

— LETTERS
on LIBERTY



IN DEFENCE OF
PARENTAL AUTHORITY

Nancy McDermott

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IN DEFENCE OF PARENTAL AUTHORITY

Parents should be free to raise their children according to their judgment, values and beliefs. This should be as obvious as stating that the sky is blue and the grass is green. But, as with many things we used to take for granted, what was once self-evident is now open to question across the Western world. After all, what's a life-long bond and tens of thousands of hours spent together, compared to the judgement of school therapists, parenting experts or informed politicians?

The mission creep of the outside world into the private life of the family - where parental authority used to create the genuine safe space needed to raise children - has happened for numerous reasons. For one, hierarchy in family life is now considered taboo - children are expected to have as many rights, responsibilities and as much capacity for reason as their mums and dads. Then there's the professionalisation of parenting - the idea that science and statistics can provide the perfect formula to raise a child, from infant-feeding practices to behavioural psychology. Teamed with changing social practices - a shrinking communal sphere, generational divides and the influences of stranger-danger panics around adult-child relationships - parents are now often

underconfident, over-surveilled, and convinced that authority lies somewhere other than with them.

In the space of a generation, what used to be considered normal parental decisions have now been called into question. Perhaps a pertinent example of this was the furore caused by British TV presenter Kirstie Allsopp, when she allowed her 15-year-old son to travel across Europe with a friend following his GCSE exams. For her parenting sins, Allsopp was reported to social services by an anonymous person for child neglect - the case will remain open despite there being no evidence of wrongdoing. Her son, by all accounts, had a great time.

The destruction of parental authority has consequences for wider society, too.

Attacks on parental authority are becoming extreme where I'm from in the US. This summer, the New Hampshire Supreme Court upheld a school district policy which protected a students' right to privacy in relation to gender identity.ⁱ In short, the school allowed children to socially transition - that is, use a different name and pronouns, or even dress differently - without informing the child's parents of the change. When a mother challenged the decision, arguing that this was an infringement on parental

authority and a dangerous precedent to set - that a child could keep secrets from his or her loved ones - the school defended the child's right to privacy. This kind of interference into family life can cause serious harm to the trust between parents and their children, giving the idea to kids that their parents *don't* have their best interests at heart. But the destruction of parental authority has consequences for wider society, too. It is one of the undervalued foundations of modernity, yet its influence is all but invisible to those who focus solely on politics and the public sphere - it is pre-political. The positive impact of experiencing authority within the context of the family helps to create the fertile ground for democracy to take root.

Ironically, the fact that parental rights are not enshrined directly in the American constitution is a measure of the strength of parental authority. It previously appeared natural and self-evident as it was assumed that parents would raise citizens fit to participate in self-rule. It never occurred to the founders, who carefully protected essential freedoms in the Bill of Rights, that the ultimate threat to American democracy would arise within the citizenry itself.

Cultural contempt

Parents are becoming *personae non grata*. It seems we just can't get it right. For a long time, 'intensive parenting' was considered the right way, with emphasis on the importance of bonding and involvement between child and adult. But now, criticism of the archetype of an intensive parent - think helicopters parents, a category I examine in my book *The Problem with Parenting* - is fuelling anti-parent prejudice.ⁱⁱ Professionals are now quick to counsel against 'over-involvement', as parental involvement is cast as a malign influence. It is not surprising to find doctors, psychologists and school administrators positioning themselves as on the side of children, against their parents' ideas.ⁱⁱⁱ

School guidance counsellors and therapists genuinely believe that they are under no legal obligation to reveal details about children's lives - such as gender distress - to parents.^{iv} Meanwhile, in hospital systems around the US and elsewhere, children have been separated from their parents during annual health checks at around the age of 12.^v Children of all ages are quizzed (via questions often presented on a tablet so that parents can't see) about their mental health, drug use, sexuality or, in some cases, gender identity.^{vi}

Much of this shift towards a suspicion of parental authority is evident in cultural representations of parents. Children's entertainment has long lampooned parents in good humour - think of Homer Simpson - but culture has recently taken a darker turn. For instance, in the Netflix animated series, *A Tale Dark & Grimm*, Hansel and Gretel are beheaded by their well-meaning parents within the first five minutes. Though the children and their parents eventually reconcile - with their heads somehow reattached - it is still jarring.

When children are repeatedly told that parents can't be trusted, it leaves them anxious and vulnerable to manipulative adults.

The golden rule of children's literature is that parents need to vanish from the story early on, since the purpose of the story is to allow kids to experience challenging, or even dangerous situations at a safe distance. But children in classic stories almost never suffer direct harm at the hands of their parents. Parents may be bewitched into putting their children into harm's way (usually by a step-parent), and bad things can happen to parents, but they are mainly benign. The Netflix tale blithely breaks this convention and manages the impressive feat of making the parents appear simultaneously threatening

and stupid. The message is clear: parents mean well, but they cannot be trusted.

This degraded state of parental authority matters greatly to children. Whether you call it attachment or trust, children need to know that they can count on their parents. They need an intimate home where they can relax and feel entirely safe. Undermining parents' authority in the eyes of their children can be both destabilising and wounding, especially for the very young. When children are repeatedly told that parents can't be trusted, it leaves them anxious and vulnerable to manipulative adults. The loss of trust once associated with abandonment or abuse may now become manifest even in stable homes with conscientious parents.

Parents intuitively grasp their precarious position, and often try to avoid conflict for fear of alienating their children. There's a reason gentle parenting is so often lampooned on social media by exasperated mothers - children who are never told 'no' often display less-than-desirable behaviour. Validating children's thoughts and intuitions may avoid conflict, but it shifts an intolerable burden on to their small shoulders, shirking the most basic of parental obligations to guide and protect children from their own inexperience.

Origins of parental authority

From the perspective of raising children, parental authority and adult authority are closely related. The natural authority of adults over children is deeply knit into the fabric of our humanity. Children cannot survive on their own, and instinctively defer to adults. This is true even when children are defiant. Defiance is a normal testing of limits that helps them learn what is, and what is not, acceptable. When parents abdicate their authority, and refuse to impose boundaries, bad things happen. We assume that adults, in turn, care for children and integrate them into the community, socialising them to eventually take on the mantle of growing up and being in charge themselves. This process occurs in all societies, but parental authority is a relatively new cultural innovation that arose from the fact of mothers and fathers assuming *direct* moral and material responsibility for raising and *educating* their children.

Prior to the late sixteenth century, European children came of age at around seven years and were immediately integrated into the life of the community. This was a serious matter, and often marked by ritual and religious sanction. But it was not a transition between adulthood and childhood as we understand it today. Children worked alongside older children and

adults spending comparatively little time under the direct care of their parents. Authority was usually vested in a patriarch whose responsibility extended over all those under his roof (kin or not), his extended family and sometimes over the wider community. His position was God-given and absolute, at least within his sphere of influence. This is why books which offered some of the first advice on training children were always addressed to the male head of the household, who took ultimate responsibility for setting standards of behaviour.

Children were destined to replace the older generation by taking on their roles. While it was possible to move laterally - for instance, from brewer to stone mason - there was no social ladder to climb. This began to change with the rise of the nascent bourgeoisie toward the end of the Renaissance. In contrast to the children of the aristocracy or the peasantry, who were required to accomplish little beyond being born to replace their parents, the children of the up-and-coming bourgeoisie would need to live by their wits. Thus, families devoted time and effort to their education, encouraging them to develop qualities like self-control, courage, flexibility and resilience. This 'bourgeois family' revolutionised childrearing by creating the extended, protected period of education and maturation we know as childhood. This became the institution through which this new class staked its

claim on the future. The family vastly improved the conditions of children, but, over time, it also lifted the education and culture of society. Perhaps most profoundly, it transformed adulthood.

Adults and citizens

Throughout most of human history, the number of people with responsibility for and authority over others was relatively small. Most adults were strong and competent, but their authority was limited. Consider the following passage from Homer's *Odyssey*:

'My message broke their spirit as they recalled the gruesome work of the Laestrygonian king Antiphates and the hearty cannibal Cyclops thirsting for our blood, they burst into cries, wailing, streaming live tears that gained us nothing - what good can come of grief?' ^{viii}

Was the crew made up of children? Were ancient men just more 'in touch' with their emotions? Ancient literature is filled with such examples. While the argument can be made that some crew members might have been younger than what we would consider adult today, or that acceptable emotional display varies widely across time and societies, the most probable explanation is that only those in

positions of authority over others (the elite) developed the qualities of self-mastery and emotional control we associate with adulthood.

The bourgeois family evolved into a future-oriented institution in which each generation of parents assumed direct authority over raising and educating the next. This vastly increased the number of canny, educated adults with the capacity and the inclination to organise their own lives and the life of society. Parental authority made citizens out of subjects and did so in a completely natural and organic way.

The bourgeois family demanded a self-sacrifice that, crucially, did not feel sacrificial.

Life in the bourgeois family taught its members to balance their needs with those of others and to manage strong emotions. The home became an intimate space that nourished the individual personality. It was a haven in a heartless world - a bulwark against the vagaries of the market. It bound the generations together with love and memory and helped to guard against presentism. The bourgeois family played a crucial part in creating modernity, but it was also the hedge against the destructive forces this change unleashed.

And yet, even the most robust institutions have their limitations. They endure only as long as the foundational beliefs and values that gave rise to them. The bourgeois family arose in the context of the Christian humanism that emerged in the Renaissance, which recognised the moral worth and potential of each person, united through Christ, thus reconciling human reason with the transcendent.

As society became progressively more secular, this religious, humanist ethos weakened. The end of the nineteenth century threw institutions and social mores into crisis - psychology began to be seen as an alternative way of understanding the human condition. Instead of looking for solace in tradition, people began to turn their gaze inward towards the self, and, over time, a new system of meaning built around the psyche began to emerge.^{viii}

The bourgeois family demanded a self-sacrifice that, crucially, did not feel sacrificial. On the contrary, family and the commitment it demanded was a deeply meaningful part of life. But as the therapeutic ethos gained ground, the parents' job of establishing norms and responsibilities, social or familial obligations and almost anything that placed limits on self-actualisation, came to be regarded with suspicion.

Therapeutic morality

By the 1970s, the bourgeois family was finished as an institution. The use of the word 'parenting' for raising children heralded the advent of a new kind of child-rearing in which the parent-child relationship took precedence over the family. The ethos of 'parenting' is thoroughly therapeutic. Parents hope to raise children who are free to 'be their authentic selves', and tend to emphasise the need to validate their children, rather than socialise them. In contrast to the bourgeois family, these new arrangements live or die by emotion.

With the ever-present possibility of adults moving on to greener pastures, family members instinctively avoid conflict and negative emotions. In most societies, adolescence is an unstable time of identity formation before individuals settle into adulthood. Parenting's emphasis on the self means that childhood becomes much shorter, with children entering adolescence without the childhood experiences that make for a robust adulthood. In turn, these inexperienced adolescents make for unsure adults. Adults only reluctantly take up the mantle of responsible adulthood, as parents, as they too seem to languish in a prolonged period of identity formation.

Just as the bourgeois family shaped modernity, 'parenting' is shaping our age. Several generations believe that society exists to serve the self, and because the self only exists in the moment, presentism has become the dominant world view. This is why parental authority, and the family, are so threatening.

Members of the now therapeutic elite shape their policies as if children are independent selves, fully formed like their mums and dads. And yet, most people instinctively understand that children are not just like everyone else. They are living reminders that we cannot live in the present. Parents - because they live and breathe the irreducible needs of their children - are an obstacle to the final reorganisation of society on a new, therapeutic basis.

The gender question

Nowhere is this way of thinking about parents and their kids more intense than in the struggle over sex and gender in the US. In July 2024, the governor of California, Gavin Newsom, signed a bill making it illegal for schools to inform parents about their children's trans identification without the permission of the student.^{ix} The bill, which was immediately challenged by parents' rights groups, codified what

was already standard practice in American schools - the exclusion of parents from important aspects of their children's lives.^x

Schools and parents used to work together to educate and protect students. Today, schools see their role differently. They believe it is they who must protect students from the tyranny of their parents' values and beliefs. School districts around the country have adopted LGBTQ+ activist-inspired policies and a curriculum that is completely alien to mainstream science and social norms.^{xi} They have hidden information crucial to the health and wellbeing of children from their parents.

Teachers, counsellors and administrators have engaged in elaborate deceptions to conceal student's 'social transition' to new cross-sex names and pronouns, a psychosocial intervention with profound implications.^{xii} Some schools have gone further by facilitating medical interventions, supplying female students with breast binders or, as was the case in schools in Seattle, Washington, by working with a gender clinic to enable student's medical transition.^{xiii}

Beyond withdrawing their children from public schools, there is little parents can do. School-board meetings, once forums where parents could voice their concerns, have effectively been shut down. Even

finding out what children are learning can be difficult without filing a freedom-of-information request. Parents have turned to the courts to defend their rights, but even then there are no guarantees. The legal presumption that parents have their children's best interests at heart is giving way after years of legal challenges by LGBTQ+ organisations. In California, perhaps the most anti-parent state of all, parents who question their child's new 'gender identity' risk losing custody altogether.^{xiv} The state's so-called sanctuary law threatens parents in other states by allowing courts to take 'temporary emergency jurisdiction' of minors who travel there (often at the demand of activists) in search of medical transition, and blocks police or other agencies from helping desperate parents search for their lost children.^{xv}

The federal government is no better. The Biden administration's recent revisions to Title IX - the 1970s legislation that prevented discrimination by sex education - now prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender identity. This has effectively abolished single-sex spaces and sports in schools. The new rules also bolster attempts to exclude parents by instructing schools to update their policies to account for gender identity.^{xvi} Similar outrages are occurring in Canada, the UK, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. But the attack on parental rights is only one facet of an on-going assault on parental authority.

Why parental authority matters

The grinding down of parental authority hasn't happened while mum and dad looked the other way. Parents can be as much influenced by therapeutic culture as the rest of us, and sometimes they make mistakes. But the family, even in its degraded state, is a powerful counterweight to the challenges we face in raising the next generation - from gender ideology to attacks on childhood innocence. No one is more permanently invested in the welfare of a child than his or her parents. They intuitively understand that the conflicts and discomforts of growing up can't simply be 'fixed' with a 'one size fits all' solution.

In order to reclaim our authority as parents - as the ones in charge of how we raise our children - we have to do two things. First, we have to challenge the crisis of trust which 'parenting' has come to manipulate. Parents' trust in themselves, and their confidence to make decisions about their children, has been undermined by an overreliance on expert opinion. This is not to say that reading the baby books or wanting to seek out good practices are bad things, but that the scientification of childrearing with a focus on stats and policy reports has dented parents' ability to use their common sense. Raising kids can be hard, but it's not rocket science. An obsession with the

therapeutic - for example, the quack science now pushed by the British royal family about the psychological importance of early years - gets in the way of exerting adult control. For fear of falling foul of your child's therapist when they're in their thirties, many parents now feel unable to intervene, challenge and discipline their kids when necessary.

Second, and perhaps most important of all, we need to stick up for the family - a private space where children can test limits and push boundaries safe in the knowledge that their parents are in control. Parental authority is the foundational resource needed to raise healthy, happy children, but it cannot flourish without the structures, confines and protection of private family life.

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