

The Kindergarchy

Every child a dauphin.

by Joseph Epstein

06/09/2008, Volume 013, Issue 37

In America we are currently living in a Kindergarchy, under rule by children. People who are raising, or have recently raised, or have even been around children a fair amount in recent years will, I think, immediately sense what I have in mind. Children have gone from background to foreground figures in domestic life, with more and more attention centered on them, their upbringing, their small accomplishments, their right relationship with parents and grandparents. For the past 30 years at least, we have been lavishing vast expense and anxiety on our children in ways that are unprecedented in American and in perhaps any other national life. Such has been the weight of all this concern about children that it has exercised a subtle but pervasive tyranny of its own. This is what I call Kindergarchy: dreary, boring, sadly misguided Kindergarchy.

With its full-court-press attention on children, the Kindergarchy is a radical departure from the ways parents and children viewed one another in earlier days. Ten or so years ago I began to notice that a large number of people born around the late 1930s and through the 1940s had, as I do, a brother or sister five or six years younger or older than they. So often was this the case that I began to wonder if there wasn't some pattern here that I had hitherto missed? Then it occurred to me that mothers in those days decided not to have a second child until their first child, at five or six, had gone off to school.

Born into the middle class in the Middle West, growing up I did not know any married woman who worked. So the mothers I am talking about here did not put a five- or six-year separation between the birth of their kids for economic reasons, or because it gave them more time to devote to their first-born children, or any other reason I can think of other than their own damn convenience. They did it because--insensitive, selfish, appalling really to contemplate--it was easier not to have two children under four years old to worry about at once; it made more sense to them not to have to deal with two or more needy greedy little children simultaneously. Let one go off to school, then we shall think of having another--much easier for everyone all around. Or so I believe thinking on the matter went.

Did this arrangement make sense for the children? Five or six years' age difference between siblings is probably not an ideal difference for the development of closeness between brothers and sisters. When my younger brother entered boyhood, at eight or nine, I was already in high school; when he was in high school, I was away at college; and when he was in college, I was a married man with a son of my own. No, a five- or six-year separation is doubtless not the best spacing between two kids growing up in the same household. If you had confronted my mother and father with this psychological datum, they might have said, "Interesting." But I doubt that they would have found it very interesting at all.

Let me quickly insert that I had the excellent luck of having good parents. Neither was in the least neurotic, both were fair to my brother and me, neither of us ever doubted the love of either of them. I can also say with no hesitation that my parents' two sons were never for a moment at the center of their lives.

The action in their lives was elsewhere than in childraising.

In my father's case the action was at his business--"the place," as he sometimes called it. A small businessman, he came most alive when at work. Without hobbies or outside interests, he worked a five-and-a-half day week, and didn't in the least mind if he had an excuse to drop in for a few hours on occasional Sundays.

My mother, who was not in any way a trivial person as the following details might make her seem, played cards at least three afternoons a week. She kept up a fairly brisk social round. She was at home to provide us lunch when my brother and I were in grammar school, and she cooked substantial dinners, baked, and was a careful housekeeper. Later she took an interest in charities and paid for and helped organize occasional fundraising luncheons. When her children were grown, she went to work in her husband's business as a secretary-bookkeeper-credit-manager, at all of which she did a first-class job.

When I was a boy my parents might go off to New York or to Montreal (my father was born in Canada) for a week or so and leave my brother and me in the care of a woman in the neighborhood, a spinster named Charlotte Smucker--Mrs. Smucker to us--who was a professional child-sitter. Sometimes an aunt, my mother's sister who had no children, would stay with us. We seldom went on vacation as a family. When I was eight years old, my parents sent me off for an eight-week summer camp session in Eagle River, Wisconsin, where I learned all the dirty words if not their precise meanings. None of these things made me unhappy or in any way dampened my spirits. I cannot recall ever thinking of myself as an unhappy kid.

My mother never read to me, and my father took me to no ballgames, though we did go to Golden Gloves fights a few times. When I began my modest athletic career, my parents never came to any of my games, and I should have been embarrassed had they done so. My parents never met any of my girlfriends in high school. No photographic or video record exists of my uneven progress through early life. My father never explained about the birds and the bees to me; his entire advice on sex, as I clearly remember, was, "You want to be careful."

I don't recall many stretches of boredom in my boyhood. Life was lived among friends on the block and, later, during games on the playground. Winter afternoons after school were filled up by "Jack Armstrong," "Captain Midnight," and other radio programs for kids. Boredom, really, wasn't an option. I recall only once telling my mother that I was bored. "Oh," she said, a furtive smile on her lips, "why don't you bang your head against the wall. That'll take your mind off your boredom." I never mentioned boredom again.

After the age of ten, I made every decision about my education on my own. The one I didn't make, at ten, was to go to Hebrew school in order to be bar-mitzvahed; this was a decision made for me and was nonnegotiable. But my parents felt no need to advise me on what foreign language to take in high school, where I ought to go to college--though my father paid every penny of my tuition and expenses--or what I ought to study once there. That I was a thoroughly mediocre student seemed not much to bother them. Neither of my parents had gone to college, and my father never finished high school, moving to the United States and going off on his own at 17, and so they did not put great value in doing well at school.

At roughly the age of 11, I had the run of the city of Chicago, taking buses, streetcars, or the El with friends to Wrigley Field, downtown, or to nearby neighborhoods for Saturday afternoon movies. Beginning at 15, the age when driver's licenses were then issued in Chicago, I had frequent use of my mother's cream-and-green Chevy Bel-Air, which greatly expanded my freedom. I don't recall either of my parents asking me where I had been, or with whom, even when I came in at early morning hours on the weekends.

When we were together, at family meals and at other times, we laughed a lot, my parents, my brother, and

I, but we did not openly exhibit exuberant affection for one another. We did not hug, and I do not remember often kissing my mother or her kissing me. Neither my mother nor my father ever told me they loved me; nor did I tell them that I loved them. I always assumed their love, and, as later years would prove, when they came to my aid in small crises, I was not wrong to do so.

I did not seek my parents' approval. All I wished was to avoid their--and particularly my father's--disapproval, which would have cut into my freedom. Avoiding disapproval meant staying out of trouble, which for the most part I was able to do. Punishment would have meant losing the use of my mother's car, or having my allowance reduced, or being made to stay home on school or weekend nights, and I cannot remember any of these things ever happening, a testament less to my adolescent virtue than to the generous slack my parents cut me.

The older I become the more grateful I am to my parents for staying off my case. Yet they were not unusual in this. Most of the parents of my contemporaries acted much the same, which is why very little anger or animus on the part of my friends against their parents was in evidence. Some parents were more generous to their kids than others, a few mothers showed anxiety about their sons and daughters, but no parents that I knew of seemed oppressive enough to give cause for feelings of revolt on the part of their children. Free and almost wildly uncontrolled though it may seem today, my upbringing was quite normal for middle-class boys of my generation.

I don't for a moment mean to suggest that such an upbringing produced a superior generation of adults. What it produced was another group of people who later spent their lives going about the world's business, with no strong grudges against their parents or anger at such abstract enemies as The System. All I would claim is that to be free from so much parental supervision seemed a nice way to grow up, and it surely resulted in a lot less wear and tear on everyone all round.

Parents generally didn't feel under any obligation to put heavy pressure on their children. Nor, except in odd, neurotic cases, did they feel any need to micromanage their lives. My own father once told me that he felt his responsibilities extended to caring for the physical well-being of my brother and me, paying for our education, teaching us right from wrong, and giving us some general idea about how a man ought to live, but that was pretty much it. Most fathers during this time, my guess is, must have felt the same.

A single generation later, I have to confess, I didn't--at least, not quite. I tried to bring up my two sons on the model on which I had been brought up, but I was unable to bring it off very successfully. My own confidence in my doing the right thing as a parent was considerably less than that of my own parents. I was always telling my two sons how much I loved them. I told them this so often that I should imagine they must have begun to doubt that I had any real feeling for them whatsoever.

The time was the 1960s and early 1970s. The culture was beginning to change radically. Lots of marriages were falling apart, my own among them. (After divorce, I had custody of my sons, who were then eight and six.) Drugs seemed to be everywhere. Crime was getting a lot more press. The rise of political hippyism followed by feminism, itself in part a reaction to the male dominance of the political movement of the Sixties, brought on a strong contempt for the middle class, and what was thought its stolid ways and left a wide swath for anyone who wished to make a jolly damn fool of him- or herself, which lots of people did. The business of therapy appeared to be picking up; more and more people seemed to be undergoing it, and its assumptions became more deeply ingrained in middle-class life.

One of the direct results of the 1960s was that the culture put a new premium on youthfulness; adulthood, as it had hitherto been perceived, was on the way out, beginning with clothes and ending with personal conduct. Everyone, even people with children and other adult responsibilities, wanted to continue to think of himself as still young, often well into his 40s and 50s. One of the consequences of this was that one shied away from the old parental role of authority figure, dealing out rewards and punishments and

passing on knowledge, somewhat distant, carefully rationing out intimacy, establishing one's solidity and strength. Suddenly parents wanted their children to think of them as, if not exactly contemporaries, then as friends, pals, fun people. Parents of my own parents' generation may have been more or less kind, generous, humorous, warm, but, however attractive, they never thought of themselves as their children's friends. When your son becomes a man (or your daughter a woman), make him (or her) your brother (or sister), an old Arab proverb has it. But it's probably a serious mistake to make a kid of 9 or 14 your brother or sister.

Childrearing became a highly self-conscious activity, in all of its facets. Husbands were now called in not merely to help out with childrearing but in actual childbirth. They went to Lamaze classes with their wives; there they were, not infrequently videocam in hand, in the delivery room cheerleading and rehearsing breathing exercises with their laboring wives. Pregnant women were advised not to smoke, not to drink, not to do a great many other things that generations of expectant mothers had always done, lest their children pay the price in ill-health, if not actual birth defects.

A child being the most dear of all possessions, instructions--maintenance manuals, really--for his or her early upbringing were everywhere. Pacific mobiles swayed gently over cribs, nursery rooms were designed with the kind of care devoted to the direct descendants of the Sun King--and why not, for every child suddenly became his or her own dauphin or dauphine. In the background the music of Mozart--so good, parents were told, for heightening the intelligence quotient--played on at just the right volume. Impossible to be too careful about these matters, when so much was at stake.

"Children are best seen not heard," was a maxim once in frequent use. "Speak only when spoken to," was another piece of advice regularly issued to children. Now kids are encouraged to come forth, as soon and as frequently as they wish, to demonstrate their brightness, cuteness, creativity. A few years ago, I found it noteworthy (and still memorable) that when on the phone with an editor I was dealing with--he was working at home at the time--he said to his daughter, "Faith, don't disturb Daddy right now. He's working." Most people today would have put one on hold or offered to call back later. Kids, after all, come first.

On visits to the homes of friends with small children, one finds their toys strewn everywhere, their drawings on the refrigerator, television sets turned to their shows. Parents in this context seem less than secondary, little more than indentured servants. Under the Kindergarchy, all arrangements are centered on children: their schooling, their lessons, their predilections, their care and feeding and general high maintenance--children are the name of the game.

No other generations of kids have been so curried and cultivated, so pampered and primed, though primed for what exactly is a bit unclear. Children are given a voice in lots of decisions formerly not up for their consideration. "If it's your child, not you, who gets to choose your weekend brunch spot," writes David Hochman in the magazine *Details*, "or if *he's* the one asking how the branzino is prepared, it's probably time to take a hard look at your own behavior."

Where once childrearing was an activity conducted largely by instinct and common sense, today it takes its lead from self-appointed experts whose thinking is informed by pop psychology. Here, for example, is a blogger calling herself Millennium Mom on the subject of punishment. On spanking, Millennium Mom's view--quoting from an article posted on the iVillage website--is that:

spanking may give children a clear message about the unacceptability of their behavior and sometimes stops the behavior in the short run. However, in the long run, it teaches children that it is all right to hit, and that it is all right to be hit. Even children are confused by the irony of the statement, "This spanking will teach you not to hit your brother."

On the subject of "time-outs"--those enforced recesses when children are asked to go off to contemplate their bad behavior--Millennium Mom notes:

the problem with time-outs is that they take a child away from a valuable learning experience. A child who hits another child can begin to learn empathy from watching the other child's response to being hurt, and if he stays around, he may also be able to participate in helping the other child feel better.

Bountiful is your heart, Millennium Mom; it is only your insight into human nature that is troubling.

The relentless cultural enrichment of children under Kindergarchy is not an option; it will be seen to, whatever the toll in time or money. At a minimum, visits must be made to Disneyland, the Epcot Center, national parks, children's museums, youth concerts, every new movie designed for the children's market. Various lessons--ballet, tennis, guitar, more--must be contracted, with mom or dad driving the kids to them and picking them up afterwards. ("Parenting," that dreary neologism, has given the old role of parent the status of a job, and no part-time one, either.) Each child must have a vast arsenal of toys, with emphasis currently on the wireless. The appropriate CDs and DVDs need to be acquired, and books, lots and lots of books. "Mackenzie has read Harry Potter, all seven books, three times." How nice for Mackenzie! "Gideon adores books about mythology, and, did I tell you, he's learning French?" *Merveilleux!* A parent can report nothing more satisfying than that her child is an eager reader, years and years ahead of himself, and, though only nine, already reading at the postdoctoral level of comprehension.

The names Mackenzie and Gideon are a reminder of how important the naming of children has become under the Kindergarchy. No more Edward, Robert, David, when you can have Luc, Guthrie, and Colby; no more Jane, Barbara, Lois, when Lindsay, Courtney, and Kelsey are available. Sometimes, in the naming of children, there is a dip back to the deliberately out-of-date--Jake and Max, Emily and Becky--but such names are tainted by an historical falsity, in the same way that Balanchine said that every beard grown after those worn by men in his father's generation was a fake.

One reads occasional stories about the spoiled children of the rich, those little tyrants of private schools, who wear designer clothes and mock classmates who do not; or about the kids whose parents drop a couple hundred grand on their bar-mitzvahs or sweet 16 parties; or of affluent suburban high-school parking lots filled with their students' BMWs and Porsches. In a rich country, a fair amount of this kind of sad vulgarity figures to go on. But what I have in mind is something more endemic--a phenomenon that affects large stretches of the middle class: the phenomenon, heightened under Kindergarchy, of simply paying more attention to the upbringing of children than can possibly be good for them.

The craze of attentiveness hits its most passionate note with schooling, and schooling starts now younger and younger. When Lyndon Johnson began the War on Poverty in 1965, its most popular, perhaps because least controversial, program was Headstart, which provided the children of the poor with preschooling, so that they would catch up with the children of the middle class by the time all began kindergarten at the age of five. But the middle class soon set in motion a headstart program of its own, sending its children to nursery and preschools as early as is physiologically possible. Where one's child goes to school, how well he does in school, which schools give him the best shot at even better schools later on--these are all matters of the most intense concern.

Under Kindergarchy, no effort on behalf of one's children's schooling is too extensive, no expense too great, no sacrifice in time and energy on the part of parents too exacting. In a scandal of a few years ago, a New York stock-market analyst named Jack Grubman arranged some complicated stock shenanigans to get to a member of the board of the coveted 92nd Street Y Nursery School in Manhattan, whom he hoped would smooth the way for his twin children to get into this school, which he felt would in turn pave the

way into the better New York private elementary schools and high schools, and thence obviously to the very Valhalla of the Ivy League itself. The Grubman story shows how much parents feel is riding on their kids' schooling and how far some are willing to go to get what they think is the best for them.

The pressure on the children upon whom all this attention is lavished is not slight. At New Trier, the upper-middle-class suburban high school on Chicago's North Shore, children load up their backpacks with SAT study guides to get as close to being toll free--present parlance for scoring two 800s on the SATs--as possible, carry lacrosse sticks and tennis racquets wherever they go, hoke up their sad little résumés to make themselves look like miniature Dr. Albert Schweitzers in search of lepers to whose aid they might come, and generally plow away at what they call Preparation H, shorthand for preparing to apply to Harvard.

Every high school now has its battery of counselors: guidance, psychological, college. A larger and larger segment of the student population seems to bring its own psychological tics and jiggeroos to school with them: ADHD, dyslexia and other learning disabilities, various degrees of depression requiring regimens of pills and therapy sessions. Some of these defects and disabilities are the result of parents' having their children at a later age. Might others be that the children are so intensely watched over and tested that more and more defects and disabilities show up, some among them possibly imaginary?

School is the pressure point. More and more teachers in grade and high schools complain not about the children they are asked to teach, but about the endless contact with children's parents. Parents are *in situ*, on the scene, unstintingly on the job. "How come Corey only got a B in physics? He's always been so wonderful in science." "Why isn't Lettice a better speller? Her father won the state spelling bee in Iowa." One wonders how many teachers have been driven out of the profession by parents' bombarding them with emails, phone calls, and requests for meetings?

As my sons were growing up, I began to notice parents taking a great deal of interest in their education, much more so than previous generations of middle-class parents had done. Everyone wanted his or her kids to get into one of the better-regarded colleges, and a lot more than education seemed to be riding on it. A son at Princeton, a daughter at Yale, such things seemed a validation of one's own virtue as a good parent, and hence, somehow, as a superior human being. Much snobbery was entailed, of course; having a child at Harvard being obviously thought more impressive than one at a nearby community college, but more than snobbery alone was involved. Payback time, getting into a good college is the child's return on his parents' immense psychological investment in him.

These much loved children eventually do, at staggering expense (but who's complaining?), go off to college. First, of course, there are the de rigueur pre-college visits, where parents load up the car during junior year of high school to tour all the colleges that are within the child's range of possibility. ("Thaddeus hated Tufts, loved Reed.") Then, the applications completed, the acceptances garnered, the decision made, one last trip: carting the kid off to the school of choice, with a carload of his clothes and appliances, with stereos, computers, television, DVD-player, PlayStation, cell phone, credit card. There he will learn from teachers raised not so very differently than he that it is precisely people like his parents--that would be you, Mom and Dad--who have made life hell for the wretched people of Africa, Bangladesh, and underdogs everywhere round the world. Which may not be the payback most contemporary parents quite envisioned.

How did earlier generations of parents seem able to manage raising children while putting in so much less time, avoiding so much *Sturm und Drang*? People raising children today will tell you that the world is a more frightening place now than it was 50 years ago. Much more crime out there, drugs are easily obtained, sex offenders are everywhere, lots of children turn up missing, as the back of your milk cartons will inform you. The spirit of therapy having triumphed, we now see more clearly than heretofore how

fragile the young human personality is, how easily it can be smashed by mistreatment or mismanagement or want of affection. Add to all this that the options for children are much greater today; a child can go in any number of ways in education and in life, and all these need to be thoroughly investigated.

Failure today seems a much more dismal prospect; 50 or so years ago, if one didn't, for example, get into what was thought a good school, life didn't seem permanently dim, if not effectively over. America seemed to offer more than now in the way of second chances. Today everything seems so much riskier, so much more appears to be at stake.

Why shouldn't parents do all in their power to make their children's lives less bumpy, more concentrated and carefully planned, thereby increasing their prospects for a happier, more satisfying life? No reason at all, really, except that trying to do so often comes to seem so joyless and the children who emerge from such ultra-careful upbringing so often turn out far from the perfect specimens their parents had imagined.

As a teacher at Northwestern University (not long retired), I found the students in my classes in no serious way I could discern much improved for all the intensity of home and classroom attention most of them received under the Kindergarchy. A very small number, those who had somehow found passion for books and the life of the mind, were remarkable, a number proportionally probably little different than in any generation of students; the rest were like students everywhere and at all times: just wanting to get the damn thing called their education over with and get on with life with the best start possible.

The most impressive students I had over my 30 years of university teaching were those I encountered when I first began, in the early 1970s, who almost all turned out to have been put through Catholic schools, during a time when priests and nuns still taught and Catholic education hadn't become indistinguishable from secular education. Many of these kids resented what they felt was the excessive constraint, with an element of fear added, of their education. Most failed to realize that it was this very constraint--and maybe a touch of the fear, too--that forced them to learn Latin, to acquire and understand grammar, to pick up the rudiments of arguing well, that had made them as smart as they were.

So often in my literature classes students told me what they "felt" about a novel, or a particular character in a novel. I tried, ever so gently, to tell them that no one cared what they felt; the trick was to discover not one's feelings but what the author had put into the book, its moral weight and its resultant power. In essay courses, many of these same students turned in papers upon which I wished to--but did not--write: "D-, Too much love in the home." I knew where they came by their sense of their own deep significance and that this sense was utterly false to any conceivable reality. Despite what their parents had been telling them from the very outset of their lives, they were not significant. Significance has to be earned, and it is earned only through achievement. Besides, one of the first things that people who really are significant seem to know is that, in the grander scheme, they are themselves really quite insignificant.

Growing up with only minimal attention sharpened this sense of one's insignificance. One's fierce little opinions were all very well, but without the substance of accomplishment behind them, they meant nothing. Not long after I had graduated from the University of Chicago, at a family dinner, an aggressively confident cousin of my father's asked what I planned to do with my life. I mentioned, rather diffidently, that I hoped one day to be a writer. "You ought to try to get something in the *Reader's Digest*," he replied, in a challenging way. The *Reader's Digest* was not what I had in mind; in those days publishing in the *New Yorker*, in my young highbrow's view, would have meant selling out. Naturally, I wanted to tell this man how stupid his notion of literary success was and that he should stick to his own damn business (which was the hardware business), and to bugger off, thank you very much. I knew, though, that I daren't do so; I was untried, untested, still a kid (even though one of 22), without authority. Instead I nodded, as if I thought publishing in the *Reader's Digest* an interesting notion, and returned to my roast beef.

Had that incident occurred today, had I been raised under the Kindergarchy, I no doubt would have

lectured him on his ignorance, put him properly in place, my approving parents ("Wonderful how young Joseph always speaks his mind!") looking on. I say this based on the fact that I note today many of the young, in late high-school or college years, suffer no shyness in putting forth their own opinions, observations, and usually less than penetrating insights. So many I have encountered also greatly overestimate their charm. But, then, why shouldn't they; their parents have for years been telling them how tremendously charming they are.

Every generation must have its journalistic label, and the most recent generation to depart school to enter the larger world has begun to be called "the millenniums," after the fact of their coming into their maturity in the 21st century. Newspapers stories are beginning to report that, on the job, these people, raised under the Kindergarchy, don't tolerate criticism well, and need lots of praise to buck them up and get them through the day. A friend of mine, who works for a financial consulting firm, tells me that the brightest of the young men and women going into financial work he meets are almost all interested in hedge funds--they want big scores, 20 or so million before they reach 30. They didn't have to wait long for their toys or attention or anything else as children, so why should they wait for the world's prizes as adults?

The consequences of so many years of endlessly attentive childrearing in young people can also be witnessed in many among them who act as if certain that they are deserving of the interest of the rest of us; they come off as very knowing. Lots of their conversation turns out to be chiefly about themselves, and much of it feels as if it is formulated to impress some dean of admissions with how very extraordinary they are. Despite all the effort that has been put into shaping these kids, things, somehow, don't seem quite to have worked out. Who would have thought that so much love in the home would result in such far from lovable children? But then, come to think of it, apart from their parents, who would have thought otherwise?

Well, in the words of Vladimir Illych Lenin, who had no children, what is to be done? Not very much, I suspect. When such seismic shifts in the culture as that represented by the rise of Kindergarchy take hold, there isn't much anyone can do but wait for things to work themselves out. My own hope is that the absurdity of current arrangements will in time be felt, and people will gradually realize the foolishness of continuing to lavish so much painstaking attention on their children. When that time comes, children will be allowed to relax, no longer under threat of suffocation by love from their parents, and grow up more on their own. Only then will parents once again be able to live their own lives, free to concentrate on their work, life's adult pleasures, and those responsibilities that fall well outside the prison of the permanent kindergarten they have themselves erected and have been forced to live in as hostages.

*Joseph Epstein is a contributing editor to THE WEEKLY STANDARD. His Fred Astaire will be published in September by the Yale University Press.*

© Copyright 2008, News Corporation, Weekly Standard, All Rights Reserved.