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TIES THAT STRESS

THE NEW FAMILY IMBALANCE

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Acknowledgments

At a working breakfast recently, a young colleague asked me, "How do you write a book?" A medley of different explanations came to mind, but I finally answered with what I believe is true for the writing of most books, namely, "You don't do it alone." First there are your family and friends, who must listen patiently while you talk on and on about your current preoccupation. I know my wife and sons were getting pretty tired of hearing about the postmodern family. They were nonetheless patient and genuinely supportive over the years while this book was germinating and being written. I appreciate them and love them for that, among other things. I also want to thank my friends Emory Cowen, Bernie Eisman, and Joe Stewart, who answered my sometimes despairing, sometimes euphoric, correspondence with good humor and calming reassurance.

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Last, but certainly not least, I want to express my gratitude to the hundreds of children, parents, and educators I have worked with, or met with, over the last quarter century. Talking and writing about the plight of children and youth in our society is often disheartening and depressing. But even when I am feeling most discouraged, I listen to a children's choir, see a chalk game on the cement of a school yard, or watch a child consoling a friend, and I feel renewed. Or I meet men and women who, despite all the pressures and demands, are doing a really decent job of parenting, and my spirits rise. Sometimes I visit a classroom and hear the quiet hum of activity that, to me, is always the music of healthy schooling, and I feel rejuvenated. Talking with a principal who has introduced multiage grouping, has cut back on testing, and is encouraging remedial teaching within the classroom has the same uplifting effect.

These encounters help me to remember that, despite all that is wrong with our families, classrooms, and school administration, there is also a great deal of healthy parenting, creative teaching, and imaginative governance going on. If I am guardedly optimistic about the future of children and youth in our society, it is because I meet so many people who are genuinely committed and dedicated to the well-being of our young people.

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Family Imbalance

1

From Nuclear to Permeable

Over the past half century, profound shifts in our ways of perceiving, valuing, and feeling about ourselves and our world have radically altered American society and reconfigured the American family. We find these changes—which have been described as the movement from modernity to postmodernity—both liberating and stressful. The modern nuclear family, often idyllically portrayed as a refuge and a retreat from a demanding world, is fast disappearing. In its stead we now have a new structure—the postmodern permeable family—that mirrors the openness, complexity, and diversity of our contemporary lifestyles.

The nuclear family provided clear-cut, often rigid, boundaries between our public and our private lives, between the homeplace and the workplace, between children and adults. In the permeable family, these dividing lines have become blurred and difficult to discern. The postmodern family is more fluid, more flexible, and more obviously vulnerable to pressures from outside itself.

The solid boundaries of the idealized nuclear family were particularly beneficial for children and adolescents. Firm divisions between public and private, homeplace and workplace, parents and children offered the young a social envelope of well-defined limits and standards. That envelope of security and protection made it possible for

children and youth to devote all of their energies to the demands and conflicts of growing up.

These firm boundaries also provided a haven for some parents. But for many others they were unbearably confining and demeaning. Mothers often felt discouraged from pursuing fulltime careers, on the assumption that a nurturing mother should devote her time to driving children to afternoon ballet classes or baseball practice. Many fathers felt overburdened by the demands of the breadwinning role and of adaptation to corporate or industrial life. Parents whose marriage was unhappy often felt compelled to stay together "for the sake of the children" and to avoid the stigma of divorce, even if it meant resigning themselves to an unsatisfying lifelong relationship. The nuclear family's strong boundaries served the needs of children to a greater extent than they met the needs of parents. This was the old, modern family imbalance.

The old imbalance was, to be sure, relative. The ideal nuclear family was largely a white middle-class fantasy, rarely fully realized even in that socioeconomic milieu. In many lower income homes the family had always been permeable in the sense that children often worked alongside parents in family businesses near or in the home, blurring the distinctions both between homeplace and workplace and between the responsibilities of children and of adults. The immigrant family also was permeable to outside influences as children were exposed to American values and suffered the loss of old traditions. At the same time, however, these parents believed in working hard and sacrificing so that their children could have a better life. In this limited sense, many lower income and immigrant families reflected the old nuclear family imbalance, which met the needs of children better than it met the needs of adults.

But even among middle income families, the old imbalance was a relative one. Some parents thrived within the protected confines and clear role definitions of the nuclear family. In contrast, many children and adolescents suffered from overprotection and frequently

blundered as innocents into the adult world of work, sexual relations, and ruthless competition. Perhaps that helps explain why the postmodern parents of today—many of them the overprotected children of yesterday's modern parents—are more willing to prepare their own children for the real world, rather than to protect them from it. Nonetheless, the old imbalance between the needs of children and the needs of adults was prevalent in the typical family of the 1950s.

With the emergence of the postmodern permeable family, the need imbalance has tilted in the opposite direction. In many respects, the cave-in of the nuclear family's divisions and boundaries has been beneficial to parents. As a result of this collapse, parents living in permeable families have many more lifestyle options than did parents living in nuclear families. Childcare by paid professionals is rapidly becoming the national norm, as large numbers of women with children under schoolage enter the fulltime workforce. Single-parent families have become the fastest growing family structure in America in the 1990s, as more and more parents choose divorce over marital dissatisfaction and as greater numbers of women make the decision to bear children out of wedlock. Blended families, consisting of stepsiblings and half-siblings from two and sometimes three marriages, are not unusual.

These many ways of loosening the old constraints of the nuclear family have come about because parents have demanded relief from the stresses of family life that accumulated in the modern period. Yet the crumbling of these divisions has been detrimental to most children and youth. Growing up is difficult when family rules, boundaries, and values are ambiguous and in flux. In the permeable family, therefore, the needs of parents and adults are better served than the needs of children and youth. This is the new, postmodern family imbalance.

Like the old imbalance, the new imbalance is relative. Postmodern parents are not necessarily more self-indulgent or less self-sacrificing than modern parents. It is simply that the demands of postmodern

life are different from those that obtained in the modern world. Like passengers on a jetliner whose cabin has suddenly depressurized in midair, postmodern parents know they have to put their own oxygen mask on first, before they can attend to the safekeeping of their children. The postmodern global economy makes unceasing demands on adults to constantly update job skills or to change occupations, and has robbed postmodern parents of their sense of vocational security. For parents at all income levels, the demands of family and work, in a time of declining income and job scarcity, are a source of unceasing stress. With the telecommunications revolution, postmodern parents can no longer control the information flow to their children and have to be content to help them, as best they can, to cope. These crumbling boundaries and mounting pressures, combined with an appalling lack of institutional support for families, certainly does not make life in a permeable family easy for many postmodern parents.[1]

Moreover, just as the nuclear family had some benefits for parents despite its costs, the permeable family has some benefits for children. It enables them to realize abilities and to demonstrate competencies that went unrecognized in the modern era. Perhaps the most striking example of this positive side of the new imbalance is the widespread postmodern acceptance of the value of early childhood education. Although the ability of young children to profit from age-appropriate instruction was argued by Friedrich Froebel and Maria Montessori, the education of young children did not become accepted in the United States until the reform movements of the 1960s altered our perceptions of children and of the family.[2]

This said, and recognizing the many hardships confronted by contemporary parents and the new opportunities available to their children, I still believe that, overall, the imbalance in the family's ability to meet the needs of its members has shifted during the postmodern period in favor of adult needs over those of children and youth. Moreover, this shift is not limited to families but is aided and abetted by all of those social institutions that serve the family.

Origins of Family Need Imbalances

The nuclear family's heyday, as the media remind us, was the decade of the 1950s. But as early as the first decades of this century the basic substrate of the modern family imbalance was already in place—the result of two related historical changes. One change was the acceptance, during the nineteenth century, of childhood and adolescence as distinct stages of life, with their own developmental tasks. The other change was the gradual restriction, during that same period, of the family's function to the sole task of meeting the emotional needs of family members. The first change brought about a separation between the needs of children and adolescents and the needs of adults, while the second transformation raised the issue of which family members' needs should predominate.

The unique developmental characteristics of childhood and adolescence had been recognized since the beginnings of recorded history. Aristotle gave a description of adolescent behavior that might well have been written today:

> Young men have strong passions and tend to gratify them indiscriminately. Of the bodily desires, it is the sexual by which they are most swayed and in which they show absence of control . . . They are changeable and fickle in their desires which are violent while they last, but quickly over: their impulses are keen but not deep rooted.[3]

Yet only in the modern period did we begin to conceive of childhood and adolescence as entirely devoted to education and to preparation for adult life rather than to the performance of the tasks of adulthood.

In the premodern world no such role differentiation obtained. Children and adolescents were on a functional par with adults and contributed in meaningful ways to maintaining the family. On the farm, even young children collected eggs, fed the animals, and picked fruit and vegetables. There was no reason to make any clear

role distinctions between grownups and children. In the premodern family, the needs of children and adolescents and their contributions to the fulfillment of those needs were largely coextensive with those of their parents—a difference in degree only, not in kind.

Philippe Ariès contends that the invention of modern perceptions of children and adolescents was brought about by the introduction of universal public schooling in the mid-1800s. Prior to that time, childhood was brief, and it continued to be brief for a long time in the working classes. But with the ascendancy of the middle class, when schooling became the principle activity of the young, the meaning of childhood changed.[4]

The perception of childhood and adolescence as periods devoted to schooling paralleled the family's progressively narrow focus on meeting the emotional needs of its members. Glenna Matthews, in *Just a Housewife,* describes the family's divestiture of other functions in this way:

> Let us look at the four significant functions that the home had gained by 1830 and assess their status one hundred years later . . . As we have seen, the political function of the home had been eroded by changes in the late nineteenth century, chiefly the emergence of an evolutionary perspective that saw the home as irrelevant to human progress. The capacity of the home to serve as an arena for the display of female prowess had been greatly undermined by a combination of technological innovation and the arrogation to themselves of domestic expertise by the home economics profession. The religious function was unlikely to be salient in an increasingly secular age.
>
> What was left, then, of the original foundation of the ideology of domesticity was the heightened emotional role home had gained by 1830. If anything, that role had become even more important by the early twentieth century. Yet the importance was tied to a new self-consciousness—not to say anxiety—about how well the women in charge of the home could meet their families' needs.[5]

As Matthews points out, the family's narrowed mission to fulfill the emotional needs of its members was not an equally distributed responsibility; it fell almost exclusively on the shoulders of mothers. The differentiation of child and adolescent needs from those of adults, together with the family's concentration on meeting its members' emotional needs, raised the question of whose needs should be given priority. It was the eventual acceptance of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution that tipped the balance in favor of children and adolescents.

Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 with some trepidation and only after he learned that A. R. Wallace was about to put forth a similar theory. In Victorian England, in an era that celebrated creationism and natural theology, Darwin was justifiably concerned about a negative reception of his heretical ideas. Particularly controversial was his suggestion that humans were simply another animal species and therefore subject to the same forces of variation and natural selection that drove the evolution of all species, from flatworms to redwoods to squirrel monkeys.[6]

From a Darwinian perspective, human children, like the young of many other animal species, require security and protection while they acquire the skills (through adult tutelage) that make it possible for them to survive on their own. Looked at in this way, parents have an inherent biological drive to nurture their offspring and to provide them with a time period, free from work and responsibility, to complete their education. And, by implication, children who are not afforded these opportunities for growth would suffer irreparable damage.

By the early decades of the twentieth century, the nuclear family's focus on the successful rearing of children at the expense of parental (particularly maternal) opportunities for personal and vocational growth gave rise to the old imbalance. The unhappiness created by this imbalance, in turn, undoubtedly contributed to the social revolutions of the 1960s and eventually to the emergence of the postmodern permeable family. The walls of the modern family, undermined by unhappiness within and besieged from without by social

forces beyond its control, eventually gave way. The prevalence and influence of television, the clashes of the civil rights movement, the revolution in sexual mores, the rise of a drug culture among middle-class youth, the disillusionment of Vietnam and Watergate, the growth of telecommunications and computers, and many other social developments all helped to overturn established relationships between the generations and to introduce new discourses that have come to be known as postmodernism.

Many of today's parents—offspring of the modern nuclear family but also products of the social upheavals of the 1960s and 70s and the economic pressures of the 1980s and 90s—no longer regard themselves as solely responsible for meeting the emotional needs of their offspring. Many of them do not think of children and youth as requiring a full helping of security, protection, firm limits, and clear values, and many of those who still believe in the goodness of those things no longer have faith in their ability as parents to provide them in today's complex world.

As a consequence, postmodern young people are often left without the social envelope of security and protection that shielded earlier generations. Because today's children and teenagers are resourceful, they can cope, to some extent, with these new demands for independence and maturity. But ironically, this demonstration of adaptability often encourages parents, and the larger society, to provide even less security and direction than they might otherwise have done.

The debilitating effects of both the old and the new imbalance can be documented statistically. With respect to the old imbalance, as recently as 1975, in a large survey of a "normal" population of married couples, married women consistently reported more depression than married men of comparable age, education, income, and number of children.[7] Today, by contrast, it is the legitimate needs of the young that often go chronically unmet. A recent survey found that 20 to 25 percent of all schoolage children experience physical

symptoms that are largely caused by psychosocial factors.[8] While we cannot, nor should we wish to, turn the calendar back, we do need to figure out new ways to take some of these damaging pressures off of contemporary children and youth.

Psychodynamics of Family Need Imbalances

Whenever one group meets its own needs at the expense of another, the stage is set for stress and conflict. Modernity itself grew out of an imbalance between the needs of the common people and those of the aristocracy and the clergy. The American Revolution was fought in part because the needs of the colonists were continually subordinated to those of the English monarchs. The French and Russian revolutions were fought for similar reasons. Obviously this is a vast oversimplification of the forces operative in these events, but need imbalances did play their part.

An ongoing imbalance within families can do serious psychological damage because it requires individuals to subordinate their personal needs and ambitions to the needs and ambitions ascribed to them by their social roles. Family members in this position feel put upon and uncared for.

• *THE NUCLEAR FAMILY IMBALANCE*

In the old imbalance, mothers were the ones who most often felt exploited. In a society that emphasized self-reliance, self-realization, and self-determination, women were asked to subordinate their needs for self-expression to the nurturance needs of their husbands and children. The pathological effects are poignantly described by Anne Sexton, who listed herself as a "poet" on her income tax only after she had won a Pulitzer Prize:

> Until I was twenty-eight I had a kind of buried self who didn't know she could do anything but make white sauce and diaper babies. I

didn't know I had creative depths. I was a victim of the American Dream, the bourgeois, middle-class dream. All I wanted was a little piece of life, to be married, to have children. I thought the nightmares, the visions, the demons would go away if there was enough love to put them down. I was trying my damnedest to lead a conventional life for that was how I was brought up, and it was what my husband wanted of me. But one can't build little white picket fences to keep nightmares out. The surface cracked when I was about twenty-eight. I had a psychotic break and tried to kill myself.[9]

Sexton was not alone. Stephanie Coontz, in *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, informs us that "tranquilizers were developed in the 1950s in response to a need that physicians explicitly saw as female. Virtually nonexistent in 1955, tranquilizer consumption reached 462,000 pounds in 1958 and soared to 1.15 million pounds merely a year later. Commentators noted a sharp increase in women's drinking during the decade."[10]

In the modern era, the emotional needs of women were not being met by the family, and the consequences can be seen in drug and alcohol abuse. It was only in 1963, however, that Betty Friedan, in *The Feminine Mystique*, gave public voice to "the problem that has no name" afflicting middle-class housewives.[11] The volcanic nationwide response to her book was clear evidence of the extent to which women living in modern families were suffering. It could no longer be doubted that the out-of-balance social expectations for nurturance placed on women in a marriage can be as emotionally destructive as, say, the out-of-balance social expectations for violence placed on soldiers conscripted to fight in a war.

But the women's movement was far from being the whole story in the transformation to the postmodern family. While some writers, even today, would like to lay responsibility for the dissolution of the nuclear family at the feet of what was once called "women's lib," that movement was an effect, more than a cause, of postmodernism, as we will see in Chapter 2. A return to nuclear family roles, as some

writers advocate, will not redress the new imbalance. The new imbalance has evolved from a complex set of social changes, not just one.

• *THE PERMEABLE FAMILY IMBALANCE*

The effects of the new imbalance are comparable to those of the old one. Like all those whose needs are not being met over the long term, postmodern children and adolescents are feeling victimized. They believe that they must suppress their own needs for security and protection to accommodate their parents' and the society's expectations that they be independent and autonomous. Like modern mothers, postmodern young people either turn their anger on themselves (for letting themselves be used) or at the world around them.

The new imbalance and its stressful consequences are receiving increasing professional and public attention. In the early 1980s several books appeared that described the erosion of the markers that set childhood and adolescence apart from adulthood. These books—Neil Postman's *The Disappearance of Childhood,* Marie Winn's *Children without Childhood,* and my own book *The Hurried Child*—all made many of the same points.[12] Contemporary children were no longer protected and shielded from some of life's harsher realities, exempted from adult decisionmaking and responsibilities, or given opportunities to engage in the play and pastimes unique to childhood.

The resulting harm has been documented in the reports of a number of national commissions and study groups. In their report on the state of the nation's education, the National Commission on Excellence in Education entitled its publication *A Nation at Risk.* Among their conclusions:

> Average achievement of high school students on most standardized tests is now lower than 26 years ago when Sputnik was launched.
>
> The College Board's Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SAT) demonstrate a virtually unbroken decline from 1963 to 1980.
>
> There was a steady decline in science achievement scores of US