Does Child Care Have a Common Ancestor? A Response to Pence.

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The historical development of institutional supports for children and adolescents is a generally neglected field; hence each new effort is greeted with interest by the small band dedicated to research in this area. Unfortunately, however, Pence's examination of "child care's family tree" oversimplifies the complex interplay of economy, school, church, state, and family in the history of American childhood and the institutions created to sustain it.

Pence (as, it must be noted, is true of many others) accepts the work of Philippe Aries and Lloyd deMause uncritically, lumping their quite dissimilar approaches to childhood into a single paragraph. Although much of the material upon which their accounts draw is similar as are, on occasion, their conclusions, there are subtle differences in the assumptions behind their arguments that Pence has failed to identify. As a result, some often accepted misconceptions about the history of childhood may be extended. Aries' study is, indeed, of the concept of "children and adolescents in need of care," which has been translated in the popular mind as the "discovery" of childhood. deMause, however, deals with the development of ideas relating to the care that children and adolescents need, ideas that have changed greatly over time, certainly a more fruitful approach to the history of American child care. Elkind (1984) has discussed the differences in these two approaches to the historical record:

It is important to distinguish here between the conceptions of childhood and of adolescence held by any given society at any particular time and the reality of children and teenagers. Children and teenagers are not social inventions, or historical discoveries. They are the young of the species, and like the young of every species, they require the care, protection, and guidance of the adults of that species if they are to survive and to flourish. The idea that children and adolescents are social inventions that can in some way be "disinvented" rests on the false assumption that society and culture are in some way separate and apart from nature. But we are biological beings, and as such we are part of biological nature. The

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young of our species, like the young of other species, are not social creations, but rather biological facts. We can deny those facts, but the reality persists nonetheless (99–100).

When the historical record is approached in terms of the care that children and adolescents need, one finds a long record of institutions dedicated to the socialization and protection of the young (extending back at least to Greco-Roman times), and that these institutions have been predicated on well-defined conceptions of child and adolescent needs. Some may, from a contemporary vantage point, appear quite barbaric, but they have usually implemented a definition of "need" related closely to the prevailing belief system and the available technology for providing for "the best interests of the child" in the context of that belief system. Additionally, access to what has been considered optimal child care has always been differentially distributed according to the sociocultural status of the child's family.

What this has meant is that child care practices have also varied greatly within a given society at any particular point in time, a reality neglected in Pence's discussion. The type of care deemed necessary for the scions of the New York elite of 1900, for example, was vastly different from that considered adequate for the "breaker boys" of the Pennsylvania coal fields. The economic contribution of child labor to the late 19th Century immigrant family in the urban ghetto was fully as important as that to the farm household in rural America, permitting a tolerance of exploitation by both that might have led to the adjudication of a middle- or upper-class family for abuse. Thus, the most interesting questions about "child care's family tree" do not stem from whether the young have been considered in need of care, but rather from the kind of care that has been considered necessary to their well-being. Carrying the arboreal metaphor further, we should ask if we are, indeed, dealing here with a "tree" at all, or a grove of institutions that vary according to the socioeconomic/ethnic "roots" of the populations they were designed to nurture.

Such an approach requires painstaking effort on the part of the historian who would seek to reconstruct the history of childhood and adolescence and their institutions, including sifting through enormous piles of dusty primary source data. Only then can a "model" emerge. Even so, one must be prepared to discover as many exceptions as true "fits" with the model. For example, following the examination of several hundred diary accounts from the 16th Century onward, Pollack (1983) discovered tremendous diversity in child care routines in any given period. Further, contrary to Aries' thesis, the earliest reflected no less clearly than the latest, an understanding that children and adolescents had capacities and needs that differed markedly from those of adults.