Taking Credit Where It's Due

By Larry Hugick

In survey after survey conducted over the past decade, the American public has expressed its misgivings about the way parents are bringing up their children. In an October 1989 Princeton Survey Research Associates (PSRA) survey for *Newsweek*, roughly half (49%) of adults said the American family was in worse shape than it had been a decade earlier. In a September 1994 national survey sponsored by Massachusetts Mutual Life, about two-thirds (64%) of adults agreed that "American parents put too much focus on their own individual happiness and not enough focus on providing a stable home for their children." A majority (56%) of American women in a March 1997 Pew Research Center survey said that mothers today do a worse job of raising kids than their own mothers did. And in August 1997, a majority (55%) of adults in a PSRA survey for Wisconsin Public TV identified "children and teenagers not getting proper guidance from parents" as an important characteristic distinguishing the United States from the rest of the world.

As the decade of the 1990s concludes, the school shootings in Littleton, Colorado and reports of other violent behavior by children and teenagers have only reinforced the public's negative perceptions about the state of parenthood. A *Newsweek* poll taken last April, immediately after Littleton, found parental neglect topping the public's list of presumed causes of the violence: 70% of adults believed that "lack of oversight of these kids by their parents" contributed a lot to allowing the shootings to happen. In a subsequent *Newsweek* poll, fully 90% of adults said that, in general, parents don't spend as much time with their teenage children as they should. A CBS/*New York Times* poll taken at about the same time found 86% of adults saying that teenagers today get less supervision from parents than they did a generation ago.

When pollsters ask mothers and fathers to rate themselves as parents, however, they are uniformly self-complimentary. In a May 1995 *Newsweek* poll, 96% of mothers and 93% of fathers of kids under 18 years of age gave themselves a good or very good rating for the job they do as parents. More than nine in ten (94%) of these moms and dads considered themselves as good parents as their own mothers and fathers. Evaluations were only slightly less positive when parents were asked to rate their partners: 97% of fathers gave their children's mothers a good or very good rating, while 86% of mothers so rated their children's fathers.

A related question in a March 1997 Pew Research Center poll produced a similar result: 97% of mothers of kids under 18 said they were very or mostly satisfied with the job they are doing as mothers. And when a *Los Angeles Times* poll asked parents in California this past May to grade themselves on parenting, over nine in ten (93%) said they deserved an "A" or a "B." Not a single parent interviewed for that poll gave him or herself a "D" or a failing grade.

If parents are so satisfied with their own performance, why have they become such a big target for public criticism? A review of survey data, social trends, and other statistical information suggests three major reasons for the disconnect between the views of parents and the public.

- **Today's parents are convenient scapegoats for long-term societal problems.**

Gone are the days when a parent's main worries were getting kids to do homework, eat the proper foods, and clean their rooms. In 1996, a survey for the National Parenting Association gave parents the opportunity to express their biggest concerns or worries for their children in their own words. Only one of the top four concerns cited by parents in that poll—quality of schooling—represents a concern traditionally associated with parenthood. The other three concerns mentioned most often—crime/violence, drugs, and declining moral values—exemplify societal problems that threaten children's welfare and make contemporary parenting a more arduous and demanding job.

The results of a May 1993 *Newsweek* poll present a similar picture of the challenges parents now face. Solid majorities of parents said they worried a lot about each of the following as a potential threat to their children: the threat of violence (85%), sexual permissiveness in society (76%), sexually transmitted

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diseases (86%), illegal drugs (76%) and underage drinking (68%).

The public is not completely unsympathetic toward the plight of parents today. Most people seem to acknowledge that raising kids has become a tougher job. When asked to assess the current situation for mothers raising kids, four in five women (81%) in the March 1997 Pew Research Center poll said motherhood has become a more difficult job over the past 20 or 30 years. That result is consistent with the May 1993 *Newsweek* poll, in which 85% of parents said that kids today are affected by more problems than children of the previous generation.

While showing some sympathy for parents' circumstances, people also want to hold them accountable. In the public's view, parents deserve a major share of the blame for creating the conditions they say make their job so difficult. Specifically, the public sees a connection between parental failure to build character and instill moral values and the social ills prevalent in our society today. In July 1995, the Wirthlin Group asked the public to rate the degree to which "parents' failure to discipline and teach respect" and "parents' failure to teach children moral values" contributed to the problems families face today. Both these parental shortcomings received an average rating of 7.8 on a 10-point scale, where "10" indicated a factor contributing a great deal to families' problems.

Just how much of the blame do today's parents deserve? Probably not nearly as much as the public thinks. Many of the social ills that threaten families' well-being today have been part of the American landscape since long before today's parents had their first child. Crime rates jumped in the 1960s. Concerns about declining moral and ethical values date back at least to the post-Watergate era. Rates of illegal drug use by young people peaked in the late 1970s.

- **Baby boomers' "wild youth" casts doubt on their ability to be good parents.**

Most parents today are members of the baby boom generation, which came of age during the turbulent sixties and early seventies. Associated with the anti-war protests, drug experimentation, and sexual revolution of their youth, baby boomers still strike many people as ill equipped to raise moral, responsible children. A generation often characterized as self-centered and reckless suffers in comparison with their own parents' generation. Epitomizing the values of hard work, sacrifice, and respect for God and country, the World War II generation has been trumpeted in recent movies and books, including the Oscar-nominated *Saving Private Ryan* and TV anchor Tom Brokaw's recent best-seller, *The Greatest Generation.*

Throughout the past decade, surveys have shown parents receiving mixed ratings, at best, for their performance in teaching moral values and raising kids with good character. For example, an August 1995 survey for Massachusetts Mutual Life found adults divided on whether today's parents are providing positive role models to young people: 52% felt they made good or excellent role models, but 45% gave them a sub-par rating of fair or poor. (And this was years before our most famous "bad role model" baby boomer parent—Bill Clinton—put his presidency at risk by having an affair with an intern.) A different kind of question posed by the *Los Angeles Times* poll in April 1996 found over nine in ten adults (93%) agreeing that "parents today are not taking enough responsibility for teaching their children moral values."

Of course, the aforementioned survey results don't show people making a direct connection between baby boomers' "wild youth" and their failings as parents. The results of the April 1999 *Newsweek* poll, however, did connect the dots. As shown in Table 1, a plurality (43%) of adults believe that boomers' experiences as youths in the sixties and seventies made them less able to shape their own children's moral character in the nineties. As the differences in opinion by age show, even baby boomers themselves tend to hold such critical views of their own generation.

At least to some extent, therefore, today's parents are being judged on the basis of past behavior rather than current behavior. Such attitudes ignore the fact that people can and do change as they mature and take on new responsibilities.

- **Nostalgic longing for the traditional 1950s family structure colors people's views of contemporary parents' performance.**

Working mothers have been the norm in this society for nearly a generation. According to government statistics, the proportion of married women with children under 18 who work at paying

Table 1

Question: Do you think the experiences baby boomer parents had in their own youth tends to make them better parents because they are more sensitive to the problems and temptations of today's teens or make them worse parents because they are less able to provide firm guidance to help teens develop a strong moral base?

	Make them better	*Make them worse*	*Both equally (vol.)*	*No effect (vol.)*
Total	32%	43%	9%	7%
18-29	44	39	6	5
30-49	33	42	9	10
50+	23	47	11	6

Source: Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates for *Newsweek*, April 29-30, 1999.

jobs almost doubled between 1960 and 1980, from 27.6% to 54.1%. By 1995, 70.2% of married mothers were part of the labor force. When queried by pollsters about the reasons they work, most employed mothers have said they need to work to bring in additional money for their families. But mothers of children under 18 also say they *prefer* to work, though not necessarily full-time hours. In the March 1997 Pew Research Center poll, half (51%) of mothers with kids under 18 described their current employment status as full-time, but a plurality (44%) described their ideal situation as part-time employment.

But even as working mothers have become increasingly prevalent, the 1950s model of breadwinner dad and stay-at-home mom—exemplified by *Leave It To Beaver* and other TV sitcoms of the fifties and early sixties—continues to be regarded by many as the ideal situation for raising children. A Kaiser Family Foundation/*Washington Post*/Harvard University survey completed in September 1997 found surprising support for the notion of turning back the clock and returning to the gender roles of the past. In that survey, 42% of American women and 35% of American men said it would be "better for the country if men and women went back to the traditional roles they had in the 1950s." In that same survey, about two-thirds of both women (68%) and men (69%) endorsed the idea that, although mothers often *have* to work, it is generally better if they stay home and take care of the house and children.

As Stephanie Koontz points out in *The Way We Never Were*, her perceptive examination of "American families and the nostalgia trap," our impressions of how families are doing today are distorted by nostalgic notions about "the way things used to be:"

> The actual complexity of our history—even of our own personal experience—gets buried under the weight of our own idealized image. On both a personal and social level, when things are going well, we credit our successful adherence to the family ideal, forgetting the conflicts, ambivalences, and departures from the "norm." When things are going poorly, we look for the "dysfunctional" elements of our family life, blaming our problems on "abnormal" experiences or innovations.[1]

Often overlooked by those nostalgic for the good old days is the role fathers played—or didn't play— in the traditional family of the fifties. The problem of missing fathers is painfully clear today, as higher divorce rates and more out-of-wedlock births have pushed the proportion of children being raised by single mothers up to 22%. But many fifties-era fathers were also "missing," through their emotional distance and limited involvement in raising their own children. Often, their role was limited to disciplining and punishing their children.

Contemporary fathers regard themselves as better parents than their own fathers for a variety of reasons. As revealed in the May 1995 *Newsweek* poll, seven in ten (70%) of today's dads say they spend more time with their kids than their own fathers did. Solid majorities also see themselves as more understanding of their children (61%) and giving more of a priority to their parental responsibilities (55%). Half (49%) describe themselves as much better or somewhat better parents than their own fathers, while only 3% think they do a worse job. Relatively few of today's more sensitive dads play the role of "enforcer." Only a quarter (23%) of fathers say they are chiefly responsible for punishing their children when they break the rules, while nearly two-thirds (64%) say they share this responsibility with mom.

When the burden of negative social trends and the filters of generational stereotypes and nostalgia for fifties-style parenting are removed from the equation, a more positive picture of today's parents emerges. Parenthood in the nineties may be more demanding, but it also seems to be more rewarding. When parents and children are surveyed about what goes on in their everyday lives, they tell a story of moms and dads who are involved with and close to their kids, despite the difficulties of juggling work and family responsibilities.

Those caught up in nostalgia about the supposed superiority of fifties-style parenting are likely to overlook the wide "generation gap" that followed in the sixties. No such rift between parents and their children is evident in the nineties. The May 1995 *Newsweek* poll showed a clear majority (62%) of parents believing they understand their children better than their own parents did. In 1990, a PSRA survey for the National Commission on Children found two-thirds (66%) of children aged 10 to 17 saying they usually feel comfortable talking with their mother about something that is bothering them. And when interviewed in an April 1993 *Newsweek* poll, parents and

children expressed similar political and social values, reporting equivalent levels of concern about issues like the environment, homelessness, and war and famine overseas.

Structuring their daily lives to attend to both job and family responsibilities is perhaps the biggest challenge parents face today, especially working moms. Survey evidence strongly suggests that children and the family have not been given short shrift, even though both parents typically work. According to the March 1997 Pew Research Center survey, the large majority of American households with children still manage to eat dinner together as a family on most days. Eighty percent of moms with kids under 18 say their family usually eats dinner together. By comparison, 91% say they routinely ate dinner with their parents when they were growing up.

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The same survey indicates that despite the difficulties they face in juggling schedules, contemporary moms find time to attend their kids' important events. Ninety-four percent of all mothers with kids under 18, and 90% of those who work full-time, say they usually attend their children's important events and activities, such as school plays and sports. Looking back, today's mothers say their own moms were more likely to be "no shows;" only 76% say their own mothers were usually present for the key events and activities of their childhoods.

And despite their generation's reputation for selfishness, working mothers today accept personal sacrifices as a matter of course. When asked about the difficulties of being a mother today, the most common complaint of working moms is "not having enough time for yourself" (72%). This concern tops such other problem areas as "balancing work and family" (66%), stress on their marriage (57%) and lack of support from their children's father (47%).

Neither do fears about busy career-minded parents neglecting their young children during the critical first three years of life seem justified. By temporarily leaving their jobs or shifting from full-time to part-time hours, many working mothers find a way to give newborns and infants the time and attention they need. In a May 1997 *Newsweek* poll of parents with children aged three and under, nearly three-quarters (72%) of mothers said they were personally taking care of their child most of the time on weekdays. Only one in six (17%) of these mothers said they relied on day care, a babysitter, or some other non-relative to provide most of the care for their child.

Dads have been slow to take advantage of the parental leave now available to fathers as well as mothers of young children. Still, there is no question that contemporary fathers are more emotionally involved with their children and take greater responsibility for their care than dads of the past. In fact, a quarter (25%) of the dads of children under three interviewed in the same *Newsweek* poll reported being mainly responsible for looking after their child on weekdays. Most dads in the poll also said they read or look at picture books with their child (62%) and sing or play music for their child (58%) every day or almost every day.

Parents are also doing reasonably well in dealing with the "4 p.m. problem"—the quandry of younger school-age children returning to empty houses on weekday afternoons. In a February 1998 *Newsweek* poll of parents with kids aged 6 to 17, fewer than one in ten (8%) reported having a "latchkey child" who is generally left to look after him or herself on weekday afternoons. In fact, most of the children left in such circumstances are teenagers between 14 and 17 who, presumably, are capable of fending for themselves. Two-thirds (66%) of parents who took part in this poll said one or both parents was generally home to be with kids on weekday afternoons.

Two key factors appear to be critical in allowing today's families to compensate for the lack of stay-at-home moms. First, parents today have more active support systems, i.e., grandparents and other adults who help them look after their children. Second and more importantly, in today's smaller families, children benefit from the more individualized attention parents are able to provide.

As we live longer and healthier lives, Americans are more likely to be around to enjoy their grandchildren and play a key role in their lives. In the March 1997 *Newsweek* poll of parents with children aged three and under, a solid majority (59%) said the grandparents were very involved in their children's lives. Grandparents may become somewhat less involved as kids age: only about half (49%) of parents with kids aged 6 to 17 in the February 1998 *Newsweek* poll described the grandparents as very involved at this stage of their lives. Even so, over two-thirds (68%) of all families with school age children have some adult besides a parent—whether a grandparent, other relative or adult friend of the family—who is very involved in their kids' lives.

A November 1993 *Newsweek* poll provides further evidence

that grandparents and other relatives are doing more to help parents raise children today. Children aged 10 to 17 were asked how much they are influenced by certain groups. When their responses are compared with parents' reports about how the same groups influenced their own lives as kids, two groups stand out as more influential today than a generation ago: grandparents (56% vs. 47%) and other relatives (39% vs. 29%).

While grandparents and others can lend a hand, there is no substitute for parents' time with kids. In the opinion of *both* parents and children, nineties moms and dads are managing to spend enough time with their kids. In the April 1993 *Newsweek* poll, over half of dads (57%) and nearly two-thirds of moms (65%) with kids under 17 said they spent about the right amount of time with their kids. When kids aged 10 to 16 were asked for their opinion, 60% said they were getting enough of dad's time and 79% felt they were getting enough of mom's time.

Smaller family size is critical to explaining why today's kids seem to be getting enough of their parents' time and attention. As reported in *US News and World Report*, the reduced number of children in a typical family has had a profound effect on ensuring that the kids today receive as much attention from parents as they did in the past. Studies by John Robinson of the University of Maryland indicate that parents in 1995 spent somewhat more time tending to their children than their 1965 counterparts did—and substantially more time compared with parents in the fifties, when nearly all moms stayed home. Kids in smaller families of three children or less tend to have higher IQs, graduation rates, and readership rates for books and newspapers. These positive outcomes are assumed to reflect more time and attention from parents when the children are young, and more family resources to allow them to travel, take music lessons, or pursue other interests.[2]

In addition to managing successfully the practical difficulties of modern parenthood, today's moms and dads also show a commitment to fostering their children's moral and spiritual development. When parents of children aged three and under were asked in the March 1997 *Newsweek* poll about their most important goal for their child, "ensuring that he or she grows up to be a moral person" (48%) received the most votes, outscoring happiness (38%), educational achievement (9%) and social development (4%). Four in five parents interviewed (79%) said they planned to send their child to Sunday school or some kind of religious training.

Further evidence of parents' commitment to their children's moral and spiritual development is seen in the March 1997 Pew Research Center poll. Six in ten mothers (59%) of children under 18 said their family usually attends religious services together. It should be noted that this same poll found significantly more parents (72%) saying that attending religious services together as a family was something they did regularly as children. This difference, however, may not actually signify a decline in the influence of organized religion on American families and children. Instead, it may be a reflection of the trend toward more intermarriage between people of different religious backgrounds. The November 1993 *Newsweek* poll found 55% of kids aged 10 to 16 saying that the "church or place [they] go to pray" was a very important influence on their lives. This figure was identical to the 55% of parents who said church was very influential on them when they were growing up.

Perhaps the most telling evidence that today's parents are doing a good job filling the shoes of the previous generation is the impact they are having on their children's lives. Despite all the changes in family structure, kids in the nineties are as likely to say their parents are a very important influence in their lives as their moms and dads are to say parents mattered in their youth (86% vs. 81% in the November 1993 *Newsweek* poll).

Will parents ever receive the credit they seem to deserve? There is enough good news these days about the state of families and children to expect that some of it will filter down to the public and improve the image of parents. Over the past decade, many of the more disturbing trends relevant to children's welfare have either bottomed out or reversed themselves. A 1999 government report on key indicators of children's well-being found that the birth rate for teenagers dropped between 1991 to 1997, after rising during the 1980s, and that the number of youths who were victims of violent crimes fell significantly between 1993 and 1997. That same report also found that preschool enrollments increased significantly in the late nineties.[3]

The ultimate test of parents' performance today is what the future holds for the new generation of American kids. It is ironic that the legacy of the presumed "ideal" family structure of the fifties was a generation of rebellious kids who embraced sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll. If history is any guide, the new generation of kids will not turn out quite the way people expect, and will tell us things about their parents that are not so obvious to us today.

Endnotes

[1]S. Koontz, *The Way We Never Were* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), p. 2.

[2]*US News and World Report* July 1, 1996, as reported on the usnews.com website.

[3]See *America's Children: Key Indicators of Well-Being, 1999,* posted on the childstats.gov website.