

## ***WHAT ARE CHILDREN FOR?***

**By Michael Ventura**

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Americans ask every conceivable question about children and receive endless answers from the expert and not-so-expert -- recipes on how to raise 'em, feed 'em, educate 'em. But one most basic question goes unasked and unanswered: What are children for? Earlier generations, with problems not simpler but more direct than ours, took for granted the obvious answer: Children are for the family's, and the community's, survival.

Earlier families had a great deal of work to do every day: Every meal was made from scratch, most families made their own clothes, cleanliness was strenuous and difficult to maintain. "Wash day," for instance, is a phrase that has gone out of usage, but once, to do a family's wash by hand took all day, a big punishing job (the soaps were abrasive) -- mother, daughters, grandmothers chipped in. Most people lived rurally, farming and gardening for food; even in towns, gardens often accounted for a necessary percentage of a family's food; in cities, too, families kept goats, chickens, pigs. All this needed tending, and it was far more than two parents could handle; every family member worked. Well into the 20th century many businesses were family enterprises -- blacksmith shops, tailors, shoemakers, grocers, stables, dry goods, hotels, cafes -- in which children performed many chores necessary for a business' survival. Large families were the rule not only because birth control was primitive and ineffective, but also because a large family could count on more work-a-day hands; also, any family could be decimated at any time by illnesses that today are only an inconvenience, so "replacements" were necessary and plentiful. It wasn't uncommon for people in their teens to find themselves the major breadwinner of a large family; they had to be *ready*, and they usually were, because they were raised primarily with the family's survival in mind. Child-rearing may not have been warm and fuzzy, but its object was definite. So my grandparents, leaving Sicily a century ago, arrived at Ellis Island "teenage" in years yet fully adult in terms of what they were prepared to do for themselves and their families.

It boiled down to this: Children were *needed*. And children were made to know that. This gave them a *gravitas*, a maturity, and a sense of responsibility, of a scope and depth virtually unknown among our youth now -- not because our young are less capable, but because we don't raise them that way anymore. We don't have to. We can prepare a meal in a half-hour or less. "Wash day" takes an hour or two, your hands don't touch the detergent, and you can do other things while the washer-dryer spins. And even the poor wear store-bought clothes. Families now may work together because they want to, but not because they *need* to, and only necessity confers *gravitas*.

So what do you *do* with your kids? Other people tend, educate, coach, and train. At earlier and earlier ages, kids now spend most of their time with people other than family. "Quality time" and "play-dates" are arranged on schedules small children cannot possibly comprehend. Thus it's no great mystery why families aren't as cohesive, why parental authority has broken down, and why parents and children may look at each other after 18 years and have no clue who they're looking at. There's nothing psychological about the root causes. For eons parents and children *needed* each other; for a mere

century or so now, in the developed countries, parents and children no longer need each other for fundamental survival. Or rather: Children need parents, in order to be provided for; but parents don't need children, and siblings don't need one another, *for their survival*. For that matter, a husband and wife usually don't need each other in order to survive the physical and social conditions that face them.

Which leaves family relations -- husband-wife, parent-child, sibling-sibling -- entirely dependent on *emotions*. But emotions are volatile and unstable, and always have been. (Check out ancient myths and folk tales if you doubt that.) Therefore family cohesion, based now almost entirely on emotion, has become volatile and unstable. As our kids are fond of saying: "Duh?!"

The very strange thing is how psychology, pedagogy, child-rearing theory, and social commentary persistently ignore the fundamental fact that the family evolved, as an institution, to address social and physical conditions that in the developed world simply no longer exist.

In this changed world, what *are* children for, and are they needed? Obviously they're needed to carry on the species; but that's a collective, not necessarily a personal, necessity. Not as obvious to many is this: Our children are needed to pass on and extend the human heritage. But in most schools, and most families, that's not what or how kids are taught. They're taught skills that will enable them to succeed. Succeed at what? "At whatever you want," is the generally accepted answer. That's not an intention or an answer to make anyone feel necessary, valuable, needed. It's nothing short of pathological how all the froth about self-worth and self-esteem overlooks this fact.

The biggest societal function that children serve today is to spend money or to have money spent on them. And, since that is nowhere near enough, confusion reigns -- for the kids, and for their parents, educators, therapists, legislators, and, in fact, most adults.

For a little over a century now, American parents have done what their forebears would have thought unthinkable, comic, pathetic: They have voraciously sought out books on "how to raise a child." Those instruction books are the subject of Ann Hulbert's widely reviewed *Raising America: Experts, Parents, and a Century of Advice About Children*. For those to whom history and Americana are important, Ms. Hulbert's book supplies a loose collection of facts that -- in the context of a wider knowledge than she has -- can be revealing and useful. (In terms of ideas the book is useless.)

But consider one of the book's more fascinating facts: A century ago "middle-class men were confronting a new type of economic equation, as they shouldered the role of sole providers in households no longer bustling with industrious members. 'Profound must be the depths of affection that will induce a man to save money for others to spend,' marveled one hard-working father in 1904 as he planned for the upkeep of a newly dependent entourage." That father's words speak of a terrible undertow in the currents of modern family life, which separates the provider(s) from the children for most of the day, while making children dependents rather than now-and-future partners. Both that separation, and the change from partner-children to mere dependents, are major and largely unremarked factors in the failure of family as a modern institution. What's destroying families are the luxuries of technology and the way we organize "working for a living." When raising a family is a choice rather than a necessity, we are on uncharted territory without map or compass, and it's no wonder so many become irretrievably lost.

Ms. Hulbert writes of G. Stanley Hall (this country's first psychology doctorate), who was born in 1846 and spent his childhood on his family's farm. One early morning in

1852, when he was 6, his father was too lame with sore feet to do the grownup chore of rising in the dark and gathering the cows for milking. The cows had to be found, gathered, herded through woods and down a steep hill. The elder Hall asked his *6-year-old* to accomplish a task that he himself found demanding. But the little tyke just set out and did it.

That was a *needed* child, who, without a thought, rose to the demands of how and why he was needed. A child who was needed not only emotionally but practically. Milk-cows can't go a day without tending, and, if Papa was laid up, then Sonny had to do it.

Imagine any parent today asking a 6-year-old to accomplish such a thing -- and imagine any 6-year-old you know being capable of it. Send a child off alone, with a lantern and a stick, into a dark wood to herd recalcitrant cows? Cows are *much* bigger than a 6-year-old. It's probably against the law to make such a demand now, and might even be viewed as abuse. Yet our parents and 6-year-olds have the same innate abilities as those of 1852. The only difference is we have not been raised, as they were from the moment of birth, with the expectation that at any moment we'd be called upon to fend not only for ourselves but for our people. We are not taught that the human community needs us -- as it still does, in myriad ways that technology doesn't cover.

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