'End of American Childhood': Beginning of American parenthood

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The End of American Childhood

A History of Parenting from Life on the Frontier to the Managed Child

By Paula S. Fass
Princeton University Press. 334 pp. $29.95

Reviewed by

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Fearful that even a momentary lapse in oversight will ruin their children’s future, many American parents micromanage. Others worry that “helicopter parents” may produce individuals who are overcontrolled, overindulged, and ill-prepared for a competitive world in which competence must be earned through hard work and independent thinking.

In *The End of American Childhood*, Paula Fass, a professor of history emerita at the University of California, Berkeley, and editor of *The Routledge History of Childhood in the Western World*, sets these debates in historical context. Tracing the twists and turns in child-rearing practices over more than two centuries and variations related to social class, ethnicity, and race, Fass analyzes the impact of the decline in patriarchal authority; the adoption of child-protection laws; the rise of the “affectionate” family; prolonged schooling; the influence of peer groups; the growth of single-parent families; the sexual revolution; and the new world of internet rules and Facebook friendships.

Taking aim at conventional wisdom about the past, Fass maintains that although American parents certainly imposed boundaries and reined in unacceptable behavior, they have tended not to endorse “spare the rod, spoil the child” discipline. Instead, she argues, parents chose practices that nurtured responsibility, freedom, and
independence.

Even so, Fass recognizes that the behavior of American parents (on such issues as weaning, toilet training, sleeping patterns, dating, curfews, and overnights) has often been "all over the map." She confirms as well that accusations of coddling are by no means new. And she knows all too well that many children are not now "enabled" to have healthy and successful lives.

That said, Fass recommends parents work to restore the proper (and delicate) balance between caring guidance and encouragement of resourcefulness, responsibility, and independence. Mindful that parenting is a fine art, Fass writes that "parents today worry too much and provide their children with too little space to grow." By drawing on the ample examples in her book documenting the capacity of youngsters "to act in ways that allowed them to create strong futures," Fass suggests 21st-century mothers and fathers can take the first step toward "a vision that embraces all our nation's children and is full of a sturdier confidence in their own progeny."

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