties, this help should be directed to strengthening rather than displacing moms and dads.

We must also remember that the nuances of this project are critical. No progressive person wants family if "family" translates into oppressive husbands and abused wives. And no progressive person wants community if "community" translates into "black jelly beans" sticking "to the bottom of the bag." However, rejecting racism, patriarchy, and homophobia need not mean retreating to a version of the liberal project in which freedom is boiled down to the ability to function as a lone individual within a heavily competitive market society. Most grownups fail to flourish in such a thin universe, and children are seriously damaged. Unless a child is protected and cherished by the selfless energies of at least one loving adult who is uniquely committed to him or her, that young person will grow up without a skin, buffeted, bleeding, and seared.

This daunting and complex set of challenges boils down to one pivotal question: can we find the political will? Can we find the key that will unlock a new and potent source of activist energy? We are, after all, talking about radical change.

We think we have found the answer. As we explain in the final section of this book, our solution involves putting mothers and fathers front and center on the national stage. By tapping into the latent strength of our democratic processes, we craft a parents' movement that will send America's 62 million parents to the polls. By mobilizing behind a single agenda, which we call 'A Parents' Bill of Rights,' and by speaking with a single voice, moms and dads can transform both our public morality and our political culture to give new and massive support to the work they do.