

Children and the Problem of Formation in American Families

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There is a wide array of problem areas with regard to the state of children in the United States, ranging from the increase in child poverty and homelessness—children constitute between a third and a fourth of the homeless population, and about one quarter of all children live below the poverty line—to the rise in violence. These areas are reported on and analyzed with great expertise by organizations such as the Children's Defense Fund in Washington, D.C., the Annie E. Casey Foundation, which publishes the annual *Kids Count Data Book*, and the National Center for Children in Poverty in New York. In addition, a number of organizations that do not make children their main focus have turned their attention in this direction. For instance, the Progressive Policy Institute of Washington, D.C., has published the document, *Putting Children First: A Progressive Family Policy for the 1990s*. Also deserving mention is the federal government's formation of the National Commission on Children, whose deliberations led to the final report, *Beyond Rhetoric: A New American Agenda for Children and Families*.¹

I cannot, in this essay, address all of the issues raised in these various reports. I will limit my inquiry to an area that is sometimes overlooked in assessments of the well-being of children but is of particular interest to Christian ethicists: the problem of formation. I will address this issue in conversation with the Christian tradition that I know best: Roman Catholicism.

¹Progressive Policy Institute, *Putting Children First: A Progressive Family Policy for the 1990s*, written by Elaine Ciulla Kamarck and William A. Galston, with essays by Robert J. Shapiro and Margaret Beyer (Washington, D.C.: Progressive Policy Institute, 1991). National Commission on Children, *Beyond Rhetoric: A New American Agenda for Children and Families* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991).

David Hamburg, M.D., the President of the Carnegie Corporation, provides a broad description of the difficulties inherent in the process of formation. "Over the extended years of a child's growth and development, the longest period of immaturity and therefore vulnerability of all known species, a young human must acquire much, master much, try much and find much wanting, discover much and put those discoveries to use. All this takes time and care, protection and guidance, experimenting and learning from experience. For the caregivers, it is an enduring, long-term, highly challenging commitment."² Such time and care is critical for all three periods—early, middle, and late—of childhood. Early childhood—the years that precede school—are important for building a foundation of trust and stability. Middle childhood—from the onset of school to puberty—is an often neglected period because it does not involve the rapid physical and emotional change that either early or late childhood do. Yet it also is a vulnerable period, in large part because of the greater spans of unsupervised activity. (Children at this stage watch more television—three to four hours a day—than either younger or older children.) Late childhood, from the onset of puberty to eighteen years of age, is critical because of the rapid onset of first physical (in early adolescence) and then psychosocial (in later adolescence) change. As the age of menarche and of male puberty drops—about three and one-half years over the last 150 years—and the age of full adulthood is delayed, this often turbulent period of life expands. It is an age that combines exploratory behavior, the easy availability of high-risk activities and substances, and insufficient experience to assess the full consequences of actions. Thus persons at this stage need both to be granted greater independence and to receive more guidance. The right mixture of the two is extremely difficult for the primary caregivers to achieve and takes vast amounts of time, energy, and focus.

According to Catholic teaching, parents are the persons who have primary responsibility for guiding the formation process. Relatives, close friends, and a range of intermediate associations from the neighborhood to schools have an indispensable role in supporting parents in their task of rearing their children ("support" is the root meaning of the Latin *subsidiium*, from which Catholic social teaching draws its principle of subsidiarity). However, a combination of complex and long-in-developing factors mitigate against both parents and the supporting institutions fulfilling their tasks. Geographical mobility, for example, has contributed to the attenuation of the extended family. Only about 5 percent of

²David Hamburg, M.D., *Today's Children: Creating a Future for a Generation in Crisis* (New York: Random House, 1992), 325.

American children see a grandparent on any sort of regular basis.³ Mobility has also made it difficult for children to form attachments outside of the family. For instance, 40 percent of adolescents changed domiciles between 1985 and 1990.⁴

Within families, the primary barrier to an adequate formation process is the decreasing time that children and parents spend together. This trend began with the movement of economic activity out of the domestic setting, shifting greater responsibility for time with children to women alone. It continued with the advancement of education that coincided with the rise of industrial society. As late as the turn of the century, only 10 percent of adolescents went to school. The rest stayed home, with parents serving as models for quite specific roles. With the advent of the secondary school system came more life options, but also less guidance.⁵ Also beginning with the turn of the century, women increased their participation in the economic sphere. In the years following World War II, this increase involved married women in particular. Between 1948 and 1993 the percentage of married women in the workforce who have children under six rose from 10.8 percent to 59.6 percent (about two-thirds of single mothers with pre-school children are employed, most of them full time).⁶ Beginning in the early 1970s, specific economic trends made the phenomenon of married women entering the workforce increasingly a matter of exigency as well as vocation. First, real income for middle-income families started to stagnate, and for low-income families it dropped. Second, the actual and proportionate costs of raising children rose sharply. Finally, international competition created more insecurity in the workplace. That insecurity, especially when combined with a less structured work environment, created a context in which there was a constant impetus to spend more time at work. The average work-week grew from 41 hours to 47 hours between 1973 and 1989.⁷ Thus while some commentators focus primarily or even solely on the claim of women to a vocation in the economic sphere as the source of the parent-child time deficit, careful scrutiny indicates that the matter is much more complex and that the deficit began with the movement of economic activity—and at that time the father—out of the domestic sphere.

³Ibid., 35.

⁴Fred M. Hechinger, *Fateful Choices: Healthy Youth for the 21st Century* (New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1992), 30.

⁵Hamburg, 241.

⁶Children's Defense Fund, *The State of America's Children Yearbook: 1994* (Washington, D.C.: Children's Defense Fund, 1994), 76; Hamburg, 108.

⁷Cf. Sylvia Ann Hewlett, *When the Bough Breaks: The Cost of Neglecting Our Children* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 79.

This does not mean that the time deficit is due entirely to impersonal social and economic forces. Two-thirds of parents report that they are less willing to make sacrifices for their children than their parents were for them.⁸ Moreover, parents are not immune to the materialism that afflicts a consumer society generally. The phenomenon of the parent who attempts to make up for the lack of time with a child with expensive gifts is duly noted in the literature. Child psychiatrist Robert Coles comments, "The biggest change I have seen in 30 years of interviewing families is that children are no longer being cared for by their parents the way they once were. Parents are too busy spending their most precious capital—their time and their energy—struggling to keep up with MasterCard payments. They're depleted. They work long hours to barely keep up, and when they get home at the end of the day they're tired. And their kids are left with a Nintendo or a pair of Nikes or some other piece of crap. Big deal."⁹ The increased participation of women in the workplace has not been offset by increased participation of men in the domestic sphere. For instance, unemployed women spend an average of over twelve hours a week in "primary care" activities with their children. This drops to six hours for employed women. The average for men is three hours, regardless of whether they are employed or unemployed.¹⁰ Finally, single-parenthood—whether the result of out-of-wedlock birth, divorce, or father absenteeism—is a crucial factor in the time deficit. This is not to say that one ought to join or remain with the child's other parent in every case. Nevertheless, the dramatic increase in single-parent families is one factor in the decreased time that children have with their parents. As sociologists Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur demonstrate, on the whole, one parent simply does not have the resources—personal as well as financial—that two do.¹¹

⁸Hamburg, 34.

⁹Quoted in Barbara Vobejda and Paul Taylor, "Suddenly, A Pessimistic America," *The Washington Post*, 6 November 1990, p. A1.

¹⁰Hewlett, 73. For an extended treatment of the trend where married working women continue to take on the bulk of domestic responsibilities, see Arlie Hochschild with Anne Machung, *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home* (New York: Viking, 1989). For a general treatment of father absence, see David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

¹¹Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, *Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994). It is worth noting that McLanahan herself was a single parent for ten years, and actually began her research to demonstrate that single-parenthood was not a factor.

According to one study, since 1960 children have lost ten to twelve hours per week of parental time.¹² Another study shows that teenagers in two-parent homes spend less than forty minutes a day with their mothers and less than five minutes a day alone with their fathers.¹³ How, then, do the children spend their time if not with their parents? In 1990, more than 6.5 million children under five years old whose mothers were employed received care from persons other than their parents. Over 4.2 million of these were cared for in either family child-care homes or child-care centers.¹⁴ The consequences for child well-being are hotly debated. Assessment must depend upon the age of the child and the kind of care. Just over one quarter of the children are taken care of by relatives,¹⁵ which was the primary arrangement prior to attenuation of the extended family due to mobility. A University of Michigan study suggests that for most persons who have care by relatives as an option and pursue it as their primary form of non-parental care, their decision is based on personal preference more than economic compulsion.¹⁶ However, because the extended family cannot be reconstructed on a large scale without reversing the massive societal trends brought on by the industrial revolution's acceleration of the market economy, most single-parent families and families where both parents work turn to other forms of child care.

The 4.2 million children in nonrelative family child care-homes and in child care-centers constitute 64.5 percent of all children in child care.¹⁷ Whether these arrangements are harmful to children depends on a number of factors. There is much evidence to suggest that full-time day care for the first year of a child's life is detrimental to the attachment process between child and parent.¹⁸ At present, the literature is still diverse on care after this period. For toddlers, the National Association for the Education of Young Children recommends a child-staff ratio of not more than 5:1.¹⁹ There must also be continuity of care, which is often difficult to achieve for two reasons. First, the low pay for teachers

¹²Victor R. Fuchs, *Women's Quest for Economic Equality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 111.

¹³Hechinger, 30.

¹⁴Children's Defense Fund, *The State of America's Children*, 31.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶Karen Oppenheim Mason and Karen Kuhlthau, "Determinants of Child Care Ideals Among Mothers of Preschool-Aged Children," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 51 (August 1989).

¹⁷Children's Defense Fund, *The State of America's Children*, 31.

¹⁸Hamburg, 111-12.

¹⁹Gwen Morgan, *The National State of Child Care Regulations*, 1989 (Watertown, Mass.: Work/Family Directions, 1989).

leads to a high turnover rate. (In 1992 the annual salary for teaching assistants, the largest number of paid workers, was \$8,890 per year,²⁰ which is below the poverty line for a family of three.) Staff turnover not only means discontinuity of care, but often also inexperienced and under-trained caretakers. Second, because of the expense of paid care and the desire not to overload relatives, as many as a third of the parents who engage child-care providers piece together a combination of care arrangements.

Even if the conditions of ratio and continuity are met, there remains a debate about how much nonparental care is excessive. However, there appears to be consensus on at least two points. First, child care is not a replacement for the parent-child relationship. Regardless of the number of hours a child is in nonparental care, it is still crucial for the child to have significant daily time with her parents. Second, low-quality child care is harmful to child development, and high-quality child care is in short supply.²¹

The American Catholic bishops locate themselves within this broad consensus accenting both the priority of parental care and the need for quality nonparental care. In *Economic Justice for All*, they write, "The nation's social welfare and tax policies should support parent's decisions to care for their own children and should recognize the work of parents in the home because of its value for the family and for society. For those children whose parents do work outside of the home, there is a serious shortage of affordable, quality day care. Employers, governments, and private agencies need to improve both the availability and the quality of child care services." At one point, the bishops add that the discrimination against women that is already present in the workplace "is compounded" by the lack of such services. Their position on child care is consistent with the Vatican's claim in its "Charter on the Rights of the Family," that while parents have "the original, primary, and inalienable right to educate" their children, they also have "a right to assistance by society in the bearing and rearing of children," all of which is to aid the family in its role as "a community of love and solidarity."²²

²⁰Children's Defense Fund, *The State of America's Children*, 33.

²¹For a good treatment of the state of child care, see, "Child Care and Development: Key Facts," (Washington, D.C.: Children's Defense Fund, 1994). The best assessment of the state of child care studies that I have found is Jay Belsky, "Parental and Nonparental Child Care and Children's Socioeconomic Development: A Decade in Review," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 52 (November 1990): 885-903.

²²National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1986), 207-08 and 147; Holy See, "Charter of the Rights of the Family," *Origins* 13, 27 (15 December 1983): 462 and 463 (Preamble and Articles 3

The concern for child care extends beyond children under five. In general, the older a child is, the more scope the literature allows for supervision by adults other than parents, though there remains the concern that parents remain the primary adults in the lives of their children. However, there is the growing phenomenon of what are called "latchkey" children, who are on their own after returning from school. Recent estimates place the number at about ten million children between the ages of six and thirteen. A Los Angeles study found that one quarter of seven- to nine-year-olds are in self care after school. A survey of Minneapolis discovered that 30-40 percent of ten- to twelve-year-olds return to a home without adults at least three of five days every week. The literature also shows that an empty home often becomes a context for harmful activities. One study found, for instance, that regardless of a child's sex, race, school performance, family income, or number of resident parents, latchkey children are more prone than other children to alcohol and substance abuse. On the whole, they are twice as likely to engage in these activities. Another study discovered that 20 percent of young adolescents engage in sexual activity when left alone in their own homes.²³ These data suggest that such problems, often placed under the medical category of "health," may be better located under the heading of formation. The presence of adults in guidance roles will not eliminate the risk activities, but it is the place to begin both in terms of analysis and response.

Regardless of one's particular response to the question of professional nonparental care for children, the overall dynamic is clear: it is extremely difficult once economic activity moves out of the domestic sphere to resist pressures for removing a substantial portion of the care of children from that sphere as well. The phenomenon of having only one parent participate in economic activity and be a source of income is, historically speaking, a minority arrangement reserved for the upper classes. The Industrial Revolution's acceleration of the market economy allowed for the expansion of this arrangement in the United States, but, for the reasons indicated above, we are finding that this may have been only a temporary phenomenon. The difference between the present situation and the pre-industrial arrangement, when both parents contributed economically, is that the economic and domestic spheres are now separate, so that

and 5). In 1991, the issue of child care became salient at the University of Notre Dame. I used arguments based upon Catholic teaching on the family, using these documents and others, to make a case for on-site child care for faculty, staff, and students. Due to the time and energy of a great many people, including an administration willing to hear the case for the provision of such care, the university now has a high-quality center.

²³Hewlett, 54 and 83; Hechinger, 190-91.

working parents are no longer at home. Advances in computer and communications technologies have allowed some parents to work at home once again, but this is not likely to become a possibility for the majority of parents in the near future. Employer practices such as flex-time, job sharing, compressed work weeks, and re-hiring of employees who have taken time off to raise children have been recommended by advocates across the political spectrum.²⁴ However, these practices are far from becoming the norm, and even where they are in place, workplace insecurity and the constant threat of being displaced frequently dissuades employees from taking advantage of them. The comments of David Hamburg, an advocate of both quality child care and new workplace practices, again are to the point.

Just as the economic functions moved out of the home early in the Industrial Revolution, so child-care functions, too, are now moving outside the home to a large extent. The child's development is less and less under parents' and grandparents' direct supervision and increasingly placed in the hands of strangers and near-strangers. In the main, this transformation was unforeseen and unplanned, and it is still poorly understood. As child-rearing moves beyond the home, the quality of outside care becomes crucial. . . . Yet, the more I have probed into this issue, the more I become impressed with how difficult it is to meet this need. There is little precedent for outside-the-home care on such a vast scale as is now emerging in the United States.²⁵

What occurs when the formation process breaks down depends much on the economic status of the family. The children of poorer families tend to be placed in either group homes or foster care. In June 1992, there were an estimated 442,000 children in foster care, an increase of 68 percent over a decade earlier. A 1993 report on foster care in California, Illinois, Michigan, New York, and Texas—the five states that together have almost half of the instances of children in foster care—showed that while the sharp incline in the number of children placed into such care is leveling off, the length of stay has grown longer, such that the total children in care is still increasing significantly.²⁶ The frequency with which these children move from one setting to another is a major obstacle to their forming any attachments with others. In families that are

²⁴For advocacy of these and similar practices from the political right, see William Mattox, "The Parent Trap: So Many Bills, So Little Time," *Policy Review* (Winter 1991): 11-12. For advocacy from the political left, see Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), chap. 8.

²⁵Hamburg, 11; See also, Robert Pear, "Audit of Day Care Centers Finds Widespread Problems," *New York Times*, 11 February 1994, A8.

²⁶Children's Defense Fund, *The State of America's Children*, 19-21.

financially better-off, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of children placed in for-profit psychiatric hospitals—from 6,500 in 1971 to 200,000 in 1989. In part, the increase is due to greater awareness of psychological problems. However, one study argues that 70 percent of these admissions are “inappropriate and potentially harmful” to the children in question.²⁷ It appears, then, that when the formation process breaks down in economically well-off families, the turn is often to an out-of-home response, even when this is not in the child’s best interest.

At the extreme of failure in formation are instances of abuse and neglect. In these circumstances, the formation process has broken down, yet the child remains at home. Unfortunately, this extreme failure is not rare. In 1992, there were over 2.9 million reports of abuse and neglect, almost triple the number in 1980. About half of the reports involve neglect. It is difficult, if not impossible, to know just how much of this rise is due an increase in the ratio of reported to unreported incidents and how much is due to an increase of incidents. Most of the literature holds that it is a mixture of the two.²⁸ Taken together, the problems of both in-home and out-of-home arrangements bring into sharp relief the difficulty of responding once the formation process within the family breaks down.

The data on the failure of child formation in families presses a question upon us: which of the traditions in American public life can speak to the problem of the formation of children. Political liberalism is problematic because its separation between public and private realms places families, and thus children, in the latter. As a result, political liberalism is for the most part silent on family life.²⁹ In the words of Bertrand de Jouvenal, “[Social contract theories] are the views of childless men who must have forgotten their childhood.”³⁰ Economic liberalism has difficulty accounting for children as well. For Adam Smith, the family enters into consideration primarily as a contrast association to the freedom of commercial society. Since children have ceased being economic assets on the farm or in the factory and have become an economic responsibility, the logic of the market can account for children in only three ways. The first is as burden or impediment to the parents’ own economic progress. In commenting on his preference in hiring money managers, for instance, investment consultant Michael Stolper

²⁷Hewlett, 124-27.

²⁸Children’s Defense Fund, *The State of America’s Children*, 19-20.

²⁹For a discussion of how modern political liberalism neglects family life, see Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family*.

³⁰Bertrand de Jouvenal, *The Pure Theory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 232.

states, "The perfect fund manager is a guy who can't pick his kids out in a police lineup."³¹ The second way the market logic can account for children is as commodities, and this is evident in some of the marketing literature of reproductive technology clinics.³² The third way it can do so is as consumers, as is evident in the growth of children's television shows where figures that are commercial products are cast as the main characters.³³

Another option is to combine market logic with concern for the country in what might be called economic republicanism, distinguished from classical republicanism by its trust in commerce to serve the common good. This approach is evident in Sylvia Ann Hewlett's *When the Bough Breaks: The Cost of Neglecting Our Children*. Hewlett states her basic thesis in the preface. "I wanted to push and prod our political leaders and have them shout from the rooftops the good news: in the 1990s, conscience and convenience will come together. As this century fades, doing what is right by our kids will also be good for the bottom line." She later elaborates, "America's emerging human capital deficit not only undermines the profitability of Chemical Bank and IBM, it also threatens the competitive strength of our national economy. This is not the first time a powerful country has been undermined by deteriorating conditions amongst its young people."³⁴ The centerpiece of the book is Hewlett's "Action Plan for Children." Hewlett imagines a hypothetical President of the United States making the following plea to Congress for broadcast during prime time. "Invest in the future. Treat kids as capital. . . . For the longer our graduation lines today, the shorter our unemployment lines tomorrow. . . . If we are interested in the size of our paychecks in the future, we have to get out there and take better care of our children. . . . A wasted life costs \$300,000, when you add in welfare charges and the expenses of the penal system. These costs, my friends, are paid for by you and me."³⁵

³¹Quoted in *The Chicago Tribune*, 21 March 1993, sec. 4, p. 3.

³²One can recognize that this is the case even while holding that some of the means of reproductive technology are morally acceptable. For a treatment of the question of whether the market ethos of American reproductive technology understands children as commodities, see J. Robert S. Prichard, "A Market for Babies?" *University of Toronto Law Journal* 34 (1984): 341-57; Margaret Jane Radin, "Market-Inalienability," *Harvard Law Review* 100 (1987): 1849-1937; and Oliver O'Donovan, *Begotten or Made?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

³³The Public Television series, "On Television: Teach the Children," is the best I have seen or read on children's television. The transcript is available from PTV Publications, P.O. Box 701, Kent, Ohio 44240 (Telephone: 216-673-3363). The transcript contains a helpful bibliography as well.

³⁴Hewlett, viii and 17.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 241 and 234-36.

Here, children are no longer burdens, commodities, or consumers, but rather “investments,” “capital,” and producers. The problem is that the logic still turns on the adults’ self-interest. For particular children—say, those with severe Downs Syndrome—who are unlikely to produce a good return on the nation’s capital investment, Hewlett’s language provides no reasons to keep adults from treating the child as a “commodity” that is a “burden.”³⁶ In fact, at one point, Hewlett contrasts children who are investments with the elderly, who are “an expense—a consumption item.” The implications of this language for our treatment of persons who are not “capital,” when there is no other language to keep it in check, is unnerving, and Hewlett provides no such check.

The Catholic Church in the United States has been far from inactive. It and its associated institutions have written documents, constructed guidelines for parish programs, and provided services. Oddly, there is no *developed* teaching on children. The elements are there within Catholic teaching to shape an understanding of children, and they are sometimes alluded to, but the teaching is not as developed as that, say, on private property or the conduct of war. Karl Rahner has it exactly right: “[S]cripture and tradition alike presuppose that we already know precisely *what* a child really is far more than they tell us explicitly or treat it as a distinct question.”³⁷ In a society where the language of the market is already overextended, a developed explicit teaching on children is necessary even to sustain the projects and institutions that the Catholic community already has in place for responding to the well-being of children, let alone to expand those efforts in the face of the budget cuts

³⁶Hewlett does qualify her thesis in page-long disclaimers at a couple of points in her book, arguing that we should care for children simply because “it is the right thing to do.” Her personal commitment in this regard is evident from her tone. However, in the face of traditions that view children largely as burdens, commodities, or consumers, the moral implications of Hewlett’s lack of a language for telling us what children are and why we should care for them are problematic.

³⁷Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 8; quoted in Carolyn Hendrixson and Karen O’Connell, *Recognizing and Celebrating Children*, vol. 2 (Minneapolis, Minn.: Congregations Concerned for Children, 1992), 7. Documents by the American Catholic bishops that focus on children are, “Putting Children and Families First,” *Origins* 21, 25 (28 November 1991): 393-404; and “Follow the Way of Love,” *Origins* 23, 25 (2 December 1993): 433-43. In conjunction with “Putting Children and Families First,” the United States Catholic Conference has initiated a program titled “A Catholic Campaign for Children and Families,” which offers a range of resource material to parishes and diocesan offices. The work of Catholic Charities USA, a network of 630 service agencies and institutions, must also be mentioned. Founded in 1910, it serves nine million persons a year, and is second only to the government in the provision of social services in the United States. Its national headquarters are in Washington, D.C.

promised by the Republican Contract with America. Such a teaching would expand upon three claims that are sometimes stated, but never developed in detail: children are gifts of creation, a hope for the future, and our present responsibility in stewardship.



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