



Book Review

Raising America: Experts, Parents and a Century of Advice About Children by Ann Hulbert. Knopf Publishing, 2003.

Reviewed by Mark Daims

Ms Hulbert's book is a thoroughly researched history of the experts who over the past century advised American parents on how to raise their children. She reports their philosophies of child-rearing, their professional lives, their research if they were involved in any, and in equal depth their personal lives. She also regularly discusses the "children's movement" through the century with descriptions of several major national meetings or federal studies on parenting and children. Her introduction alludes to Ellen Key's best seller of 1904, *The Century of the Child*¹, a title applied to the dawning century described in *Raising America*. She quotes from Key's book where Key envisages a new focus on parenting and children that could transform our species to something greater and asks for, "an entirely new conception of the vocation of mother, a tremendous effort of will, continuous inspiration." Key's, "entirely new conception of the vocation of mother," is referred to by the author as a "very tall order." Her book does not address what would be best for children or mankind; its focus is on what the expert's advice means for parents. Their advice nearly always

means challenges and stress for parents. The author also mentions that calls for enlightened parenting were not new to the dawn of the 20th century. "What stands out at the turn of the 20th century," Hulbert declared in a earlier essay², "is the explicit emphasis by parents on their own right to disobey their parents, or at least to do things differently--and scientifically." The experts also want things done differently but there is no indication in *Raising America* that anything is done better or that expert advice gradually improved in any way. "It wasn't firm data that drove child-rearing expertise, but changing social concerns that seemed to dictate its swerves and emphases." Hulbert's assessment of the experts mirrors Kay S. Hyman's view of the larger society in her book, *Ready or Not*³, where she states, "Human beings fashion the childhood their culture needs." Hulbert finds that the parenting styles espoused by some experts are in right in step with business models of the day. Stephen Covey, described by *The Economist*⁴ as, the world's most influential management thinker," easily moved from management thinker to parenting expert.

One of the first experts discussed in the book

is Dr. Luther Emmett Holt who gave advice in keeping with the regularity and systemization desired in industry at the time. Dr. Holt, one of America's first and finest pediatricians, had ideas which stood in mild contrast with those of Dr. G. Stanley Hall, owner of the first psychology doctorate in the USA and the first chair in that discipline. The two espoused contrasting models of scientific child-rearing without becoming competitors as later experts became and both spoke at the National Congress of Mothers in Washington D.C. in 1899. Both suggested that children should be studied and that parenting be based on scientific information. They perhaps established the notion of a parenting expert thereby downsizing advice from grandparents and friends. The sophistication necessary to parenting had to match the new century of increasing complexity that awaited the nation's children. Holt and Hall also may have established the two poles in expert thought on parenting that the author feels have persisted to this day. Dr. Hall championed Rousseau's more "child-centered" (soft) approach while Dr. Holt delineated a "parent-centered" (hard) plan. Of Dr. Holt the author says that, "he coolly emphasized rational discipline as the route to self-control in the child and peace for mothers," especially during the child's early years where hygiene, charts and schedules were the policy. Dr. Hall, on the other hand, "championed the child's own natural impulses," especially later during adolescence. He declared that, "youth must have excitement, and if this be not at hand in the form of moral and intellectual enthusiasms, it is more prone... to be sought for in sex or in drink."

With the expert firmly established, the "Conference of Modern Parenthood," held in 1925, touted scientific or "educated motherhood" while experts at the time were, "multiplying at a rate unmatched by children or parents since before the war." The social sciences were now the key to social change and perhaps to a lasting peace to follow World War I. The vocation of parenthood became even more complicated

as Freud and others began to imbue children with libidinal desires and a rich, mysterious internal life of their own. Parents were psychoanalyzed as well and found wanting. Into this world where both parent and child seemed to be new entities stepped Dr. John B. Watson (Holt's successor on the "hard" side of parenting) who declared in 1925, "Give me a dozen healthy infants, well formed, and my own specified world to bring them up in, and I'll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select." This he could do, "regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations, and race of his ancestors." As the author points out, the expert and subject of the expert's advice are predominantly male while the persons receiving the advice are predominantly female. Another consistency among the experts, including Watson, is that their advice is based on scant to little actual evidence. This is something many of them admit, quietly, in amongst their writings, and may in some cases, have only further endeared them to parents with the buddy to buddy tone of their advice. Dr. Watson, however, was not a buddy, declaring, "parents today are incompetent. Most of them should be indicted for psychological murder. His motto was, "Never rock the baby." and discouraged maternal affection. All affection, as the author sums up, was felt by Watson to be, "physical, self-centered indulgence." His wife would later admit that, "I cannot restrain my affection for my children completely." Dr. Watson at one point proposed "infant farms."

Perhaps responding to Dr. Holt's prescriptions for regularity and timed feedings, Dr. Watson's counterpart had a different motto. "Don't watch the clock, watch the child," was the motto of Dr. Arnold Gesell who was the first to use the camera to investigate children's behavior. He had to use a special dome to make the films due to the requirements of the equipment of the time. His books for parents, *Infant and Child care in the Culture today*, departed from the "How to" genre of then and now; "It

does not contain a single 'Do' or "Don't" for parents" touted a radio program of the times. He moved away from parent-centered "regularity" to child-centered "regulation" wherein the parent unobtrusively adapted to the many stages or "marvelous series of patterned events" that their child would develop through. Known for his attentiveness to children, he urged attentiveness at home but also added that, "development is a little like the weather. It should be accepted at least within reason."

In her chapter, "The Awkward Age of the Expert," the author leaves Gesell and moves on to the "Midcentury White House Conference on Children and Youth" in 1950 and Dr. Benjamin Spock. According to the author, the expert's feeling in past conferences that science would arrive at some comprehensive view of the child had changed in this conference to, "an earnest therapy session, where all parties could feel free to examine their identities and confess their insecurities in neo-Freudian style. Attended by Margaret Mead and Erik Erikson, the experts seemed aware that more information from more experts had revealed little overall except that development was more complex than originally thought. "Personality in the Making," the title of the conference's final report concluded how, "much of this knowledge [about the healthy personality]... is still tentative." "Probably there will be no single answer." Some experts and some research seemed, as echoed later in the book when the author discusses Judith Harris' controversial book [*The Nurture Assumption*](#)⁵, to find little relationship between parenting practices and the personality of the child. Dr. Spock may have sidestepped this confusion with his confident style that declared to parents, "Trust yourself. You know more than you think you do." To capture his appeal the author quotes an infatuated follower of Spock, "He's as sympathetic and understanding as a woman that wonderful man." The author claims that Spock's softer, less rigid, more spontaneous approach fit the mood of the times and thereby became popular. The first edition of his famous

book was a twenty-five cent paperback that fit in a pocket and spoke in understanding tones. Gesell and others had published textbooks written with the authoritarian tone of an expert. Spock spoke and wrote more like a friend.

Nevertheless his advice and philosophy evolved through the several editions of his book towards a "harder" approach to parenting. The second edition of Spock's book, says the author, moves away from spontaneity and towards something that was, "a management strategy that called for emotional subtlety." There was a concern in those times that there was too much spontaneity. A feeling that a firmer hand was needed was in the air. Spock was, as were earlier experts, in step with corporate or business personnel management strategies of the time. Spock and corporate mentality, "enshrined a new therapeutic value, group harmony--alongside old-style efficiency." Besides business influences, the author asserts that Spock was profoundly influenced by his mother Mildred and that many of the experts before him were influenced by their "strong" mothers. The personal life of each expert is examined and about Spock the author says, "He was Mildred's son eager to be loved rather than judged by the mothers who came to him with their children, yet also eager to provoke the strong-willed wife who reminded him of his mother." Spock, as is the case with most of the experts, does scant research of his own. His own poorly designed studies surprised the researchers as they seemed to indicate that mothers paid scant attention to the advice of the experts. This possibility was not lost on many of the experts while some at the same time worried about too much pressure being placed on parents by the experts. The experts as a group seem to be, in *Raising America*, not without some marketing skills as they sense what parents want to hear, want advice about (or what tone the parents would like their advice served in) and then provide it. Gary Ezzo, the author of *Babywise: How 100,000 New Parents Learned to Put Their Children To Sleep the Natural Way*⁶, for instance, "picked

up on what made for a good pitch in the over-saturated market." She also says of the experts, "In fact, they are more in need of telling readers what they might want to hear than their readers have ever been in need of actually doing what any manual says; the experts' popularity has depended in it."

Gary Ezzo belongs to the latter part of the last century where the world of the parenting expert became increasingly complex as not only the child becomes more complex but the means of investigating the child become controversial and uncertain. "The real scientific breakthroughs of the closing decades of the century had converged on an unsettling recognition: there was far more complexity, and indeterminacy, in children's trajectories than scientists in the child development field had expected to discover--or had yet figured out how to handle." The chapters on Spock are followed by a chapter entitled, *Ministers, Mentors and Managers*. "Minister-experts," emerge as "hard-liners" with a mission to raise moral children while the "mentor-experts" advise a guiding, softer parental direction where the child's emotional and cognitive abilities are fostered. Though the approaches seem different, Hulbert sees within each a commonality of purpose. Both are concerned about an overstimulating, consumer-type society and are trying to prepare the children for what awaits them and both approaches are in essence managerial; one manages by command, the other by sleight of hand. The "Manager-Experts," like Covey, want harmony or as one parenting expert, unmentioned in the book, Bill Cosby said, "Parents are not quite interested in justice, they are interested in quiet." She goes on to argue that the two camps

have always been equivocal about their hard or soft approaches. There are a few pauses in the experts' advice where they switch sides and advise the opposite of their overall approach. The experts throughout the book and in the closing chapter, *What to expect from the Experts*, appear very human and, "as full of contradictions as the rest of us." In the closing pages the author quotes Heidi Murkoff's advice in *Newsweek*⁷ on dealing with the "plethora of advice," that can leave parents, "uncertain how to proceed - paralyzed." Concerning the expert's advice, Murkoff advises, "Use it to guide, not dictate," watch out for "parenting pendulum swings" and find what "fits."

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Notes

- 1 [*The Century of the Child*](#), Ellen Scott Key. 1909
- 2 "The Century of the Child," Ann Hulbert, *Wilson Quarterly*. Winter 1999
- 3 *Ready or Not*. Kay S. Hymowitz. Encounter Books. 2000
- 4 "Confessor to the Boardroom," *The Economist*. Feb 24, 1996 p. 74
- 5 *The Nurture Assumption*. Judith Harris. The Free Press. 1998
- 6 *Babywise: How 100,000 New Parents Learned to Put Their Children To Sleep the Natural Way*. Gary Ezzo and Robert Bucknam (contributor). Multnomah Publishers. 1995
- 7 "The Real Parenting Expert is... You." *Newsweek* 136, no 17A (Fall/Winter 2000):21.