Introduction

Why the Failed "Century of the Child"?

Between 1900 and 2000, an unprecedented American effort to use state regulation to guarantee health, opportunity, and security to the country's children did not meet its own goals. The achievements envisioned were enormously ambitious. They also reflected entrenched but self-contradictory values and Americans' inconsistent expectations of government. As such, a "failed" century deserves a mixture of rebuke and cautious admiration.

In the same breath, Americans celebrated individuals, family, and community but rarely acknowledged the inherent conflicts that accompanied such catholicity. Governments rarely established clear hierarchical priorities when the interests of the young, their elders, and the general public did indeed clash. Failure to do so produced unexpected, even nonsensical, consequences that these pages dissect. At best, it nourished ambivalence about responsibilities for children, reflected in public policy's frequent inability effectively to draw the lines – between proper parental discipline and child abuse – between medical privacy and mandatory immunization of all children – between a disabled child's right to education and a school system's need to balance a budget. That contributed to the country's failure to achieve the goals symbolized by the phrase, "century of the child." In 1900, well-read Americans discussed a just-published book, *The Century of the Child*. Its Swedish author, Ellen Key, predicted that children's welfare would be central to any definition of twentieth-century progress.[1] Nowhere did this really happen, certainly not in the United States.

Reiterated in these pages is another reason for, again, a mirror of powerful contradictions in American cultural and political beliefs. Americans lauded democracy and tried hard to implement it. They also embraced

[1] One wonders if very many of the American Progressives who copied the title actually read the book itself, as the socialist Key opposed most forms of public schooling and included diatribes against capitalism as harmful to children. Ellen Key, *The Century of the Child* (London, 1900).

prejudices that divided society by race, ethnic origins, class, and gender. A genuine egalitarianism justified many of the new duties twentieth-century American governments assumed as overseers of the young: no child should be hungry – no child should suffer injury at the hands of relatives – all should be educated. The idea that its children would grow up to be citizens with equal opportunity, even if they had been born poor or to foreign parents, was an audacious vision – not shared to such an extent by any other developed nation in the twentieth century. In unintended ways, this emphasis on commonality encouraged failure.

This book examines numerous ways activist state policies that emphasized universality, objectivity, and democracy deepened racial and class separations. A juvenile justice philosophy that said all wayward children should be "rehabilitated," not punished, wavered as young African Americans in great numbers finally exited the Jim Crow South and entered urban courtrooms. "IQ" exams "sorted" students and magnified existing prejudices. After all – didn't they prove that the poor, the nonnative, or the black child was quantifiably inferior?[2]

Starting with the young, American public policy transformed individuals into strings of measurable characteristics. People became statistics – points on a normal distribution, deviations from a population mean.[3] That also complicated efforts to improve childhood through state action. If society could just get the measurements right, social policy said, progress would be possible. But children proved hard to quantify. Policies based in optimistic faith in the powers of applied scientific truth revealed instead the perils implicit in acceptance of incompletely developed and poorly understood social science paradigms. Definitions changed, as psychology or sociological or statistical theory changed, and good intentions foundered, as experts fiercely challenged each other's conclusions and public policies sought to respond. Who among the young was "crippled" – then "handicapped" then "disabled"? Who should decide? How should society react?

This twentieth-century enthusiasm for numeric judgment produced another phenomenon important to this study of childhood policy: age-grading. From the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, ability often mattered more than age. Men in colonial Massachusetts who wished to be spared militia training had to demonstrate physical weakness – not proof that

[2] By the 1920s, some southern states made it illegal for a public school classroom to include even *teachers* and pupils who were members of different races, and many policy debates in the early twentieth century were distinguished by efforts to decide who, among non-African Americans, was "good enough" to be classified as white. For a fascinating account of these social policies, see Morton Keller, *Regulating a New Society: Public Policy and Social Change in America, 1900–1933* (Cambridge, MA, 1994), 248–75.

[3] For further elaboration of this argument, see Olivier Zunz's fine book, *Why The American Century?* (Chicago, 1998), 48–68. The above sentence paraphrases one original to Zunz: 49.

they had passed a certain chronological benchmark.[4] Adolescent boys in nineteenth-century American common schools struggled to learn their letters alongside four- or five-year-old children.[5]

State efforts to regulate children's lives made one kind of statistical measurement pervasive in America: division by years. Children studied in carefully separated cohorts, and school systems accepted "social" promotion so that same-age groupings would not be split. When faced with illiterate high school seniors, policy makers then demanded that graduation be based on measurable academic standards, though what those standards should be stimulated unending dispute.

So, too, did decisions about what age was appropriate for full or part time paid work, marriage, alcohol consumption, the right to drive, or, even, the imposition of the death penalty. Their daily lives transformed by government institutions organized by age, kids turned to those born at the same time, and youth "peer cultures" frightened the adults whose policies greatly encouraged their growth.

Twentieth-century Americans fancied themselves the planet's most ardent individualists but marched through life in age-graded ranks. They said they opposed intrusive government but accepted "help" for children that increased intrusive government. This exercise in collective self-deception, finally, weakened the chances that the century of the child would achieve its dreams, because it meant that the programs this book analyzes often functioned as a shield for a more controversial aim – the establishment of federally imposed uniformity of law.

Many reforms these chapters examine, such as an effort during the 1920s and 1930s to ratify a constitutional amendment giving the U.S. Congress the right to control the paid labor of all individuals under the age of eighteen, went far beyond powers most Americans were willing to grant local and state authorities, much less federal officials. Its supporters eventually abandoned the proposed Child Labor Amendment. Nonetheless, the odor of deception clung to child advocacy. Rightly so. Throughout the century reformers whose vision centered on a socially activist federal government urged change for the children. Marian Wright Edelman, founder of the Children's Defense Fund, actually admitted it in print in 1987. "Because we recognized that support for whatever was labeled black and poor was shrinking . . . new ways had to be found to articulate and respond to the continuing problems of poverty and

[4] John Demos, *Past, Present, and Personal: The Family and Life Course in American History* (New York, 1986), 142.

[5] Maris Vinovskis remarks that twentieth-century age-grading transformed American public schools, but notes that "how, when, and why this remarkable" change occurred has been "seldom remarked upon." Maris Vinovskis, with David Angus and Jeffrey Mirel, "Historical Development of Age Stratification in Schooling," in Maris Vinovskis, *Education, Society, and Economic Opportunity: An Historical Perspective on Persistent Issues* (New Haven, 1995), 171–92. Quotation: 176.

race."[6] One does not have to oppose Edelman's goal to recognize the costs exacted by her strategy, one shared by generations of other "progressives." The idea that childhood policy cloaked other aims took hold, and for good reason. It frequently did.

Support of programs for the young, most important, local and state funds for schooling, peaked in the 1970s. For the rest of the century, voters around the country defeated school bonds. In Washington, politicians restricted many other "childhood" programs – from aid to poor youngsters to job training initiatives. Ironically, the early twentieth-century reformers who practiced the nonpartisan politics of child saving – in part, in hopes of shifting more political power to the national government – helped set in motion hugely important changes. By the 1990s, the nation's regions *were* less distinctive. Many aspects of American culture *had* nationalized. The issue-based politics childhood policy symbolized *was* far more important, as party loyalty waned, but the country's elderly, not its children, most benefited, as the recipients of federally sponsored programs of retirement stipends and medical care.[7] Of course, old people voted; children did not.

A Broad Brush and a Big Canvas

Twentieth-century "child saving's" ambitious agenda transformed social attitudes toward childhood, parental duty, and family functions, while changing more than a hundred million youngsters' actual experiences of life. Moreover, many new supervisory duties given governments demanded intellectual reconceptions of the state. The subject is an enormous one, organized here topically into four sections that analyze public policies affecting children's welfare, work, education, and health. Several themes link these otherwise disparate subjects. The enduring legacies of early-twentieth-century Progressive reform underpinned a large number of government initiatives. Dramatic changes in the composition of twentieth-century American households and workplaces exercised a powerful demographic imperative to which public policy reacted, often inadequately or with confusion. The enormous growth in the twentieth century of the law and social sciences as professions profoundly altered public governance of the young. Finally, the persistence of federalism meant that divided bureaucracies disputed changed rules for childhood.

This book begins with some of the oldest duties accepted by states – to punish wrongdoers and succor the poor – then considers increasing novel

[6] Marian Wright Edelman, quoted in Theda Skocpol, "From Beginning to End: Has Twentieth Century U.S. Social Policy Come Full Circle?" in Morton Keller and R. Shep Melnick, *Taking Stock: American Government in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1999), 266.

[7] For an informative discussion of the rise of "interest group" politics in twentieth-century America, see Jack Walker, *Mobilizing Interest Groups in America: Patrons, Professions, and Social Movements* (Ann Arbor, 1991).

innovations.[8] It analyzes juvenile justice, twentieth-century responses to child abuse, state aid to poor children, regulation of child labor, and government work programs for adolescents. It examines the creation of comprehensive systems of compulsory public high schools, the expansion of formal education for very young and disabled children, and efforts to improve and regulate children's diets, play, and exercise, and, finally, it investigates the impact of required immunization against infectious childhood diseases.

Such an overview necessarily employs a broad brush and a big canvas. The huge body of scholarship about American children in the twentieth century is immensely valuable. This book would not exist without it. However, this enormous literature is largely unintegrated. Histories of juvenile justice pay little attention to developments in child psychology, despite the fact that the juvenile court owed its birth to the growth of psychology as a distinct profession. Medical studies track the history of polio from its first appearance in the United States in epidemic form in 1916 to its defeat in the early 1960s. They do not speculate about the ways that a new, virulent childhood disease helped alter public education policy. Students of one subject rarely speculate about these kinds of connections. Did the "crusade" to end child labor really substitute the opportunities of free education for the dangers of factories? An answer to just that one question demands an understanding of the interactions between labor and education policy.

Moreover, most histories of twentieth-century laws and regulations are "snapshots" – pictures of a specific policy initiative over a relatively restricted period. This study focuses longitudinally and broadly – seeking to capture a complex landscape of change. It synthesizes work from many different disciplines as it investigates the transformation of American childhood into a public concern and a different experience. It utilizes the insights of many of the sociologists, psychologists, legal scholars, political scientists, economists, and historians who write about American education, medicine, law, social work, labor, and the history of the family. It surveys recent scholarship and reviews the literatures produced by earlier generations of experts on children. It is also based on a wide variety of primary and archival materials.

The stories these sources reveal are of public responses to the concept of *childhood*. This is not an attempt to survey the actual lives of twentieth-century children in the United States, although real children appear now and then as actors. The semantics are important. In some way, all societies throughout recorded time seem to have differentiated a state of human biological immaturity. The word "childhood" encompasses perceptions about the nature and importance of those differences. Cultural, political, and economic forces have always shaped such attitudes, but, nowhere, apparently,

[8] The oldest of all state functions has been armed conflict, but American armies of the twentieth century, while young, were not composed of children, at least as childhood was socially constructed. Therefore, state war making will not play a major part in this story.

have children ever grown up outside of the constraints of childhood – some system of adult understandings of who their young were and what they should do.[9]

It is conceptions of childhood that twentieth-century American governments helped to reshape, with varying impact on the experience of youth. Unquestionably, new regulations required that millions of twentieth-century youngsters behave differently than had their predecessors in earlier centuries. What the young actually thought about these demands remains largely unstudied. Often governments judged children's needs on scales tipped by perceptions of parental worthiness. Even when that did not happen, policies depended on adult ideas about who children were.

The anthropologists and sociologists who sought to understand "children's culture" warned that it was far more complex than most analysts imagined. Although their physical appearance made it impossible for these social scientists to pass for real children, some adopted a role they called "least adult." As did Margaret Mead in Samoa, they tried to blend in as participant observers, and reported back that children's worlds were exotic terrains, dominated by rituals, secrecy, and heavy reliance on nonverbal signals.[10]

However, the Samoans famously tricked Margaret Mead. Had the "least adults" been given the right passwords? If children created their own culture, to what extent could adults ever understand it? Could written records help? Adults, after all, wrote the vast majority of autobiographies, and viewed their own beginning years through older eyes.[11] Until the twentieth century,

[9] Documenting such differences poses huge problems. Material culture can be tricky. For instance, through the early nineteenth century, wealthy American adult women, not little girls, were the proud owners of most dolls. Many items now perceived as "toys" did not play such a role in earlier ages. Through the seventeenth century, documents variously referring to adult slaves, servants, or even prisoners, often used the term "child." For discussions of efforts to use evidence from material culture to assess historical childhood, see Antonia Fraser, *A History of Toys* (London, 1966); Karin Calvert, *Children in the House: The Material Culture of Early Childhood* (Boston, 1992). For discussion of written documents, see Roger Chartier, Ed., *A History of Private Life: The Passions of the Renaissance* (Cambridge, MA, 1989). Nonetheless, most historians of childhood now argue that no society thought its young were "miniature adults" – to use French historian Phillipe Aries's famous phrase. Aries's *Centuries of Childhood*, which appeared in a French edition in 1939 but not in English until 1962, stirred enormous debate among social historians for the last thirty years of the twentieth century. Many of Aries's critics, however, neglected to note that his comment about "miniature adults" was secondary to his central concern – idealizations of family life. For a summary of the debate about Aries, see Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500* (New York, 1995), 9–12, 57.

[10] For an introduction to the anthropological literature that analyzes children's cultures, see Patricia Adler and Peter Adler, Eds., *Sociological Studies of Child Development* (Boston, 1986); John Clauson, Ed., *Socialization and Society* (Boston, 1986).

[11] For a discussion of the nature of autobiographies of childhood, see Richard Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller: Autobiography and the Experience of Childhood* (New Haven, 1984).

few bothered to ask such questions. Understanding twentieth-century state regulation of children's lives requires a larger framework that explains why an intense focus on children has been a relatively recent development and, even in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a trend largely confined to developed countries.

A Brief History of Children and Childhood

Before the early nineteenth century, the average child was the dead child. For most of human history, probably seven out of ten children did not live past the age of three.[12] Yet, despite high infant mortality, children were a greater presence in every society than they would be in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They were much more visible and, certainly, audible. When most people died before the age of forty, the greatest percentage of any population was under the age of ten, although, since at least the fourteenth century throughout the West pervasive late weaning helped prevent conception, and childbearing was widely spaced. Couples wed in their mid-twenties, and marriages generally ended with one spouse's death within two decades. Throughout that time, a wife usually gave birth every two or three years, but only a tiny fraction of parents raised all their young past infancy. The birth of children and the burial of children episodically marked family life, and an eldest surviving child likely had left home before the youngest was born.[13]

In such a world "civilization . . . stunted growth, spread disease, and shortened life spans."[14] Cycles of growth and collapse characterized all societies, even wealthy ones whose cities inevitably outstripped the capabilities of the outlying countryside. Urban areas were so unhealthy that none expanded through natural increase. Elites hoarded resources; war and epidemic regularly raged; the most technologically advanced cultures fell into ruin. Calamity dogged prosperity for centuries, and societies full of children offered their vulnerable young little but suffering.[15]

[12] Phillipe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood* (New York, 1962), 2.

[13] For overviews of family life in Western society since 1500, see Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society*, 79–111. See also Richard Smith and Keith Wrightson, Eds., *The World We Have Gained: Histories of Population and Social Structure* (Oxford, UK, 1986).

[14] This is the theme of John Coatsworth's 1996 presidential address to the American Historical Association, in which Coatsworth argued that, prior to the twentieth century, no peoples anywhere expected to enjoy prolonged eras of physical well-being. John Coatsworth, "Welfare," *American Historical Review* 101 (1996): 2.

[15] For example, Europe recovered from the devastation of the fourteenth-century plague, only to see population growth slow dramatically again in the seventeenth century – because of war and widespread malnutrition. For discussion of these historical patterns, see William Baumol, Richard Nelson, and Edward Wolff, Eds., *Convergence of Productivity: Cross National Studies of Historical Evidence* (New York, 1994).

Sometime around the middle of the seventeenth century, things changed. Adults started to live longer, and families produced fewer children. Although these trends were by no means uniform, they were the first signs of a monumental transformation: the growth in the Western world of "modern" information-rich societies in which ordinary people changed jobs, residences, even their legal and cultural status.[16]

Well before most of their people left the farm, areas in North America and northern Europe began to experience sharp declines in births. The Industrial Revolution accelerated this demographic one. New crops, higher productivity, efficient transportation, and better sanitation gradually improved the lives of millions of people, chief among them children, more of whom survived infancy.[17]

Modernization improved human prospects throughout the West, but not in simple linear fashion. Significant percentages of nineteenth-century Americans consumed a diet inferior to the one enjoyed by their colonial grandfathers.[18] Conditions in hugely overcrowded cities worsened in both the United States and Europe before they began to improve.[19] Hundreds of thousands of children grew up only to endure lives of brutally hard labor in mines and mills.

Nonetheless, as actual children's survival chances improved, adults attached greater importance to the abstract phenomenon of childhood, nowhere more so than in parts of colonial America. At a time when perhaps as many as one third of all children in eighteenth-century France were abandoned, Puritan leaders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony punished the practice and demanded that parents feed, shelter, and train their children.[20] The young in the American colonial South fared far less well. Rectification of highly imbalanced sex ratios in both black and white populations came

[16] For good introductions to modernization theory, see Nick Eberstadt, Ed., *Fertility Decline in the Less Developed Countries* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1981); Michael Teitelbaum, *The British Fertility Decline: The Demographic Transition in the Crucible of the Industrial Revolution* (Princeton, 1984); Richard Brown, *Modernization: The Transformation of American Life, 1600–1865* (New York, 1976).

[17] Baumol, Nelson, and Wolff, *Convergence of Productivity.*

[18] Economic historians use patterns in rise and fall of median heights as a marker of nutritional levels within a society. By this measure, mid-nineteenth-century Americans were unhealthier than their late-eighteenth-century ancestors. See John Komlos and Joo Han Kim, "On Estimating Trends in Historical Heights," *Historical Methods*, 23 (1990): 116–20.

[19] For a good overview of the nineteenth-century health crusades that improved life, especially in urban areas, see Allan Brandt and Paul Rozin, Eds., *Morality and Health* (New York, 1997).

[20] Most abandoned children died – within a few months at foundling hospitals, much more quickly if simply left out of doors. Victoria Getis and Maris Vinovskis, "History of Child Care in the United States Before 1950," in Michael Lamb and Kathleen Sternberg, Eds., *Child Care in Context: Cross Cultural Perspectives* (Hillside, NJ, 1992), 188–9.

slowly, and, through the mid-eighteenth century, fewer stable households existed, even among free whites.[21]

Still, throughout America, children emerged as individuals, especially by the early nineteenth century, an era that lauded the "self-made" man. As late as the mid-seventeenth century, states punished whole families for the crimes of particular members.[22] By the nineteenth century, that was anathema – in law at least – in the United States and most of Europe.[23]

And a dramatically new idea emerged in societies that praised "go-ahead spirit": the future was going to be better than the past.[24] Rapid technological innovation encouraged such belief – as well as a larger sense of life as a succession of stages, all perhaps quite different. Toll roads, canals, steamships, and railways made the world both larger and smaller. Millions no longer lived and died in the same spot, surrounded by kin.[25] For the first time, great numbers of people experienced mass dislocation as a potential source of opportunity, not woe. Change was the future. Who better symbolized it than the young? Why not begin to view childhood as another, quite separate "place"?

The Nineteenth Century and Child Saving

Individualism, faith in progress, and unprecedented mobility paralleled another phenomenon: the growing importance of family privacy and an enlarged nurturant role for mothers. An ideology that praised mothers as particularly fond of children was peculiarly modern – and simultaneously sentimentalized family life, motherhood, and children themselves.

This nineteenth-century emphasis on the young as uniquely attractive was not entirely new. As early as the mid-eighteenth century, the French

[21] For more information on southern colonial family history, see Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680–1800* (Chapel Hill, 1986). For discussion of slave family life, see Philip Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill, 1998), 498–519.

[22] The notion of individualized punishment spread from the West to the rest of the world from the eighteenth through the twentieth century, but in an incomplete fashion. Witness the fact that in the year 2000 the ruling Islamic Taliban in Afghanistan reimposed sentences on whole families for the moral infractions of members. See M. J. Gohari, *Taliban: Ascent to Power* (New York, 2001).

[23] Richard Coe argues that a separate literature meant to educate or amuse children would have been hard for adults to imagine creating prior to the early seventeenth century. Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller*, 26–29.

[24] John Demos discusses the history of American nineteenth-century admiration for "go ahead spirit," in "History and the Formation of Social Policy towards Children: A Case Study," David Rothman and Stanton Wheeler, Eds., *Social History and Social Policy* (New York, 1981), 317–19.

[25] Richard Coe asks: Had millions not made such kinds of travel the turning points in their own lives, would the idea of an autonomous "place" for childhood have resonated so deeply? Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller*, 26–29.

philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau celebrated children as imaginative, unselfconscious creatures, with lessons to teach their elders.[26] After 1830, Victorians on both sides of the Atlantic elevated these ideas into a virtual cult of childhood. An age roiled by change glorified stable marriage. For the first time in history, the Industrial Revolution allowed tens of millions of ordinary people, mostly Europeans, to travel the globe seeking employment or adventure. Americans made folk heroes of the man on the move – the wanderer – the Huck Finn quick to abandon civilization and light out for the territories. They also praised the home fires many eschewed, either voluntarily or through force of circumstance. A distinction between the glorification of children as symbols of fantasy, innocence, and freedom and the lives of actual children should be drawn. Only prosperous families could afford to shield their young. Still, ideology mattered, even when reality came up short. Victorian adults could locate in sentimentalizations of childhood longings their own lives did not easily accommodate.[27] And the sentimentalized nineteenth-century child became a twentieth-century publicly regulated one.

The Demographics of Modernization and the "Century of the Child"

This book examines child saving's enduring legacies. It also argues that demography played a crucial role in shaping the century of the child. As nineteenth-century American society enshrined the family as a safe center for civilizing forces in times of rapid change, the idea of the child as the "heart of the home" gained emotional force. However, the "home" itself was already in decline. Modernization ensured that. Institutions as varied as common schools, charity hospitals, and orphanages took over some of the social roles once centered in families, and parents exercised reduced economic control over older youths.[28] By 1900, the United States was thoroughly modern – a country in which the economic, social, and emotional roles of private households diminished even further.

A new kind of family began to emerge, with fewer children, but also fewer dead children. Only in the middle of the twentieth century did a funeral for

[26] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, which first appeared in 1762 and has been in print almost continuously since (edition used: B. Gagnebin, Paris, 1969), 245–300. The historian John Boswell notes, however, that Rousseau did not practice what he preached – at least with his *own* children. All five were abandoned to foundling hospitals, acts Rousseau never publicly regretted. John Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers: The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance* (New York, 1988), 424.

[27] "Child saving" was not just an American phenomenon but also spread throughout much of the developed world. To explore its ramifications over a century's time in the United States, however, is a sufficiently large task, although references to European counterparts appear in these chapters, with notations to differences.

[28] For discussion of the changing economic and social roles of families in the nineteenth century, see Kurt Kreppner and Richard Lerner, Eds., *Family Systems and Life-Span Development* (Hillsdale, NJ, 1989).