

Kids these days

By [Catherine M. Wallace](#) in the [March 22, 2005](#) issue

In Review



Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood

Steven Mintz
Belknap

path from innocence to experience is inevitably complicated: we are tempted to think that the world has become treacherous, not that we ourselves were once

blazingly naïve. If we fail to recognize our own glorious grandiosity, then as the years go by we are liable to fall victim to a peculiarly hazardous nostalgia: yearning for a past that never existed.

Such quirky nostalgia surrounds our cultural past as well as our personal histories, especially in considerations of the family. Historians and sociologists have been warning about this for years: there is no lost Golden Age in which families had fewer problems than families have now. The problems change, but that's about all. They insist that we must not dream that we can solve contemporary problems by reverting to a past that never was.

The childhood we remember, like the childhoods our parents and grandparents recount, is inevitably colored by the limitations of our youthful perceptions. People were not more trustworthy and responsible once upon a time, for instance; rather, we trusted more easily then than we do now. Growing up is always, to some extent, a loss.

With *Huck's Raft*, Steven Mintz, who holds an endowed chair in history at the University of Houston, makes possible an exponential advance in the clarity with which we understand the history of families in this country. A substantial tome at 384 pages of text plus almost 800 footnotes, *Huck's Raft* is more a compendium of information than a sustained argument, but it's a reasonably lively read because Mintz knows how to tell a story. He adeptly leavens his accounts with anecdotes about individual children and their households, bringing his data to life with portraits of Native American, slave and immigrant children; children fighting in the Civil War and working in factories; orphaned children, refugee children, and children hawking flowers on street corners; children of the poor, the wealthy and the religiously obsessed. He documents repeatedly that children have always shared in the fortunes of their families, for better or—often—for worse.

It's a sobering message. Children have always suffered right alongside their parents when public health measures have been inadequate, when the economy has not supplied a living wage, when violence has erupted. The vagaries of history and the harshness of the American economy have always wreaked havoc on the lives of a remarkable percentage of American children—and Mintz has collected a stunning array of evidence to explain who, how, where and to what extent. He offers particularly compelling documentation for his central contention that childhood is a social construct whose meaning changes to accord with changes in the larger

cultural definitions of human nature.

Two of Mintz's 17 chapters concern the last quarter of the 20th century, and these are inevitably the most interesting for general readers. In the first of the two he laments what he calls a "grossly inflated and misplaced sense of crisis" regarding children's well-being. I agree that polemicists in the culture wars are often as careless with historical facts and epidemiological data about children as they are with facts generally. It's a long American tradition: we have always argued about child-rearing because the "American experiment" depends upon it.

Nonetheless, I think Mintz glosses over a body of very serious evidence that would refute his sanguine claim that "by most measures, the well-being of youth improved markedly between the early 1970s and the late 1990s."

For instance, in *Life Without Father*, David Popenoe offers stunning evidence of negative outcomes for the growing number of children whose fathers are absent, whether because of divorce or because their parents did not marry. The negative impact of divorce itself is addressed in *The Divorce Culture*, by Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, and in *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*, by Judith Wallerstein and her colleagues. Mintz does cite one study showing that "serious social, emotional or psychological problems" are 2.5 times more frequent in the long term among children of divorced parents, but the citation is buried in a footnote. In the text itself, he says—correctly—that the majority of children do not demonstrate problems.

In parallel fashion, Mintz does observe that most child care is poor to mediocre, but this is the best possible formulation of the case. Though quality care is most crucial in the first two years, major studies rate only 8 percent of infant child care as good or excellent. Mintz does not refer at all to research by developmental psychologists such as Jay Belsky of London's Birkbeck College and Alan Sroufe of the University of Minnesota; nor does he cite the huge, multicenter National Institute of Child Health studies, all of which suggest that more than 20 hours per week of child care beginning before the age of one correlates with a higher incidence of interpersonal difficulties by early grade school.

For those who do use child care, the costs are astronomical: in 1998, annual in-state tuition at the University of Illinois cost only half of what a young parent would spend for a year of licensed, accredited child care for a child under three years old. Given the rise in the number of single-parent households, stagnant-to-falling median

income and increasing instability of employment in the global economy, the prohibitive cost of decent child care is a matter of long-term national well-being. And consider this: child care workers themselves are paid poverty-level wages, which leads to remarkably high levels of turnover. We pay parking lot attendants and kennel workers more than we pay the people who care for our children.

Yet many parents have no choice. As it was for generations of American parents before them, it is beyond their reach economically to provide for their children as well as they would wish. As Arlie Hochschild asserts in *The Commercialization of Intimate Life*, massive economic forces are now arrayed against family life. The money just isn't there. Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Cornel West contend in *The War Against Parents* that current policy requires parents to be stunningly irrational actors—and thank heavens so many are. But that necessity is a shaky basis for national policy.

Even though many children cope successfully, the dysfunction of a rapidly growing minority of children takes a dangerous toll upon child well-being generally. Mintz gets to this in his final chapter, which begins with a long description of the Columbine shootings and continues with a sober account of the severely unhealthy social dynamics permeating many schools. During the 1990s, he points out, the average number of school shootings with multiple victims increased from two to five per year.

Mintz attributes this pattern to the fact that children and youth now have very few ties to adults other than parents and teachers, and even fewer opportunities within the broader culture to demonstrate and exercise their developing maturity. Meanwhile, a semiautonomous “youth culture”—backed up, I would add, by massive marketing to children—endlessly demands a sexualized precocity that mimics adulthood without meeting genuine developmental needs. Mintz concludes that the psychological cost to children has steadily grown more apparent, and he makes the familiar array of policy recommendations: more widely available health care, education reform, subsidized high-quality child care, family-friendly employment policies, a living wage, a limited work week and economic support to the impoverished.

This call for change would be more persuasive if Mintz had not just spent an entire chapter insisting that recent accounts of a crisis in child well-being are nothing but a matter of moral panic and polemical distortion. A darker assessment of current child

well-being would accord more consistently with what Mintz's entire history reveals: that economic and social trends afflicting adults' lives have an even more negative impact upon the lives of children. Declining social capital, broadly defined, has a disproportionate impact upon children because their needs are social-capital intensive. Furthermore, today children are more likely than people of any other age group to live in poverty, and, as Mintz explains in such excellent detail, it has always been true that when children live in poverty both their physical and social needs are apt to go unmet.

Those of us whose early needs were adequately satisfied must always remember that we are exceptions in the history of childhood. Children are extremely vulnerable to the fates of their parents. When real wages are falling, when the gap between rich and poor grows wider every quarter, when parents across the board are working ever-longer hours at jobs that are increasingly insecure, we need to remember that the resulting problems are inevitably amplified in the lives of the young. To borrow the name of the famous 1983 study, we are indeed a nation at risk.