



# Anxious Parents: A History of Modern Childrearing in America

By Peter N. Stearns

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The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw a dramatic shift in the role of children in American society and families. No longer necessary for labor, children became economic liabilities and twentieth-century parents exhibited a new level of anxiety concerning the welfare of their children and their own ability to parent effectively. What caused this shift in the ways parenting and childhood were experienced and perceived? Why, at a time of relative ease and prosperity, do parents continue to grapple with uncertainty and with unreasonable expectations of both themselves and their children?

Peter N. Stearns explains this phenomenon by examining the new issues the twentieth century brought to bear on families. Surveying popular media, "expert" childrearing manuals, and newspapers and journals published throughout the century, Stearns shows how schooling, physical and emotional vulnerability, and the rise in influence of commercialism became primary concerns for parents. The result, Stearns shows, is that contemporary parents have come to believe that they are participating in a culture of neglect and diminishing standards. **Anxious Parents: A Modern History of Childrearing in America** shows the reasons for this belief through an historic examination of modern parenting.

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## **Editorial Review**

From Publishers Weekly

While other authors have stressed the 20th century's emphasis on parental anxiety by focusing on the advice industry (e.g., Ann Hulbert's recent *Raising America*, *Forecasts*, Mar. 10), Stearns, a George Mason University history professor, takes a broader approach. If the 20th century invented the scientific approach to child care, it was partly because parents were seeking expert opinions. Modern life had created real changes in the lives of children: urbanization and smaller, nuclear families. While earlier generations of parents had viewed children as resilient, in the 20th century they were considered vulnerable, which shaped parents' approaches to children's discipline, schooling, chores and uses of leisure time. The impact of parental anxiety on children's daily lives may not have been drastic, but it did steer children in certain parent-sponsored directions, says Stearns. Children became more school-oriented, their free time more regulated. As parents worried that their kids were bored, kids began describing themselves that way. Parental hovering increased adolescent need to differentiate from parents; constant emotional temperature-taking may have led to an increase in childhood depression. Stearns urges "more parental backbone" to reject guilt tripping by the experts and more "decency" from the advice givers. Less nostalgia and more study of how things really were and are (i.e., by reading excellent texts like this one) may give parents and educators a clearer picture of how well they're doing. Stearns has put a lot of thought into this dense but elegantly argued and thoroughly researched volume, and it should become a classic in the study of American childhood.

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## **Review**

"In what is his trademark style, Stearns creates an artful synthesis that is both revelatory and captivating. An at times unsettling analysis of parental angst, the book is replete with worthy insights for historians and contemporary parents alike."

*-The Journal of American History*

"(Stearns) has a keen appreciation of what really mattered to 20th-century Americans, in their families and beyond. Indeed, it is his easy command of all that was going on outside the home- and his profound grasp of the connectedness of those larger developments and their consequences for childrearing - that sets his study apart from other histories of the modern American family."

*-Journal of Social History*

"Stearns points to a number of contemporary phenomena, each of which he considers an expression of parental anxiety. Stearns appears to be particularly sensitive to the upward mobility of kids' grades."

*-The New York Review of Books*

“A strong, effective, and readable portrayal of how twentieth-century American parents have invested and over-invested in their children. In a fairly short compass, Stearns has demonstrated many of the things that historians have tended to belabor-the role of expertise, why despite their declining numbers, children have become so important socially, the new realm of consumption, how the anxiety about children has become a central matter in twentieth-century culture and even an identifier of American life. Stearns knows what is going on and that children are not a means to express other anxieties, but the very source of many of the anxieties we express.”

-Paula S. Fass, University of California, Berkeley

“The book is more than a synthesis of existing scholarship. It is a compendium of ideas - some personal, mostly scholarly - about the experience of parenting in the United States since the beginning of the twentieth century. The book is imaginative and thought provoking.”

-*History of Education Quarterly*

“Anxiety is the hallmark of contemporary parenting. Today’s parents are tormented by fears of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, child abductions, and juvenile drug and alcohol use. In perhaps his most timely and exciting book, Peter N. Stearns explains with wit and humane insight how modern mothers and fathers came to agonize incessantly about children's personality development, school performance, and psychological well-being.”

-Steven Mintz, University of Houston

#### About the Author

**Peter N. Stearns** is Provost and University Professor at George Mason University. Since 1967, he has served as editor-in-chief of *The Journal of Social History*. His numerous books include *World History in Documents*; *American Behavioral History*; and *Anxious Parents*.

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