Anxious Parents: A History of Modern Childrearing in America

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In Review

Anxious Parents: A History of Modern Childrearing in America

Peter N. Stearns
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The cover of Peter Stearns's book gets your attention. It portrays an iconic mid-20th-century television mother who seems either to be gripped by a migraine or on the threshold of an "I'm losing my mind" scream. But this is not another in the long list of advice-to-parents literature; rather, it explores what such literature says about the past century's attitudes toward parenting. Stearns contends that parents are deeply influenced by popular trends in the advice-giving industry—from Skinner/Watson behaviorism to *Parenting* magazine, Dr. Spock and T. Berry Brazelton.

Breast or bottle? Let them cry or hold them? Should baby sleep alone or with us? How should we discipline? Are we being too harsh and damaging the child's self-esteem or too lax and creating a self-indulgent narcissist? Are we pushing good grades too much or too little? Should teachers be tougher or more encouraging? Should our kids be working around the house more? Should they have jobs? Are highly competitive sports a good or bad thing? How much should we be responsible for entertaining children and how much should they learn to entertain themselves? These and similar questions plague parents. Because civilizing little "barbarians" is not an easy task, there is plenty of advice-giving literature to explore, and Stearns does it well.

Has all this advice and attention helped people be better parents? Stearns is careful not to answer this fundamental question. Even if there were ways of measuring late 20th-century parenting against, say, 19th-century parenting, how does one evaluate the quality of the differences? It's like comparing derby hats and do rags, or hoop skirts and Capri pants. Stearns tries to keep his historian's cool about such pragmatic concerns. But not completely. He makes a strong case that two overriding ideas have intensified child-rearing anxiety beyond the inevitable levels of parental worry: the ideas of the "vulnerable child" and the "precious child."

In a thousand ways—from warnings on television and radio programs to cautions from doctors, social workers and milk cartons—the message is made clear: your child is in constant danger, and you, dear parent, have to do everything possible to protect her. The industry of experts may not be undermining parenting itself, as Christopher Lasch argued, but, according to Stearns, expertise intensifies parental anxiety, and that may have its own deleterious effects on family life.

In addition, since American parents have had fewer and fewer children and infant mortality has greatly declined, they tend to commit more psychological energy to

each precious child. This combination of vulnerability and preciousness deepens worry.

Though Stearns acknowledges that some parents may care little about their children, he focuses on the problem of overinvesting in and overworrying about one's children. He makes the fascinating point that parents' "anxiety about their own children might have reduced adults' political concern for children in general." It's disappointing that he doesn't develop this insight.

Rather, he limits himself to documenting the new anxieties of the 20th century and to trying to soften their impact. By placing modern parenting anxieties in a larger historical context Stearns helps us see the fashion/fad side of parenting and aids those of us who worry too much. For anxious parents he advocates moderation and even a parenting pleasure principle: ease up and try to enjoy it more. Good advice, ironically, from this nonadvice book.

Yet one can quibble with Stearns's conclusions without being an overanxious parent. Children are precious and worthy of parental care and attachment. And surely they are vulnerable in many, many ways. Though the ideas of preciousness and vulnerability may in some ways be socially constructed realities that in turn generate new and exploitable anxieties, attachment to and care for offspring is deeper than fashion and not unique to the human world.

Though this is not a theological book, it certainly raises concerns crucial to the faith community. How do we raise our children? How do we care for other people's children? How do we support parents? Are we making parenting harder than it need be? The challenge of that great double bind of caring for others (whether children, elders or creation) in a fragile world vulnerable to the sting of death is anything but new territory for the theological community. As Kierkegaard, that great theologian of anxiety, might say, we are able to do so through the paradoxical power of the absurd.