The Role of Fear: Transitions in American Emotional Standards for Children, 1850–1950

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We have seen that he felt fear. Had it been otherwise he must have possessed nerves of steel, or have been utterly destitute of the power of reasoning; but that fear did not so completely overpower him as it had but a short time before, when he lay behind the bush and listened to the guerrillas plan for the capture of Boxer and her crew. On the contrary, it nerved him to make the greatest exertions to effect his escape.

Harry Castlemon, *Frank on the Lower Mississippi* (Boston, 1868), 74–76.

A baby’s fears are often taken for granted as a part of the process of growing up. It is true that many baby fears have no lasting effect upon later behavior, that they are “outgrown.” But it is also true that some of these fears carry over into childhood and adulthood with far-reaching results . . .

The prevention of such fears is important, for not only do they make the child an object of ridicule among his playmates and the butt of practical jokes, but later on they may become social and occupational handicaps and in some cases an actual danger to health.


**Between the second half of the nineteenth century and the mid-twentieth century, middle-class Americans began to reevaluate the uses of fear in a number of important respects. The transformation was not complete: before and after 1900, widely read advice literature to parents could both describe fear as a barrier to sensible behavior and celebrate the courageous conquest of fear. Excessive fear in children and deliberate efforts by parents to instill fear were deeply condemned throughout the modern era. Yet there were a number of significant changes in approach. The ideal time for training children to control their own fears moved from childhood and adolescence, when conquering fear might be useful as part of character building, to early childhood, when the key agents were, of necessity, not the children themselves but their parents. Popular authorities correspondingly began to emphasize the unreasoned fears infants might encounter, not those produced by such situations as adventure or war. Even more important was the shift from encouraging children to embrace moral challenges to reducing fearful**

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situations and supplying assurances of love and support when fear did loom. Overall, middle-class Americans became increasingly aware after 1900 of fear's unpleasantness and replaced an emphasis on mastery with one on avoidance in their implicit definitions of the desirable emotional life.

Fear is an intrinsic human response to certain stimuli and the emotional basis for flight. It is also a cultural construct. In some societies, people learn not to experience (or at least evince) fear about situations that in other cultures promote panic. For example, several American Indian groups are notable for their lack of fear of heights. As a cultural construct, fear can play various roles in discipline and is frequently used to control and socialize children. Its expression can evoke diverse responses; a recent study argues that shifts in nineteenth-century southern culture made men more sensitive to fears their wives expressed about childbirth. Standards for fear, including those recommended for children and for adults dealing with children, are open to change, as well as being a reflection of deep-seated variations from one culture to the next. The changes that altered a complex Victorian response to children's fears by heightening anxiety form a significant case in point. The changes embraced several of the facets of fear-as-construct: ways in which fear could be used in dealing with children, responses to fears children themselves expressed, and the kinds of reactions to fear that children were supposed to learn in order to become successful adults.

The contention that the evaluation and, through this, some of the experience of fear can change is not new. Jean Delumeau argued that the decline of magic and its supplanting by more rational beliefs and orderly religion greatly reduced fears of external forces in Western culture by the eighteenth century. He went on to claim that, by the twentieth century, fear of the external world was replaced by fears coming from within the individual psyche. Work of this sort, while richly suggestive, remains highly generalized, and it has not been applied to modern American history. The changes discussed in this essay, though less grandiose, may fit into a larger Western transformation in which nineteenth-century confidence yielded to twentieth-century Angst even in the cozy confines of the American middle class.

The main evidence for this study derives from eighty-four advice manuals directed to middle-class parents and from various literature aimed directly at children, over the hundred-year span. We also use secondary studies in establishing the popularity of such materials. While popularity does not prove acceptance of content, at least the advice itself can be viewed as representative. The essential

4 Identification of the popularity and audience for prescriptive literature has been extensively researched. On Victorian-style child rearing and the family manuals most popular with the nineteenth-century middle class, see Bernard Wishy, *The Child and the Republic* (Philadelphia, 1968); and R. G. Kelly,
coherence of the Victorian approach to fear shines through the most popular manuals and widely sold boys' fiction until key signs of change creep in at the century's end. Nineteenth-century emotional standards were deliberately conveyed through several kinds of publications, with parental guidance supplemented by moralistic children's fiction, often purchased, in the decades before "allowances," by parents themselves. After 1900, the advice to parents took clearer precedence over other channels in defining mainstream adult expectations about childhood fear. Findings from psychology began to enter the picture more strongly, even though they did not monopolize middle-class standards in this area. Partly because of this new expert role, recommendations on child rearing moved through several phases between 1900 and 1950, from tentative exploration of behaviorism to elements of Freudianism, and the most popular child-rearing manuals signaled these transitions while maintaining some larger themes. Correspondingly, new parental concerns about fear contributed to new interest in expert findings; the interaction was mutual. Children's fiction, no longer overtly moralistic and more eager to treat its audience as consumers who must be diverted, less clearly complemented family standards. Even so, an approach to fear was implied in children's fiction that differed from its nineteenth-century predecessor, reflecting some of the themes that had transformed the prescriptive literature for adults.

As conveyed in a series of widely read family manuals, American middle-class standards for dealing with fear in childhood from the mid-nineteenth century until its end displayed three striking characteristics. First, in a shift from the cruelty and backwardness of presumably traditional parental practices, advice writers urged adults to avoid the use of fear in discipline. The message here was clear, though not expounded in as much detail as it was to receive in the twentieth century. Second, most family manuals were relatively silent about the fears children experienced. The manuals offered almost none of the anxious probing of nighttime terrors or frights inspired by animals that were to become standard fare a few generations later. Silence on certain topics, to be sure, limits illustration and constrains


interpretation, but it also suggests that many parents between 1850 and 1900 found children's fears unproblematic compared to more pressing issues such as obedience or honesty. The paucity of guidelines for parents was partly explained by the existence of a medium to address children directly. Moralistic children's stories urged an active confrontation with fear as part of a successful boyhood. They also provided reasonably explicit gender distinctions between boys and girls in terms of handling fears, which in turn helped reconcile diverse Victorian impulses about avoiding and utilizing fear's emotional charge. All three elements—warnings to parents about causing fear, silence about early childhood fear otherwise, and the inspirational boys' stories—fit together in a reasonably coherent, if not deliberately coordinated, package consistent with the wider context of middle-class Victorian culture.

Victorian standard-setters did not theorize about fear in emotional make-up. They clearly found fear unpleasant, and therefore not to be unnecessarily invoked, but they also granted the inevitability of fear-producing situations that could be controlled, even mastered, to the benefit of character. The most urgent recommendations about childish fear involved the cautions to parents. These fit into a wider nineteenth-century interest in reexamining parental habits on the basis of new assumptions of family emotional harmony and childish innocence. They also meshed with new worries about the tone servants might take with the children, as middle-class and popular standards were beginning to diverge. The dominant acceptable approach for managing children, which opposed extensive physical punishments and other scare tactics as a means of correcting childish misbehavior, was founded on a belief that children should not be made needlessly afraid. Advice writer Lydia Child stated the common sentiment early in the nineteenth century: "Fear should on no occasion be used as a preventive, or a punishment." Even as a caution against danger, fear should be avoided. Thus a child made afraid of spider bites may get bitten just as easily as a child who had not been warned, while at the same time bites are not nearly as bad as a "fear that troubles one all life long." Children had no natural fear of animals, according to this expertise, and could only be made afraid by heedless adults. Still more obviously, the temptation to use dire warnings about old men "prowl[ing] about to steal" infants, however well-intended by a mother concerned about safety, must be resisted, for they might "embitter the whole existence of her offspring." And "she who can tell a frightful story to her child or allow one to be told, ought to have a guardian appointed over

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8 On servant-child relationships generally, see David Katzman, Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America (New York, 1978); and Faye Dudden, Serving Women: Household Service in Nineteenth-Century America (Middletown, Conn., 1983).
11 Child, Mother's Book, 32.
herself.” “Much watchfulness” was needed against the implanting of superstitious fears, which meant not only parental restraint but supervision of ignorant or malicious maids and nannies.\(^{12}\)

The message, overtly directed to parents, expressed obvious concern about the extent to which fear could undermine rational control and the confidence necessary for effective behavior. Good character and purposeful action did not mix with fear in the Victorian lexicon. This distaste for fear was a unifying thread in Victorian emotional culture, especially in the rearing of boys destined for the sphere of business and public life. The first step in creating the necessary freedom from fear rested with enlightened mothers, to whom most of the family advice books were directed. It was vital for a mother to spend enough time directly supervising her children so that scare tactics became unnecessary, for childish fear could become a tyrant that only the strongest minds could later overcome. “It is utterly impossible to calculate the evil” that imposing fears, either through warnings or as discipline, could do to sensitive souls. Even isolation in a dark closet, not an uncommon punishment on the part of nineteenth-century parents eager to avoid physical discipline, was rejected as an “undefined species of horror,” sometimes actually fatal through the fright it created.\(^{13}\) As the rearing of children became more important in the lives of middle-class women, abrupt uses of fear, which had certain advantages in immediate and durable impact, became less compelling as a means of discipline. A more sentimentalized view of motherhood meant a reduction in the use of fear in favor of more gentle, time-consuming persuasions. Children could be swayed instead through familiar suggestion.\(^{14}\)

Admonitions against instilling fear constituted an important shift in recommended parental norms, away from earlier traditions that had readily employed fear as a means of cautioning children against strangers and other potential threats.\(^{15}\) Indeed, parents in the evangelical tradition undoubtedly persisted in instilling active fear of God as a basis for proper piety.\(^{16}\) But the mainstream shift against those tactics paralleled changes in Protestant middle-class religious views toward a more benign view of God in which love, rather than fear, played the central religious role and visions of hell receded. A fearful individual was no longer appropriately pious but rather risked being incapable of taking the kinds of initiatives, of displaying the kinds of confidence, desirable in the new world shaped by republican optimism and business dynamism. Fear was dangerous, and the individual who deliberately sowed it was abusing authority.\(^{17}\) While most of the nineteenth-century pamphleteers who warned against parental error did not

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\(^{16}\) See Greven, *Protestant Temperament*, 21–150.

belabor their innovations, unlike their twentieth-century counterparts who inveighed against traditions of scaring children, an important new ingredient had been identified: fear should not be added to childhood.18

This first aspect of the Victorian approach to managing fear has persisted throughout the twentieth century. How widely it was accepted, of course, is another matter. Even parents who jettisoned frightening physical discipline often, in their desire to achieve obedience, terrified with other means. As fathers became figures less often present in the home, they might newly inspire fear when invoked as ultimate sources of discipline, and new concerns about childhood sexuality or, by 1850, about toilet training formed new sources of children’s fears as well.19 The currency of published warnings about the use of fear did not necessarily win the day, and even well-intentioned parents could cause fear in new ways or old. Almost certainly, middle-class innovations spread gradually at best. Evidence from recent decades shows how certain subcultures deliberately preserved the older, boogeyman approach. A study of Appalachian families near the mid-twentieth century revealed an unreconstructed sense of fear’s utility in discipline. “Yes, she’s getting to be a big girl now. You can’t scare her any more about the dog to make her go off to sleep. We never tried to make her think the dog would get her, . . . but when she’d get restless we’d say ‘listen to the dog bark.’ And she’d just scrooge down under the covers and be still.”20 The continued use of fear for control is one reason that twentieth-century advice givers, more concerned about childhood fears overall, returned to the charge with growing insistence.

Nevertheless, the new standards, and their very explicitness, almost certainly won some gradual changes in the way many parents, particularly mothers and particularly in the middle class, defined their own approaches to children. Further, the standards were essential in explaining the second feature of the Victorian family advice literature concerning childhood fears. Prescriptive writers found a ready target in crude parents and even cruder servants as sources of fear, and they fervently believed in the innocence of childhood; thus they ignored other sources of fear in young children. If adults did not create a problem, there was none present. While spiders, for example, might scare some children, inherent fears such as this remained manageable, unworthy of discussion, so long as parents did not exploit them. This assessment of children as shaped by the soundness of adult tactics plus children’s own sweet nature clearly differentiated nineteenth-century American guidelines from all the twentieth-century variants; for there was no need, by Victorian assumptions, to provide advice on handling children’s fears as a discrete topic beyond the strictures against bad parenting. Innocent children, an orderly environment, a benign God, and, doubtless, some acceptance of the normalcy of certain early fears joined to minimize fear as a subject associated with early childhood.

Thus, what was left unsaid was as important in dominant nineteenth-century


20 Claudia Lewis, Children of the Cumberland (New York, 1946), 79.
advice as what was said. Although parents should not create fear, they were assigned no particular responsibilities for fears that children actually experienced. Parents reading advice manuals gained no specific advice on what to do if a child became unwontedly afraid of the dark or of some other phenomenon. There was no problem about animals "unless it were put into their heads," and, indeed, childish cruelty to animals, not fear, was the prevailing concern. Fairy tales might be modified to prevent needless fear of strangers or animals from arising but not because of a deep-seated problem of childhood fear in general. Further, an overriding belief that appropriate religious sentiment could cushion fear and a related conviction that good would triumph over evil rendered more specific strategies unnecessary. Lydia Child urged in 1831 that prayer always permitted a child to govern feeling, "tranquiliz[ing] the most strong passions." Horace Bushnell, noting sixteen years later that children must not be taught to fear either parent or God, lauded the "natural state of courage" that a child's approach to God permitted. Undue parental scare tactics could dent this shield (although Bushnell was not concerned about occasional necessary punishments), but, with appropriate adult caution and general religious encouragement, the child needed no further armor. While invocations of religious solace declined in the popular manuals issued late in the nineteenth century, religious references did not disappear, and an emphasis on the ability to instill confidence in the "forces of right and order" remained high. Taken at face value, then, the men and women who wrote the popular family manuals in the nineteenth century, claiming largely moral inspiration, whether religious or secular, shaped an indirect task for parents regarding fear, save insofar as they had to unlearn bad traditional habits: their role was to avoid creating, rather than actively managing, a troubling emotion in children. Brief injunctions would suffice, like writer T. S. Arthur's uplifting but curt appeal: "Train up your children to be virtuous and fearless. Moral courage is one of the surest safeguards of virtue." Active attention to proper religious values and moral confidence, not some rearguard action against fear itself, was the appropriate strategy.

Victorian emotional culture, even in its eagerness to avoid fear-ridden personalities, emphasized the opportunity to shape emotional characteristics later on, when children could be addressed directly. Middle-class arbiters assumed that older children could and would continue to improve their characters, aided by moral examples from various sources in the adult world. Here was the other reason for the relatively small amount of space devoted to fear issues in family advice literature and the reason as well for utilizing another kind of literature—the

21 Documenting silence is possible mainly by contrast, beyond the sheer lack of discussion of young children's spontaneous fears in all the widely used nineteenth-century manuals. The more detailed discussion below, of the elaborate treatments current after 1904, provides the obvious counterpoint.
22 Felix Adler, The Moral Instruction of Children (New York, 1901), 72; Child, Mother's Book, 8–32.
23 Child, Mother's Book, 5.
25 On the basis of nineteenth-century "expertise" in the family manuals and the trend toward greater secularism, see Wishy, Child and the Republic. Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of the American Family (New York, 1988), 44, sets a useful overall context for the growing middle-class need for family manuals from the 1830s onward. There was no apparent parental demand for advice about children's fears save in the reconsideration of discipline.
26 Arthur, Mother's Rule, 288.
inspirational stories directed toward older children, particularly boys—to expand on the subject more abundantly.

In this genre, the message was clear and consistent from the 1850s onward, although there were some gradations in complexity as the Civil War was reassessed after the first flush of excitement.\textsuperscript{27} In 1856—before the war and its impact—Oliver Optic, one of the most widely sold writers for boys, offered a characteristic story of courage, in which a lad stops a plunging horse, shrieking lady atop, without considering his own danger. He had neither time nor wish for deliberation; the lady was in peril and he had no excuse. “He was a boy who would not fight except in self-defense, but he had the courage to do a deed which might have made the stoutest heart tremble with terror.” The same bravery inspired Harry Castlemon’s George in the pilot house: “There was nobody to whom he could look for assistance; he was utterly alone. He had never before been placed in a situation of danger, and when he thought of it afterward he was astonished at the manner in which he conducted himself, and the promptness with which he acted.”\textsuperscript{28} And the popular \textit{Rollo} series by Jacob Abbott urged the same, both by example and paternal injunction. In one story, Rollo had fallen into bad company. When his father found out, he knew sheer terror, which he could not at first control. His father was patient but expected his son to master his emotions on his own. Fear had to yield, without external assistance, until Rollo was “entirely composed and pleasant.” Still more common themes in the series found Rollo saving his sister from danger in settings that combined excitement with explicit comment on how Rollo experienced but overcame fear.\textsuperscript{29} Castlemon’s river story \textit{Frank on the Lower Mississippi} (1869) featured a boy who felt fear but refused to be overpowered by it, using it as a motivation instead to escape captivity while calculating his tactics amid “remarkable” clear-headed coolness.\textsuperscript{30} Injunctions of courage, appropriately and dramatically illustrated, formed one of the standard themes of mid-century boys’ stories. The Victorian usage of “courage” involved not only controlling emotions but also facing up to moral obligations, among which was the explicit mastery of fear. This was not simply an ideal for later manhood but a quality boys themselves could be expected to develop.

With the Civil War, additional sources of inspiration were added to the insistence on cool courage, for the failure to conquer fear could lose battles and undermine both a just cause and a boy’s own standing. A series of stories drove the message home. A wounded lad was urged to “keep up a good heart... A little pluck does more for a wound than a good many bandages.” And the boy responded “I won’t die—it would kill my mother if I did.” Another wounded boy was aided both by thought of mother and by prayer, and he found both courage and the necessary practical assistance to pull through. The same theme spilled over into other fearsome situations. A boy faced a mad dog. “Although Paul was so cool and courageous in the moment of danger, he trembled and felt weak afterwards when

\textsuperscript{27} We examined thirty-six book-length stories from the mid to late nineteenth century, as well as a substantial sample of relevant tales from boys’ magazines. Existing secondary literature guided us in judging representativeness; see note 5 above.

\textsuperscript{28} Oliver Optic [pseud., William Taylor Adams], \textit{Now or Never} (Boston, 1856); Harry Castlemon, \textit{George at the Wheel, or Life in the Pilot-House} (Philadelphia, 1881).


\textsuperscript{30} Castlemon, \textit{Frank on the Lower Mississippi}, 74–76.
he thought of the risk he had run.” Again, religion supported the retrospective assessment, as Paul knew that a kindly God sustained him.\textsuperscript{31}

In stories of this sort, fearlessness was equated with sinlessness. Very good girls, like Beth in Louisa May Alcott’s \textit{Little Women} (1868) and Little Eva in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin} (1852), were allowed to go to their death without fear. In stories involving boys, explicit and successful displays of courage were standard fare. Fear required mastery, but with divine assistance this mastery proved possible, even easy, and the conjunction of danger and control was the key emotional test. Facing fear successfully was far more important than avoiding the situations that might produce the emotion because of the risk of failure or loss of control.

The confidence that fear could be dominated shifted slightly in the boys’ fiction of the final decades of the nineteenth century, a modification that foreshadowed the more pronounced transition in the early twentieth century toward making the confrontation with fear more problematic. Fear became understandable in boys’ stories that used the Civil War setting, and even desertion, while not proper, could be granted as rational.

“I am sorry to know that these men have deserted the field,” replied Captain Lyon.

“You can hardly wonder at it, Dick; for I suppose they are like so many who have been brought into the field of the enemy, with little or no drill or training, and it’s a terrible thing for a green soldier to stand up before a volley from the enemy, with artillery blazing at them, as we can judge that it was from the sounds that have reached our ears.”

“I can pity without blaming them, for it was a fearful ordeal for men such as you describe,” replied Dick. “As I heard my father say in a speech to the men, it requires a moral force behind the physical to enable a soldier to stand up before the enemy, facing death and mangling wounds, without flinching. We have always found that the most ignorant and ruffianly men make the most unreliable soldiers. As father said, it is the soul, rather than the body that makes the true soldier.”\textsuperscript{32}

Still, the idea of control over fear as a moral test—even a desirable moral test, if not here generating quite so automatic a response—remained current in boys’ literature at least until 1900. Bravery was essential to the manly boy, and it required dealing directly with fear either by quick reactions followed by subsequent sober assessment or by a somewhat more conscious self-control, the whole supported by a strong moral or religious sense and a reference to the lifelong inspiration of a loving mother. Indeed, children’s stories clearly implied that control of fear was a particularly masculine badge. To be sure, as in many emotional categories during the Victorian era, gender distinctions were not explicitly confronted in the dominant formulas. No advice authority directly defined fearfulness as a feminine characteristic, and the children’s literature made it clear that girls were not supposed to succumb to fear. Yet in the family advice manuals, fearful mothers were criticized, while fathers were assumed to pose no problems. And, while a few brave girls joined the fictional pantheon of boys, the larger images of female frailty and a new tolerance of women’s expression of their anxieties about death and


\textsuperscript{32} Oliver Optic, \textit{On the Staff} (Boston, 1896), 398–400. The changing response of boys and boys’ literature to the Civil War has been commented on by Sam Pickering in “A Boy’s Own War,” \textit{New England Quarterly}, 48 (1975): 362–77; see also Oliver Optic, \textit{On the Blockade} (Boston, 1890); and \textit{The Soldier Boy} (Boston, 1863).
physical pain suggested a de facto gender gap, in which boys and men might readily conclude that control of fear was an attribute of manhood. Popular girls' fiction did its part by discussing scenarios in which "self-control" (the word courage was not used) consisted mainly of waiting while boys or men faced peril and then offering them support and consolation. More active ideals of strength in meeting adversity were held up, but the situations did not involve mastering fear (or were not so described). In those few childhood terrors occasionally acknowledged by advice writers, girls were consistently used as examples. By the end of the nineteenth century, when nightmares began to be examined more forthrightly, notably by G. Stanley Hall, the victims mentioned were girls, although, again, no general statement sought to prove that girls in fact suffered disproportionately. Similarly, from the mid-nineteenth century onward, comments on children's problems in confronting death cited female cases. References of this sort anticipated emotional issues faced as standard fare by twentieth-century experts, but in the nineteenth century their identification with girls contrasted markedly with the moral-challenge themes for boys.

Boys, in sum, were urged to face fear and conquer it. Girls, less explicitly discussed in this category and more sheltered domestically, were essentially advised not to be more fearful than necessary. Thus T. S. Arthur, while urging even adult women to control fear, also implied that they should expect to suffer from it. The same author, in twin manuals directed respectively to girls and to boys, devoted a characteristically long section to fear and moral courage when addressing boys, having resolutely ignored the subject in the pamphlet for girls. To the extent that skittish women depended on courageous male protection, a small degree of female fear might even help delineate the essential distinctions between the genders; such was the implication when Rollo courageously saved his more passive sister. Females could be brave. They certainly should not distract males through incapacitating fright, and, as mothers, they should not corrupt their naturally fearless children. As girls, however, they had no need to gain the positive mastery over fear that was urged as a staple of a boy's identity.

Not surprisingly, American language use reified the gender distinctions with which children's fears were viewed. The word "sissy," coined in the 1840s both in Britain and the United States as an affectionate name for "sister," began its conversion toward a derisive term for fearful boys and men in the 1880s—interestingly, almost exclusively in the United States. Boys dominated by fear needed to be labeled in order to be reproved, and a feminine label suited best.

Gender distinctions added complexity to the Victorian approach to fear, but they also helped reconcile its diverse ingredients. Fear should not be used in discipline. Women should always be shielded from fear, and, if they expressed the emotion anyway, they deserved some sympathetic hearing—for fear remained unpleasant. Comfort from religion and love from one's mother provided some protection against fear for children generally. Fear could also build character, and here some

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53 Lewis and Lockridge, "Sally Has Been Sick," 5–19.
54 See, for example, a widely used collection, Lydia H. Sigourney, The Girl's Reading Book (Newburgh, N.Y., 1847), 197–98, 217.
57 Arthur, Mother's Rule, 168–71; T. S. Arthur, Advice to Young Ladies (Boston, 1848); T. S. Arthur, Advice to Young Men (Philadelphia, 1860), 168–93.
confrontation was essential—but mainly for boys, trained to face the outside world. Elaborate strategies for dealing with fear were unnecessary for young children, save in avoiding scare tactics, for girls’ fearfulness was to an extent natural, while boys should be prepared to deal with “causeless fear” through the stiff-upper-lip injunctions of model heroes. A few prescriptive authors who targeted boys directly joined the fiction writers in this conclusion, but it was the inspirational story above all that was meant to continue the task of shaping male standards and character. Men should be able to control fears, and the schooling ground was in boyhood and its physical challenges. That boy was most to be envied who had found his control tested, who had tasted fear but surmounted it, using the challenge to inspire great deeds. Writing in 1901, Felix Adler, the last popular family manual writer to take an essentially Victorian stance, agreed that fear was not a great problem, not worth mentioning in connection with early childhood save in avoiding needless anxieties generated by undiluted fairy stories. The emotion could be addressed through literary example, directed at older children. Here the goal was “moral courage,” which, though it could not entirely prevent physical cowardice could overcome it, bypassing the admittedly “paralyzing” effect of fear “by a powerful effort of the will,” itself honed by heroic example learned from good reading and good teachers. True moral confidence and the “dignity of humanity” could not be overwhelmed by any force of nature or of evil. It was a question of character, and character could be instilled through orderly appeals to reason.39

Advice given to parents and children alike concerning childhood fear forms only a part of the larger subject of fear in the American Victorian experience. Middle-class men may in fact have been unusually fearful, in an environment of economic innovation and competitive threat; this is the conclusion of a recent study of psychological implications in selected American adult fiction.40 Efforts to minimize fear in childhood and to urge a special courage on manly boys could well follow from largely unacknowledged adult anxieties, for the role of denial in aspects of Victorian culture has often been noted. At the same time, the standards applied to children’s fears had more straightforward bearing on Victorian emotional life. They encouraged parents to reconsider traditional discipline, as in the relatively permissive atmosphere of 1890s child rearing. They certainly fed familiar gender stereotypes, for while the positive imagery applied to boys was not matched by a clear characterization of girls, it did encourage condescension. Boys’ standards fit into adult-sponsored exercises such as athletics, scouting, and paramilitary training. Most strikingly, the qualities urged on boys were a part of the culture of middle-class boys themselves, where passing tests such as crossing swollen streams or facing down a bully became standard fare during expeditions boys organized to help separate themselves from maternal protectiveness and in which scaring girls was a recurrent pleasure.41 In sum: the Victorian emotional culture developed to describe and manage childhood fear invites further attention, toward identifying competing subcultures and toward more fully testing its relationship to the actual

41 E. Anthony Rotundo, “Boy Culture: Middle-Class Boyhood in Nineteenth Century America,” in Carnes and Griffen, eds., Meanings for Manhood. On adult-sponsored exercises, see David I. Macleod, Building Character in the American Boy: The Boy Scouts, YMCA, and Their Forerunners, 1870–1920 (Madison, Wis., 1983); similar themes are discussed for Europe in John Gillis, Youth and History: Tradition and Change in European Age Relations (New York, 1974). Fictional enshrinement of the pleasures of scaring girls—although with realistic recognition of how boys themselves could end up equally scared—is found in Mark Twain’s Adventures of Tom Sawyer (1876) and Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884).
emotional experience of children and adults alike. It was not, however, mere camouflage. It shaped adult perceptions and vocabulary to some degree, and it bore some relation to what children themselves thought their response to fear should be.

This amalgam began to unravel after 1900, although change was gradual and incomplete. Emphasis on parental responsibility to avoid provoking fear was carried bodily into all twentieth-century advice. The desire to celebrate courageous acts that defied normal fears persisted in military and sports settings and also in key institutions inherited from the nineteenth century; thus the Boy Scouts encouraged their members to encounter certain fears and master them and gave prizes to the most successful. Many children's stories continued to cite heroism, and courage remained a vital theme of inspirational biographies intended for children. Leaders such as Theodore Roosevelt directly sought to expand on Victorian standards. Along with persistent themes, however, came a number of new ingredients, which made some of the most undiluted Victorianisms increasingly anachronistic. Early childhood was reassessed as a more complex and more crucial stage of life where fear was concerned. Parental responsibilities extended accordingly. Gender became less salient, and the facile inspirational qualities of boys' fiction declined overall; here, the acknowledgement of the frequency of fear in late nineteenth-century war stories had foreshadowed new complexity. In general, fear and its management became far more problematic than they had been in nineteenth-century culture. Avoiding fear began to make much more sense to many prescribers than accepting its challenge as part of building moral character.

Most of the leading child-rearing manuals issued in the first quarter of the twentieth century pointed clearly to a transition formula concerning children's fears. In 1904, for example, just a few years after Felix Adler offered his stiff-upper-lip injunctions, Mrs. Theodore Birney, writing under the auspices of the Child Study Association, took a different tack. Birney, devoting considerably more space to the issue of fear than the Victorian-style manual writers had allowed, explored the subject of fears in early childhood. She noted unaccountable fears of such menaces as darkness, which might arise without any clear parental spur. Her manual urged caution in dealing with such fears, arguing against a "hardening"—presumably, a tendency to punish fearful reactions—and equally against a purely dismissive response. Here was significant identification of a new kind of emotional problem and a corresponding responsibility for parents. Having made this point, however, Birney went on to recommend stories of brave deeds to instill courage, in the best Victorian fashion. In 1919, William Forbush issued a substantial compendium on child rearing. Like Birney, Forbush devoted a considerable section to children's fears as a problem. He maintained that infants, while exhibiting some fear reactions, were not yet old enough to be a real concern. Children from two to six, however, were another matter. They often picked up signals from adult fears.

Jay Mechling, "Courage and Heroism in Everyday American Life, 1890–1930," paper presented to American Studies Association Annual Meeting, New Orleans, November 1990. Mechling also noted that the very attention to the topic in scouting literature (Boy and Girl) and the 1904 Carnegie Hero Fund reflected newly problematic aspects of heroism.

See, for example, children's biographies of figures like Helen Keller; Margaret Davidson, Helen Keller (New York, 1973), 43–68.

and then displayed intense anxieties about the dark or animals. The adults blamed were usually a “thoughtless nurse [telling] a fairy story” (black nannies were singled out for comment in the South), but mothers also came in for criticism when they expressed too many cautions about climbing stairs or avoiding lightning in a thunderstorm. This extension of a Victorian explanation of origins was combined with greater detail on the resulting emotional issue for children.

Twentieth-century parents were told not only to avoid frightening children as a disciplinary device but also to master their own emotions lest they give disturbing signals. A bit of fear in promoting caution was acceptable; however, most situations required calm, rational discussion, not scare tactics. Forbish extended Victorian assumptions that fear prevented effective action and inhibited an appropriate personality in either adult or child, adding specifics about what kinds of behaviors could result from inadequate management of early childhood anxieties. “An untold dread may become a veritable poison in the mind, bringing its evil to fullness years later.” Delinquency, among many other troubles, could be traced to mishandled fears, since wayward youth used aggression to conceal their terrors.

Even though this judgment of childhood and fear was not entirely novel, it intensified and extended the discussion of childhood anxieties, it enhanced a sense of fear as a problem, and it enlarged parental functions in the management of emotions. Children were, in the Forbish view, vulnerable creatures needing considerable help in handling fears successfully. Parents should assist them positively to overcome fear, not through direct mastery but through benign evasion. Thus the child who feared the dark should be elaborately talked to, given a candle or light at night, or urged to enter a dark room to get some candy. Parents must be “patient and sensible in reinforcing the child’s own courage.” Even in somewhat later childhood, parental guidance remained essential, allowing children to practice courage so they would not collapse in the face of fear. Activities such as camping or boxing were excellent preparations toward handling later challenges. Forbish offered an elaborate range of strategies: “We can strengthen a child who is sensitive to physical discomfort, afraid of a fight, etc., by experiences in camping out, fishing, boxing, that will prepare him imaginatively to face other perils, even though their exact character may be unknown.” This nineteenth-century goal, the mastery of fear, was now rendered more a matter of parental manipulation than native moral courage. When a child was simply frightened, Forbish urged no confrontation: children should not be forced directly to control fears of fireworks or water. The need to avoid emotional trauma began to gain precedence over displays of courage.

Compared to their Victorian counterparts, transitional writers like Forbish and Birney were introducing a more restrictive definition of childhood fear, one confined to its incapacitating facets. The gradations of fear that the late Victorians had tacitly recognized gave way to a tendency to equate fear with stark terror—a shift toward definitional simplification discernible in other changes in

48 In the history of advice literature, materials issued between 1900 and 1920 are few and far between, compared to the outpouring from the 1920s onward. The pattern suggests a transition, certainly in terms of source of expertise, and probably in terms of reconsideration of nineteenth-century staples. Transitional approaches to fear are thus suggestive more in content than volume. For discussions of representativeness and on twenty-first-century advice literature periodization, see note 4 above.
twenty-first-century emotional culture. Correspondingly, this new generation of experts added an explicit strategic component to the parental approach that their more confident predecessors had ignored; care was not enough, and moralistic invocations of courage were irrelevant. In the child-rearing manuals of the 1920s, avoidance or soothing of fear in early childhood began to supersede interest in later demonstrations of bravery almost entirely. Not accidently, the use of words like bravery and courage, in relation to ideal boys and even to many adults, began to decline as well, as the terms began to take on a slightly antiquated air. Even the word "sissy" began to recede in popularity. The most authoritative manuals of the decade, issued by the Children's Bureau and its principal popular expert, D. H. Thom, devoted considerable attention to the problem of childhood fear and to practical antidotes.

Warnings against parental use of fear tactics multiplied, providing new emphases and detail to a Victorian theme, and admonitions against revealing one's own fear to young children were usually conjoined. "Do you ever scare your child by saying 'The doctor cuts the fingers off little boys who touch things'? Do you sometimes say, 'The policeman will get you if you are not quiet'? Or do you say, 'Mother will ask the ragman to take you away in his big bag'"? "Do you ever let him hear you say, 'Johnny is afraid of the dark just as I am,' or 'Johnny is afraid of dogs—he gets it from his father.' Of course, Johnny will be afraid of the dark or of dogs if you suggest to him that he is." D. H. Thom extended warnings about boogeyman tactics and invocations of dangers from animals. He urged that children not be pushed into new experiences if they were fearful, while also insisting that parents (particularly mothers, who now replaced nursemaids as the worst sinners, but as cowards instead of frighteners) control their own fears about lightning or animals in front of their offspring. Children were far more sensitive than adults realized, Thom maintained, and they could acquire deep-seated fears with extraordinary ease. Thom granted that a certain amount of fear provided desirable protection against danger, but he stressed the incapacitating qualities of the emotion. Any notion of a salutary moral challenge in facing fears down was entirely absent.

The rising concern about children's fears and the risks they entailed continued into the early 1930s, in leading manuals written by popular authorities like Winnifred de Kok and Sidonie Gruenberg. They emphasized the importance of reconsidering a host of traditional parental approaches, beyond the lazy and damaging use of fear in discipline. Children's fears should be coddled and heeded rather than scorned or ridiculed, for as reproval of the emotion became more straightforward, the strategic responses increased in complexity. Implicitly, the nineteenth-century practice of urging fearful boys to buck up—as in T. S. Arthur's recommendation—now came under attack. "When a child evinces fear, the one danger to avoid is repression. As long as the fear is brought into the open and discussed, little harm can be done." Talk it out and attach pleasant experience to the object of fear, so that young children are led unwittingly to replace fear with anticipation. Fear joined a number of "bad" emotions that had to be ventilated to

49 Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "sissy."


51 Are You Training Your Child to Be Happy? (Washington, D.C., 1930), 32.

remove their sting, lest a repressive dismissal drive the feeling deeper, to fester and corrupt.\textsuperscript{53}

By the 1920s and 1930s, the Victorian approach to childhood fear had been altered in a number of fundamental respects—although no overarching popular theory as yet explained the emotion. The resultant approach persisted for several decades. Popularizers argued that fears might arise in children without clear cause, and they could wound the psyche deeply, distorting not only childhood but also adult functioning. Early childhood, once noted in passing, now became a crucial stage for combating fear. Blasts at the use of fear tactics increased, consuming several paragraphs in every child-rearing manual; the fierceness of the attack reflected the persistence of traditional habits during the preceding decades but also the new urgency of the problem. Parents must actively try to prevent other fear-producing situations and must introduce a host of compensatory strategies when fear intruded. Finally, amid this flurry, the idea of recommending bravery and encouraging mastery of fear in later childhood, even if still present in Forbish's pages, fell by the wayside. "There is always the danger that the fear resulting from such methods [teasing or insisting on confrontation] will reach the 'overwhelming' stage and leave its mark for a long time," wrote Gruenberg.\textsuperscript{54} Fear could be handled only through elaborate manipulations in a placating and supportive environment.

It is unquestionably easier to pinpoint the nature of changing advice than to specify its causes, particularly because most of the prescriptive literature was resolutely unselfconscious in identifying, much less in justifying, the novelty of the themes it advanced. The origins of the changes are complex, and, although expertise played a role in the equation, no simple model of innovative expert preaching working away at parent-readers will suffice. Rather, the new advice expressed a number of trends building in intensity from the late nineteenth century, fully emerging only from the 1920s onward and amplified by successive schools of child psychology, to which we will shortly turn. Three factors can nevertheless be adduced, all of which combined to promote heightened anxiety about childhood fears. First was the ability to build on precedent. While, on balance, the twentieth-century emotional advice was new, it reprised those elements of Victorian expertise that had stressed the importance of avoiding incapacitating fears and promoting rational self-control.

The second part of the explanation follows from wider shifts in American culture and society. By 1900, for example, adult controls were beginning to be imposed on the previously autonomous activities of middle-class boys, activities that had been filled with dares and the need to control fear. Heightened supervision both expressed and encouraged a reevaluation of fear as part of the process.\textsuperscript{55} The decline of gender-specific advice about childhood fear, so noticeable in the changes of the 1920s as children became a collective problem category and as heroic goals


\textsuperscript{55} This is the concluding claim in Rotundo, "Boy Culture"; some similar points are offered in Joseph Kett, \textit{Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America 1790 to the Present} (New York, 1977).
for boys receded, related to larger gender interactions within the middle class. From dating and courtship to marriage and professional roles, men and women began spending more social and work time together, which reduced the vitality of older gendered emotional norms. Changes in the uses of fear, in other words, related to important alterations in the larger American context, including even the emergence of personality over character as a socialization goal. These changes in turn help explain how this new context worked, in emotional terms.

Finally, several specific innovations in culture, in expertise, and in the experience of early childhood and parenting directly contributed to the adjustments in emotional standards. These were innovations that can be teased out of the prescriptive literature itself, during the first four decades of the century, in contrast to the larger shifts in context that plausibly coincided with the new tone without emerging explicitly in its expression. Direct causes of the reevaluation of fear preceded the fullest statements, for popularization tends to lag, but, while the standard-setters were too unanalytical to inquire into their stimuli, they incorporated these stimuli in their phraseology.

The most obvious new ingredient involved the findings of child psychology and its gradually growing currency among popularizing advice writers. Darwinian biology had encouraged a host of emotions studies toward the end of the nineteenth century, as well as a growing sense that certain key emotions were innate in the human experience and likely to emerge in early childhood. G. Stanley Hall, among others, had sponsored studies of emotions in childhood as well as adolescence. Fear gained his attention late in the 1890s; and, while in his views on gender he reflected a lingering Victorianism, his conclusions were on balance novel. It was Hall’s work that particularly inspired the Child Study Association, and his findings on the frequency of night terrors among infants fed directly into Birney’s child-rearing manual, with its new promptings on the fragility of young children and the need for protective strategies. Most widely sold manuals did not include scholarly references, which fact masks precise research sources of the rising urgency concerning childhood fears, but authors and agencies like D. H. Thom and the Children’s Bureau were intimately acquainted with turn-of-the-century psychological research.

Scholarly probing of children’s emotions unquestionably influenced the change in Victorian assumptions about what was normal, but it does not explain why middle-class parents, as purchasers of the popular manuals, might be interested in a new approach. Here, the popular manuals point toward a shift in the actual infant experience of fear and a decline in middle-class confidence in a benign environ-

58 Hall, “Study of Fear,” 147–248; Birney, Childhood, 24–29. The present article is not intended as a systematic inquiry into the evolution of formal psychological or psychiatric theories of fear over the past century. This might be a useful additional project. Hall’s article on fear, though less theoretical than his wont, accumulated a hodgepodge of data on childish fears and sparked both scholarly and popularizing interest. See American Journal of Psychology, vols. 8–18, 1897–1917. The concentration on fear specified children, with occasional excursions into adult phobia. French work on the frequency of infant fears was also widely cited: thus the American Journal of Psychology reported Birnet’s study on infant fear (Année psychologique [1895]: 223); American Journal of Psychology, 7 (1896): 577. In all this, the emphasis was highly empirical, with little attention to causation.
ment—though they do not, it must be repeated, provide explicit documentation on either count.

Why did the dominant advice literature by 1920 stress children's fears of darkness and animals, in such interesting contrast to Victorian sentiments? Research findings like Hall's help explain the innovation, but they were in all likelihood supplemented by actual changes in the context of middle-class childhood. Several factors pushed middle-class children toward greater fearfulness, as well as toward more willingness to exhibit fears, than had applied to their nineteenth-century counterparts. Emotional change in childhood must always be suggested cautiously, given inherently inadequate direct evidence and the need to acknowledge some innate emotional reactions independent of cultural context. Nineteenth-century toddlers surely had their fears, however minimized in adult response. At the same time, emotional change among children does stand out in some key areas, such as sibling jealousy, in the turn-of-the-century decades. There are good reasons to posit shifts in the focus of childhood fear. Declining family size reduced buffers between individual children and adults; there were fewer siblings available for talks about fears and for half-teasing, half-reassuring reactions. More intense contacts with parents could both frighten children and increase the utility of infantile fear reactions as a means of appeal. Falling death rates might heighten anxieties if a family member did die. Evidence for these connections between new family structures and childhood fear is tentative, but it merits some attention.59

Early twentieth-century child-rearing authorities, drawn from disciplines with little sensitivity to change, in no sense directly reported a new level of fear among children. If asked, they would surely have assumed that past parental practices—their traditional target—had created more fear than did the gradual enlightenment of their own day. Nevertheless, some interesting clues emerge from the prescriptive manuals. The new emphasis on fear of animals is a case in point, for, while this subject was mentioned in the nineteenth century, it had been overshadowed by the concern about cruelty. Different meanings play a role, to be sure; earlier cruelty may have followed from fear. But it is conceivable as well that a more urban society, in which families encountered fewer animals, produced greater anxiety about them. The stress on darkness is even more interesting, for it had no preparation in nineteenth-century accounts despite the low level of household lighting and the greater reality of darkness. Smaller family size and the growing insistence on separate rooms for middle-class children may well have produced a higher level of fear about darkness than had traditionally prevailed.60

Thus an important factor in heightened adult concern about fear and attendant focus on young children may have been new emotional tensions parents encountered among their offspring. Given the previous century's distaste for young children's fears (and a desire to avoid responsibility for engendering them), this notion would help explain the expansion of parental responsibility beyond self-control to active supervision and compensation. Along with expert-driven findings (indeed, explaining their parental audience), this factor would account for the


60 These possibilities would add important flesh to the contentions of Richard Sennett, Families against the City: Middle-Class Homes of Industrial Chicago, 1872–1890 (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), concerning the growing emotional vulnerability of smaller, more fully nucleated families at the end of the nineteenth century. Similar issues are explored concerning sibling rivalry in Stearns, Jealousy.
particular interest in countering children’s fears by embracing security. Night lights and carefully staged encounters with the neighbor’s dog not only resulted from expert perceptions about the need to reduce fear for healthy personalities but also reflected real changes in a child’s life. Furthermore, parents were spending more time with infants during the early decades of the century than had been the case for the nineteenth-century middle class. Declining family size, again, reduced mutual care by siblings. Live-in maids were disappearing, and by the 1920s co-residence by a grandmother was declining as well. This meant that parents were exposed to new evidence about how fearful infants could be—and ready, therefore, for advice that pinpointed the earliest years as a key point for intervention and control.

Reduced reliance on religion completed the changes in middle-class family life that explain the early twentieth-century intensification of concern about fear. Active invocation of a divine being certain to reward courage measurably declined. Here was both symptom and cause of the retreat from Gilded Age confidence, but, like children’s new (or newly noticed) fears of darkness, it directly promoted reorientation of parental tactics. The secularization of family advice literature, increasingly visible in the later nineteenth century, became virtually complete in the most widely sold prescriptive manuals after 1900. Expertise rested, however vaguely, on science, not theology. Middle-class families might retain some religious identification along with their openness to up-to-date secular advice. And there were various subgroups for which religion was less compartmentalized that utilized separate child-rearing pamphlets or relied more directly on tradition. Nevertheless, for the consumers of the most popular manuals, and after 1926 the new Parents’ Magazine, explicit religious references were either absent or isolated in a specific section on church behavior.

Secularization in turn shifted the framework for dealing with children’s fears; for, as religion provided less certain comfort, fear almost inevitably surged forward as an emotional problem, at least in the eyes of concerned adults. Adults in the nineteenth century may well have been fearful in fact, as noted above, but they were eager to believe that their children could be shielded, and their religion had loomed large in the popular advice on children’s reassurance. Twentieth-century prescriptions offered no such solace. The Victorian heroes’ recourse of prayer proved harder to invoke, while at the same time parents had to think of explicit tactics to replace the general reliance on divine guidance and the power of prayer that had undergirded their professed confidence in children’s control of fear. Religious aside concerning fear, persisting even in largely secular manuals before 1900 in the form of remarks on the solace of trusting in God, now disappeared. Some experts attacked religious impulses to use fear as discipline against the “wages

61 Daniel E. Sutherland, Americans and Their Servants: Domestic Service in the United States from 1800 to 1920 (Baton Rouge, La., 1981); Daniel Scott Smith, “Accounting for Change in the Families of the Elderly in the United States, 1900–Present,” in Old Age in Bureaucratic Society, David Van Tassel and Peter N. Stearns, eds. (Westport, Conn., 1988), 87–105. The impact of more extensive parental contact with infants, against a backdrop of previously established high expectations of family harmony, is also explored in Stearns, Jealousy, chap. 3. Note that reallocation of parental time, while applying particularly to mothers, also touched fathers; Margaret Marsh explored the 1920s survey literature on parental time allocations in “Suburban Men and Masculine Domesticity, 1870–1919,” Carnes and Griffen, eds., Meanings for Manhood. On changes in living arrangements, see David Handlin, The American Home: Architecture and Society, 1815–1915 (Boston, 1979), 479–502. A number of studies point to the importance of sleeping with siblings in nineteenth-century reactions and of the corresponding results of new sleeping patterns around 1900; see E. Anthony Rotundo, “Romantic Friendship: Male Intimacy and Middle-Class Youth in the Northern United States, 1800–1900,” Journal of Social History, 23 (1989): 1–26. On the changing general context for family life, see Mintz and Kellogg, Domestic Revolutions, 107–32.
of sin." Others simply recorded the growing hesitancy about religious comfort. An early Parents' Magazine article (1933) noted the parental interest in softening children's fear of death by "conjuring up a heaven of angels and harp playing." The difficulty was—theology resolutely aside—that "inevitably the small girl or boy will discover that mother and father are not certain about the afterlife. Such a discovery augments the fear of death." The alternative? A simple scientific explanation, or a bit of history of other peoples' views of death, or some assimilable phrase such as "grandma was through." Here is a clear, unsurprising indication that the new approach to fear drew on larger trends in the culture of the early twentieth century. Related uncertainties about moral absolutes and their inevitable triumph added to the mix as the century progressed.

It is possible that the decline of religion reduced the confidence adults themselves had about their ultimate relationship to the natural and social environment, although advances in technology and medicine might compensate for some loss of faith. One way to handle a level of anxiety that could not be fully acknowledged was to help children avoid the sources of fear—as children were removed, for example, from active participation in funerals, in marked contrast to Victorian practice—or to reassure them carefully if avoidance broke down. Greater recognition of the complexity of fear in fictional treatments of war, even in the later nineteenth century, might similarly denote declining confidence in the ability to view battle as moral challenge, which the actual experience of twentieth-century war would merely enhance.

Apart from speculations about levels of adult anxiety, it is clear that changes in early childhood experience and in more general adult assumptions within the middle class combined with new research findings in psychology to make key features of the nineteenth-century approach to childhood fears untenable. The manuals parents bought helped them deal with new emotional reactions, from the response of a toddler now sleeping alone in a dark bedroom to reactions that had previously been delegated to a sibling for attention. The new advice guided parents in strategies that could be used to replace reliance on prayer and divine supervision. The same advice reduced confidence that older children could be relied on to work their fears out as part of character development.

In this context, by the late 1920s, advice givers and concerned parents alike were open to more systematic statements about childhood and fear than had been


64 It would be of particular interest to see how an event of the magnitude of the Civil War affected the emotionology of the postwar era. While beyond the scope of this essay, one might begin this exploration by a close reading of The Red Badge of Courage (1895), which was written not by a veteran but by Stephen Crane, who was born six years after the hostilities had ceased. Though not a typical treatment, it displays some connection to the new awareness of fear even in the boys' war stories by the 1890s. The contrast can be further extended by comparing the very different, and more limited, echoes of World War I in children's literature—a subject that merits further scrutiny.
available up to that point. They were treated to two successive versions: Watsonian
behaviorism, which gained considerable attention in the decade after 1928, and
then a somewhat diluted version of Freudianism, shorn of stark formulas such as
castration anxiety, which appeared in the popular literature during the 1940s and
early 1950s. The two approaches differed in key respects: interpreting childhood
fear and recommending strategies to alleviate it. They conjoined, however, in citing
fear as a significant problem in childhood’s early stages that warranted substantial
parental attention. This shared focus, more perhaps than the nuances of explana-
tion, may have accounted for the attention the theories gained from two successive
generations of popularizers.

The Watsonian discussion of childhood fear trumpeted a “scientific” method for
its prevention or management that fit the growing concern of child-rearing experts
and many expertise-consuming parents during the 1920s and 1930s. According to
John B. Watson, children’s entire emotional disposition was determined by age
three, yet children by nature had virtually no fears at all. Watson claimed that a
series of experiments had revealed no instinctive fears in children of the dark, of
fire, or of snakes; only noise and falling produced innate reactions of fear. All other
fears, for example, of animals, derived from associations with noise or falling. For
parents who worried that children were mishandled as experimental subjects, Watson produced a revealing explanation: such experiments “are not cruel if they
help us to understand the fear life of the millions of people around us and give us
practical help in bringing up our children more nearly free from fears than we
ourselves have been brought up.”65 The moral of the scientific story was twofold:
first, the scope of necessary parental restraint in inducing fear, for instance, by
avoiding even vital cautions in a loud (and therefore scary) voice, was greatly
expanded. Parents were charged with the responsibility of providing a fear-free
environment, by limiting loud noise, closing windows during storms, and buying
houses set well back from the sounds of the road. Second, when children did
display fear despite the best parental efforts, careful steps of reeducation should be
introduced, gradually associating the feared object with pleasurable sensations.
Again, traditional approaches were wrong: ridicule, demonstrations that other
children were not afraid, as well as confrontation with the feared object were
useless. But gradual bribery—candy in a partially darkened room, then the next
night a bit further into the dark, and so on—would do the trick.66

The goal of all this effort was assumed to be largely self-evident. Watson
specifically mentioned the importance of preventing or correcting excessively timid
or fearful children. Surely, every mother of such a child should be “more than
willing . . . to take the time and trouble necessary to shape the fear life of her child.”
But whether the long-range impact of such strategies on most children was to teach
them to handle fear better, or to avoid fear, or to look for some authority to
sweeten the setting—these consequences, all logical possibilities, were simply not
explored. Presumably, the stable emotional personality formed by age three would
have lifelong benefits.67

The popularity of Watson’s views on fear (and his approach to this emotion drew
much more notice than did his stern views on anger or love) clearly went beyond
the credibility of his experimental base. To an interesting extent, popularized

65 John B. Watson, Psychological Care of Infant and Child (1928; rpt. edn., New York, 1972), 54; see also
66 Watson, Psychological Care of Infant and Child, 45–68.
67 Watson, Psychological Care of Infant and Child, 68.
Watsonianism could help parents combine a new degree of worry about childhood fear with Victorian assumptions that there was nothing innately wrong. Environment was now the key, but an environment immensely more complex than the last century’s, with car and appliance noises added to nature’s storms—another perception many middle-class parents might have found congenial. Problems there were, but they could be solved, so long as parents devoted more active effort than their nineteenth-century counterparts had been told was necessary. The clear casualty was the brave mastery of fear as part of character development, although the candy-induced conquest of a phobia might serve as pale substitute. Since the brave boy scenario had already trailed off in adult perceptions as being too risky, the fact that courage had yielded to manipulation passed unnoticed.

Watson’s general views on fear were widely reproduced among the authors of popular child-rearing manuals. He himself was interviewed on the subject in an early issue of Parents’ Magazine. This journal continued, through the 1930s, to publish articles on the subject in a Watsonian vein, albeit with a few theoretically aberrant modifications, such as a suggestion that seeing children of one’s own age playing with a fear object did in fact help, along with pleasurable bribes that were still more reliable. Considerable attention continued to be devoted to the prevention of fears through adult self-control: mothers must realize how often their own irrationality was communicated. Still greater emphasis was placed, in these popularizations, on remedial action after fears had been implanted. Adults could teach children skills that would ease initial fears. They could, through a “long, slow” process, reverse fears of strangers that had resulted from a careless adult, by gradually, over weeks or months, providing treats in association with the stranger’s presence, putting them closer and closer to the stranger in question. The goal, the Watsonian popularizers noted, remained clear: “The main job of the parent should be to prevent fears, since some fears are extremely difficult to cure.”

The Watsonian approach not only formalized the new level of anxiety about children’s fears and promoted various strategies designed to circumvent them (in the process reifying the decline of fear’s role in character development), it also highlighted how fear itself had been redefined, or more properly narrowed, compared to Victorian usage. Watsonians contrasted fear with caution, which was a desirable attribute given the inability to prevent all danger. Fear itself meant

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68 Uses of Watsonianism permitted some interesting Victorian throwbacks. If children could be entirely manipulated, they might be taught mild versions of fear as the basis for forming subsequent courage; people did need to face risks. One popularizer boldly offered a subheading to her article, arguing that the new methods of teaching fear control should produce “a generation of young people braver than their elders.” In other words, even as newly explicit attention was given to young children and to manipulative strategies, an ultimate goal of courage—including use of the word itself—might persist, even though this was not characteristic of most statements in the 1930s. See Fisher and Gruenberg, Our Children, 137; and Sapin, “Helping Children,” 14–16. The 1930s manuals that use Watsonian ideas without expressing a larger goal of courage (as opposed to a more limited, ad hoc prevention of fear) include D. Russell, Children: Why Do We Have Them? (New York, 1933); Ada Arlitt, Child from One to Twelve: Psychology for Parents (New York, 1931); and E. R. Groves and G. H. Groves, Wholesome Childhood (New York, 1931).


undiluted loss of control, actually prompting foolhardy antics by "making it impossible for one to think clearly." Passionless good sense and a controlled environment were the new preconditions of sound behavior, as fear moved from its nineteenth-century amalgamation of danger and stimulus to an emotion defined simply in terms of its boundless and destructive qualities.71

The reevaluation of fear reached new intensity in the revised child-rearing advice of the pre–World War II era, even though the basic thrust, toward minimizing fear and avoiding confrontation as a vital aspect of dealing with children, remained constant. Earlier assumptions (broadcast if not created by the behaviorist research school), about children's lack of many natural fears, yielded ground to Freudianism by the 1940s. The selective popularization of Freud was crucial, teaching that certain influential fears lay deep in the psyche.72 The anxious wartime atmosphere provided a spur as well. During the war, fear was judged to be more normal, though no less undesirable, than either Watsonians or nineteenth-century writers had allowed. Psychiatrists urged wartime parents to be alert for children's anxieties and to present a calm exterior, lest they do permanent damage to their child's character. But part of the program now included an admission that fear was normal and could be discussed with the children themselves; the extreme avoidance goals of the behaviorists, which allowed fear to be combated while evoking more traditional hopes of inherent calm, gave way to greater complexity. Fear, still dreadful, was inescapable for children, which meant that adult support became all the more indispensable.73

Parents received less blame for causing children's fears in this new formulation, perhaps an indication that scare tactics were declining. Children might be afraid of dogs or the dark for reasons that could not readily be fathomed. But, while the emphasis on staying totally placid declined, and more possibilities of admitting fears crept in, parental responsibility for producing a compassionate, reassuring response to children's fears escalated. It remained important not to invoke the boogeyman or to terrify as part of even justifiable discipline. Some Watsonian fear-by-contagion suggestions persisted as well, including strong recommendations for a secure, controlled environment. It became commonplace, however, to recognize that fears could not always be reversed in a mechanical behaviorist fashion, and the role of affectionate reassurance steadily gained ground.74

The first full articulation of the mid-twentieth-century approach to child-rearing standards came in Dr. Benjamin Spock's initial manual.75 Children's fears were presented as somewhat unpredictable—certainly varied—but demanding a careful adult response. Parents must sit up with the sleepless child in whom fear had taken root. "Don't be in a hurry to sneak away before he is asleep... This campaign may take weeks, but it should work in the end." Delay travel plans when children around two years of age seem anxious; be very careful about going off to work; do not push toilet training to the point of causing fear, and assure an anxious child that your

71 Harold Homer Anderson, Children in the Family (New York, 1940, 105, see also 95–106.
73 Institute for Psychoanalysis, Growing Up in a World at War (Chicago, 1942).
love withstands any number of soiled pants. Older children who show fear of the
dark should not be threatened or teased or even reasoned with; they should be
provided with an atmosphere of calm, including no scary stories or films, because
“the child is scared enough of his own mental creations.” Other training goals must
be put aside, for a time, amid the primary purpose of reassurance, and above all
lavish affection must be offered. “This is the time for extra hugs and comforting
reminders that you love him very much and will always protect him.” Earlier
mechanisms, such as candy in a darkened room, dropped out of sight, given the
more mysterious origins of childish fears, although playacting was recommended
as a potentially useful stratagem.76

The revisions Dr. Spock introduced implicitly into the advice literature were
amplified in a number of manuals and in Parents’ Magazine during the 1950s. The
range of childhood fears was described in great detail: “The fact is that a child can
get to be afraid of almost anything.” While some fears were outgrown, others were
merely considered unhealthily concealed. Children could not manage this emo-
tional area unaided: “Unless some grown-up helps them, each frightening experi-
ence leaves them weakened for the next assault.” Fear lurked, in fact, within the
child, not in the feared object, which is why outside guidance was essential.
Popularizers still found it necessary to warn against parental threats or insipid
displays of fear, but active “corrective efforts” moved front and center, along with
admissions that full success was impossible. The goal was to “reduce to a minimum
the reasons a child should be afraid,” according to a manual in 1956, which
translated into constant control over the environment. The effort must extend, in
this vision, well beyond the early years into the schooling period; parents should
accompany a frightened first grader, for example, when the child’s insecurity
warranted it. Oversolicitousness was a risk, but the real attention of the popular-
izing experts riveted on reassurance and provision of security. Because some fear
was inevitable, promoting bravery was meaningless and potentially damaging; far
better to urge a child to discuss fear amply and to provide opportunities for
playacting and carefully graded activities that extended responsibility. The Victo-
rian joys of a sturdy confrontation with fear yielded still more fully to adult stage
managing.77

Post-1945 revisions of the interwar strategies are important, as they echo through
successive child-rearing manuals. For most practical purposes, however, they
added to the interwar approach, rather than overturning it, while confirming the
basic interest in controlling children’s fears amid anxious realization of their
damaging potential. Any impulse to urge courage on a child or to deal with fears
by confronting them with their source—a dog, or water—remained taboo. “Cour-
age” might result from careful handling—Dr. Spock still used the noun itself—but
through gradual adjustment, not moral challenge, and only if eased by consistent
parental reassurance and affection. Children had become potentially delicate
plants, in this new vision, with the noxious qualities of fear intensified as a result.

76 Spock, Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care, 284, 295, 283–97.
77 Allan Fromme, The Parent’s Handbook (New York, 1956), 109–08; see also above, note 74. For
Parents’ Magazine’s adjustment to the new, more complex parental strategies, see Martin W. Piers,
AMID SOME IMPORTANT VARIANTS, the new stance toward children’s fear deepened its roots in American culture from the 1920s onward. It drew growing attention from parents and even older children, helping to shape their vocabularies about fear. It affected adult appeals to children’s imagination, through fiction, though in a complex fashion. Taken together, these facets demonstrate the widening context in which the new standards being urged on parents were embedded.

The reevaluation of fear and its appropriate socialization calls renewed attention to the early part of the twentieth century as a time of significant alterations in the American emotional climate. Fear can now be added to the several emotions that were more systematically reprobation in the initial decade of the century and that summoned up new strategies of avoidance and social manipulation as both Victorian intensity and Victorian gender differentiations were downplayed. Here, at least on the suppressive side, was the emotional counterpart to the construction of new American personality values, suitable (or so it was deemed) for a new, secular consumer culture and a managerial organizational and economic structure. As consumer interests proliferated, it became increasingly important to label emotions pleasant or unpleasant, with the latter to be shunned as much as the former were courted. Fear by now fit easily into this characteristic twentieth-century dualism, insofar as it paralyzed rather than pleased. Just as clearly, the idea of wrestling deliberately with an unpleasant emotion in order to develop character made less sense amid consumerist values. The declining validity of entrepreneurial virtues, in the corporate economy of the mid-century, similarly maintained the new attack on fear just as it redefined other emotional standards. Here, too, direct confrontation with fear made less sense than organizational controls that would limit encounters with the emotion, beginning with parental manipulations. The new approach to fear, spurred by specific issues in childhood family context and by specific psychological findings, meshed with the sweeping shifts in American personality goals that began to take shape from the 1920s onward. This is why expert recommendations were widely sought and heeded, furthering the process of change.

As mentioned above, the reevaluation of fear was also an important feature of the general revision of gendered differentiations in emotional standards. When expert attention moved to very young children, gender distinctions mattered less than when the encounter with fear had been seen as a longer process. Written accounts of fearful young children ceased to point disproportionately at girls. The Victorian insistence that boys had a special responsibility for controlling fear, in part to shelter more timid girls, virtually disappeared, and the salience of joyful

78 David Riesman, The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character (New Haven, Conn., 1973); Christopher Lasch, Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged (New York, 1977). Claims of transformation in personality norms need not be accepted without reservation, but the shifts in emotional standards support the idea of significant change.


81 Susman, Culture as History, 271–85; see also Stearns, Jealousy.

mastery of fear declined. The residues of these attitudes, with children beating back their fears to win through danger, were by 1920 as likely to show up in stories about girls, now more active protagonists as detectives or nurses, as in boys' fiction.

Gender-based disputes over fear in adults could persist, however, as the Victorian legacy died hard. Child-rearing authorities often implied that mothers, because of their traditional anxieties about fear, moved more quickly than fathers to accept new standards in dealing with childhood frights. Even up-to-date fathers might try to insist that boys master fears directly, without manipulation or coddling. At the same time, the theme of contagiously fearful mothers persisted, particularly in the 1920s manuals; this echoed Victorian gender stereotypes and turn-of-the-century worries about boys turning to "sissies" under women's tutelage. The extent to which disagreements eased, and at what speed, remains to be traced. It is revealing, however, that prescriptive literature from the 1930s onward uniformly dropped the standard references to frightened mothers. Again, shifts in assessment of fear, prompted initially by specific factors including new expertise, merged with wider alterations in middle-class life and culture.

By the same token, large numbers of adults, parents in the vanguard, seemed to accept the new concerns about childhood fear and many of the tactics urged in consequence, even though neither timing nor extent can be precisely measured. By the 1920s, certainly, worried parents often referred fearful children to therapists or to guidance clinics, a recourse duly noted in early issues of Parents' Magazine. More general evidence emerged in the 1940s, partly because social researchers began to investigate parental standards more systematically. By this point, the campaign to promote sympathetic attention to children's fears and the various factors that supported it were several decades old; it was not surprising that many parents had fully internalized the message. An inquiry during the 1940s into problems parents perceived with children, though regrettably unspecific in its summary categories, uncovered great concern about childhood fears. There was no corresponding perception of particularly admirable courage among children, and the concept was rarely cited. Fears loomed large in the overall category of emotional problems, which in turn was considerable among all issues treated; problems were rated highest among younger children and were focused on reactions to darkness, water, animals, germs, and death, as well as generalized fearfulness. Parental perceptions, in other words, particularly in the suburban middle class, paralleled the kinds of signals given in the larger emotional culture of the period.

Parents also had comments to make. Letters to Parents' Magazine began to appear regularly from the late 1920s onward, detailing concerns about children's fears and successful (initially, largely behaviorist) strategies of coping. The magazine posed a problem to its readers in 1929, based on a five-year-old's night fears. A host of mothers responded, dutifully warning against maids who told boogeyman stories, fearsome images of a punitive God, and, on the positive side, recommending carefully planted benign images and the after-all-small-enough expense of a night light. The temptation to impose discipline was granted, but giving in was sedulously

83 Fisher and Gruenberg, Our Children, 116–18.
85 Arthur T. Jersild, et al., Joys and Problems of Childrearing (New York, 1949), 215 and passim; note that parental concerns were heightened through World War II's impact on children, although Jersild and his colleagues allowed for directly war-inspired fears in a separate category.
combated. Here, admittedly, was a sponsored scenario. More interesting (though still self-selected) was the spate of spontaneous submissions from the late 1930s through the ensuing decade, in which children's fears of dogs, darkness, and so on were detailed and compensatory strategies based on explaining the source of fear and distracting with treats were recounted. The goal was always removal of a particular fear, not (overtly, at least) development of a courageous personality or a desire to introduce moral challenge. By the 1940s, if not before, middle-class parents had widely assimilated the idea that childhood fear was a substantial problem and were eager to offer tactics that would allow their children to cope.

A similar tone emerged in responses of older children to survey questionnaires about fear, although again the interests of the eliciting researchers may well have influenced the result. The assessment by Arnold Gesell and his colleagues in 1956 yielded no pre-teens dreaming of facing stampeding horses or calculating the bravery needed to turn aside an enemy attack but rather a group of older children eager to demonstrate that they had surmounted the characteristic fears of earlier years. The narrowed equation of fear with terror had clearly triumphed over the wider Victorian use of fear in stimulating response to danger. Fear and childishness were more likely pairings than fear and moral challenge. Thus ten-year-olds pointed proudly to the waning of a previous fear of dogs, while "spontaneously" reporting that they were no longer afraid of the dark; Victorian echoes resounded only in comments about potentially fearing to meet a lion or spend a night in an old castle alone; here, some projections of imagined calls upon courage persisted. By age eleven, however, these fancies seemed to have passed, and many children would either not discuss fear at all or had redefined the emotion to focus on anxieties about being liked by peers. By fifteen, fear had become mainly a matter of reminiscence, about earlier sports anxieties or more outright childhood frights. Maturity, clearly, meant claiming to do without fear, not anticipating its confrontation, and this was some measure of the change from the unpolluted nineteenth century.

Teen-agers who dutifully responded to questions by development authorities and pediatricians like Gesell had obviously learned much of their vocabulary about childhood fears from their parents, a further sign of the dissemination into middle-class households of the prescriptive literature. Teen-age responses may also have been shaped by the altered tone of the stories directed at children. This category of fiction, like the child-rearing manuals, departed substantially from Victorian standards of fear and its mastery.

Children's fiction from the 1920s must, to be sure, be handled somewhat differently from its nineteenth-century counterpart. It had rivals, in radio and movies; the graphic portrayals of danger on screen may well have maintained some of the Victorian motifs of surmounting fear, if somewhat less explicitly. Further, there was no unity of approach. Many stories maintained themes of courage while many leading series, like the Hardy boys novels and rising genres like science fiction, pulled away from Victorian continuities. Overall, children's stories served less obviously as companions to family norms than during the nineteenth century,


87 Arnold Gesell, Francis Ilg, and Laura Ames, Youth: The Ages from Ten to Sixteen (New York, 1956), 51, 63, 192.
since children increasingly bought their own books, and fiction appealed to them more directly as consumers instead of catering to parental moralisms. Still, if fiction was less centrally enmeshed in approved adult standards for children—another reason for the growing concentration on socializing young children—it could still bear some relationship to them and could certainly affect the readers involved. In fact, many children’s stories echoed the shifts in prescriptive literature by moving away from episodes that probed a boy’s encounter with fear and subsequent mastery. Here is another indication of the considerable reach of the twentieth-century approach to childhood fear, even in media that did not always win favor from experts or parents.

The experts themselves were clear enough: certain kinds of fear-inducing horror stories were inappropriate, possibly for anybody and certainly for children. A certain leeway was allowed, for more moderate tales like Hansel and Gretel, which, though a bit scary, could provide useful dramatizations that would aid children in handling fear. Temperaments and timing, however, must be considered. In one account, fathers, who enjoyed thrillers more than mothers, were given a cautious and qualified green light.88 In no sense did traditional fright stories, or their functions both in providing courageous examples for children and in allowing adults to vent some spleen by scaring their offspring, disappear entirely.

Nevertheless, there was change, as a result of the larger shifts in emotional values. A number of traditional tales were redone to reduce (though rarely to eliminate) the fear component. This was a standard feature of the Walt Disney approach in cartoons of fairy tales and modern children’s books: in Disney’s Three Little Pigs, the first two little pigs were not in fact eaten, and the cartoon Cinderella had lots of friendly animals to keep her spirits up during the darkest hours (which is doubtless why she was kind enough to invite her stepsisters to her palace later instead of having them put to death). As stories of this sort were read and reread, children did not need to build up too much uncomfortable anticipation of the sort that they might equate with fear.

To be sure, some children’s stories from the 1920s onward maintained an essentially Victorian desire to inspire courage, just as Watsonian experts themselves waffled as to whether their goals were enhanced bravery or avoidance of fear-producing situations. Again, there was far less consistency in this genre than there had been during the nineteenth century and less coherence than the contemporary parental advice literature manifested in terms of basic standards for judging fear. Concerns about boys who were “sissies” and sports activities that “built men” by, among other things, insisting on control of fear in the face of challenge maintained or even enhanced earlier nineteenth-century themes.89 Boys’ literature, not to mention radio adventure shows like “Jack Armstrong, All-American Boy,” unquestionably presented to the imagination situations that could readily provoke internal assessments of whether one would be afraid, how one would handle fear, and so on. Stories like Matchlock Gun (1936), which pitted Dutch colonist children and their mother against Indian attacks, came straight from a Victorian arsenal now modified for greater gender equality.90 Girls’ stories offered only a partial modification. A new breed of teen-age heroines—nurses and girl detectives—

88 Sapin, “Helping Children,” 16. For additions to the roster of scary stories available for children, see works such as Maurice Sendak, Where the Wild Things Are (New York, 1963).
grappled with fear from time to time, beyond merely finding themselves in scary situations. The signals about evaluating fear presented through fiction to older children were far from uniform, which is normal when new emotional standards are being sketched.

Nevertheless, fear did change in children's media in key respects beyond the curtailment of fairy tale horrors. The changes related to the emerging expertise on child rearing. First, an increasing number of heroes in children's stories of the 1920s and beyond were essentially emotionless, building on the "Nick Carter" and Old West tough-guy models pioneered in late nineteenth-century adult fiction and dime novels. Rather than grappling with fear, or even considering fear in retrospect, the new breed of Tarzans and, soon, outright super-heroes whose emotionlessness was as impressive as their ability to fly or to withstand bullets, had no fear to begin with. Daredevil supermen or Captains Marvel were notable for their freedom from any need to master fear. They handled all sorts of adventures, but they faced no moral challenges; their stories were intended to rouse excitement, not fear. It was almost as if the super-heroes had been reared in an ideal Watsonian setting in which the emotions had been entirely inhibited. The subsequent surge of outright science fiction extended the tendency to depict incredible adventure minus an emotional load. As exposed in the newer forms of children's fiction, fantasy life changed considerably, from idealizing the control of fear to celebrating its absence.

Equally revealing, though admittedly harder to assess, was the emotional atmosphere surrounding real-boy heroes. Frank Dixon's Hardy boys, teen-age detectives, avoided emotional challenge, in contrast to their nineteenth-century wild-horse-stopping counterparts. Called upon to fly a blimp with no experience, Frank and Joe were briefly "tense with excitement," but that was it. And after later getting shot at, they might remark, "I thought we were dead ducks"; no pondering how they set aside their fear, no invocations of prayer or mother for these stalwarts. Lesser colleagues, including fat Chet, might indeed admit some emotion, as in one situation they did "forget fears" in supporting Frank and Joe in their adventures, but these points were made in passing, with none of the savor of nineteenth-century evaluations of performance. By implication, the protagonists were not bothered by these fleeting emotional warts. They accomplished wonders, but they were not described as courageous because they had no complicating emotions to surmount.

The idea of successfully grappling with fear thus faded in many of the fictional formats urged upon children, in favor of high-action adventure without emotional strings. Children's stories were less monochrome than the advice about fear being urged upon parents. These stories often annoyed adults through their sensation-alism, for daredevil fictional excitement challenged the more carefully monitored

91 Available studies on American children's fiction support the idea of a shift in tone during the 1920s, including a decline in heroic idealizations, but they have not developed a full characterization—partly because of a tendency to focus on literary quality and adult appreciation more than popularity and children's reactions. Still, a helpful guide is Sally McNall, "American Children's Literature, 1880–Present," in Joseph M. Hawes and N. Ray Hiner, eds., American Childhood: A Research Guide and Historical Handbook (Westport, Conn., 1988), 377–411, esp. 391–92. See also Deirdre Johnson, Stratemeyer Pseudonyms and Series Books (Westport, Conn., 1982).
92 Although it focuses on England, Kristen Drotner, English Children and Their Magazines, 1751–1945 (New Haven, Conn., 1988), helps evaluate American patterns in absence of a definitive study; see also Avery, Childhood's Pattern, passim.
environment parents might seek for their offspring. Modern children were much less likely, however, than their nineteenth-century counterparts to explore the process of encountering fear and mastering it. Children might avoid scary stories at their parents' request or assume with their heroes that danger could be faced without emotional distraction. They would not, as readers, be encouraged to think concretely about what fear was or how they would handle it.

The dominant tone of children's fiction, then, reflected important elements of the same approach toward childhood fears that was shaping some of the goals and concerns of many middle-class parents. The idea of avoiding fear, rather than learning or even welcoming its mastery, meshed with larger changes in emotional style and gender standards during the middle decades of the twentieth century. In their approach toward childhood fears, middle-class Americans increasingly assumed that unpleasantness should be evaded rather than utilized and that organizational strategies, rather than personal resourcefulness honed by emotional challenge, best served the individual in the social environment. Redefining the control of fear added significantly to the new directions in American personality goals toward mid-century.

Growing acceptance of the new approaches to childhood fear, evident in various facets of culture and in the ways many Americans were learning to talk about the emotion, had a number of further consequences that overflowed the bounds of family socialization and personality goals. Without pretending to offer a thorough exploration of an area where further research remains essential, we can briefly mention three outcomes that followed from the idea of modifying the way fear was handled. Adult institutions reconsidered uses and descriptions of fear, recreational outlets found ways to make fear sell, and the experience of fear itself seems to have shifted.

A variety of institutions took up the idea that fear should be avoided, not surmounted; here was the most straightforward extension of the shift in socialization standards. A new emotional culture, even when its interaction with direct emotional experience is incomplete, characteristically has important institutional consequences, if only because the kinds of thinking and expertise that help formulate standards also affect other public norms. The new aversion to fear had several institutional implications. By the 1930s, school authorities were urged to minimize fear-based motivations in favor of careful encouragements; even examinations were to be rethought. As one authority noted, "Many junior high schools, by eliminating home work and stressing day-by-day preparation at school, have done much to banish the fear of semester examinations." Obviously, fear and school could still go hand in hand for many children, at least at certain times. Attempts to avoid inducing fear did not suddenly or completely recast the school atmosphere. Over time, however, from the 1940s onward, schools did increasingly encourage positive reinforcements rather than fear-inducing punishments and comparisons, to the point that some educators came to believe that only kindness was worth conveying as a response to classroom work. Warnings about flunking tended to give way to careful acknowledgements of some quality or improvement in a student exercise—and, from the 1940s onward, a less frightening average range of grades moved in the same direction. Fear-informed settings of school days

past (which, in a different emotional culture, once functioned successfully, though doubtless at cost to some youngsters) seemed incomprehensible amid contemporary beliefs about the incapacitating qualities of the emotion.95

Gradually, the same emotional culture pressed toward modifying other fear-based rituals, supplemented by concerns about outright physical danger in certain hazing practices. How extensively the desire to banish needless fear operated in institutions like campus fraternities, which traditionally took some pride in testing self-control of fear, warrants further inquiry, for the process was gradual and uneven; but the general direction and its cultural base seem clear enough. Even in periods when fraternity popularity surged, as in the 1950s, societal pressure to modify initiation rituals continued.96

A less familiar limitation of conventional uses of fear took shape in the personnel field as the implications of the new emotional culture gained ground after World War II. Job interviews in the white-collar sector had long operated in a formal fashion, with abrupt questions designed to test an applicant's ability to handle anxiety. The idea was not to terrify but to use moderate fear as a probe of character. By the 1950s, a new breed of management experts insisted on a change in emotional tone. Interviewers should offer moderate friendliness, putting applicants at their ease—for fear, no longer a character test, merely distracted from useful qualities.97

Even the military used elements of the new emotional culture. In 1943, a manual for American officers still conveyed strong echoes of Victorianism:

Physical courage is little more than the ability to control the physical fear which all normal men have, and cowardice does not consist in being afraid but in giving way to fear. What, then, keeps the soldier from giving way to fear? The answer is simply—his desire to retain the good opinion of his friends and associates . . . his pride smothers his fear.

Even this statement relied more on the power of general beliefs about keeping fear at bay than on idealized individual bravery. Still more revealing was an infantry pamphlet for the Fifth Army in Italy: "Don't be too scared. Everybody is afraid, but you can learn to control your fear . . . Being too scared is harmful to you." While war made avoidance of fear impossible, there was no anachronistic interest in pleading for heroic courage.98 Wider assessments of military experience also changed; recognition of fear's potential for causing madness increased in World War II. Earlier wars had emphasized "shell shock"—more literally, physical


96 Kett, Rites of Passage, 176–77, 185–86, 260, deals with episodes of hazing and with twentieth-century changes. Attacks on fraternity practices were not, of course, new to the 1950s, but they demonstrated a split between youth and collegiate authorities over fear's appropriate role. Still, some connection between the new standards and the official concern about hazing is probable. On hazing traditions, see also Henry Sheldon, Student Life and Customs (New York, 1901); on postwar concerns, see Bill Bryan and Robert Schwartz, Challenges for Fraternities and Sororities (Alexandria, Va., 1983).


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concussion—which had allowed greater latitude for heroism in World War I descriptions. In contrast, euphemisms like “war neurosis” or “battle fatigue,” used from the 1940s onward, granted a constitutional inability to cope with fear as a darker, pathological side of the military experience.\(^9\) Changes of this sort in the military culture were incomplete, although they have gradually extended into further adjustments to reduce the needless generation of fear as part of combat training.

Other fields of combat, such as team sports, maintained elements of the older tradition of valuing the mastery of fear. Overall, however, the new approach to fear, emphasizing avoidance over confrontation, gained ground in adult life, as the implications of the new emotional culture spread from family advice and adultsponsored standards for children into such prosaic sites as job interviews, and as a growing range of experts chipped in. Here is a thread running through a number of mid-twentieth-century adjustments: the new standards spilled beyond child rearing, and adults themselves emerged from childhoods in which fear had been carefully manipulated.

The second outcome of the new approach to fear was more complex, providing another opportunity for additional analysis in subsequent research. Consumer fascination with encountering certain kinds of fear increased. It is true that the explicit logic of limiting exposure to fear moved in the opposite direction. As we have seen, it argued for careful monitoring of children’s play and enhanced Victorian concerns about scary stories. Steadily also, from the 1950s onward, the fright potential of Halloween ventures was curtailed. Growing hostility to vandalism joined with a desire to protect younger trick-or-treaters from unregulated scares. Community authorities in the 1950s began to regulate the hours and scope of Halloween activities.\(^1\) Yet the idea of restricting fear as part of healthy recreation did not gain an unchallenged victory. While fear receded as a source of moral challenge, certain kinds of fright actually grew in popularity, particularly for teen-agers and young adults, as vehicles of entertainment. Amusement park rides and horror films deliberately billed as terrifying became an increasingly important part of American popular entertainment from the early twentieth-century onward. Freak shows became less appropriate amusements—another development traced to the 1920s\(^2\)—but horror movies to some degree took their place.

Fear as perverse enjoyment, of course, was not new; it could even involve the challenge to master emotions. One source of the appeal of horror movies, from Frankenstein onward, might have been the vestiges of Victorian values that urged young people, particularly boys, to surmount scares. Certainly, there is no reason to ignore continuities from past popular culture even when translated into the media of the twentieth century. The contemporary entertainment forms, however, reflected the specifically twentieth-century standards for fear in several ways. First, this was not fare for younger middle-class children. Second, despite its brief intensity, the terror involved operated in ultimately bounded conditions; it appealed to people who perhaps wanted more emotional stimulus than they had been allowed in a controlled childhood—who wanted to demonstrate their maturity by their ability to set fear aside—but who knew that the environment was secure. Third, entertainment fear normally avoided a significant implication of moral

challenge: this was pure sensation, not an opportunity to build character. It was experienced passively, by people in the seats of movie houses or roller coaster rides.\textsuperscript{102} As such, it built on the experience of Americans who had been taught mainly to see fear as terror and who found escapist enjoyment in encountering the emotion, childhood safely past, in reassuringly fictional or staged settings. The connection, reflected in the new super-heroes as well, with their nerves of steel, sprang from a socialization that did not stress inner controls over fear and that therefore gave new support to escapist fantasies both of fearlessness and of recreational terror. On these terms, the new standards developed for fear in childhood may have had a real, if hardly straightforward, impact in shaping the ways in which fear could be sold as part of the consumer culture.

Finally, the new standards of fear might affect individuals' responses when experienced outside a recreational setting; for, as a rule, altered perceptions color actual emotional reactions to some degree. Americans taught to avoid fear or to expect supportive sympathy when fear intruded might well have adult encounters with the emotion somewhat different from those of their nineteenth-century counterparts. Distinctions could be heightened by aspects of adult culture that maintained concern. Growing attention to the heart as a source of health risks, for example, could reinforce adult sense that fear was dangerous.\textsuperscript{103} It became more respectable, in the twentieth century, to admit to phobias, in contrast to Victorian tendencies to mask them under more general hysterical symptoms.\textsuperscript{104}

Were there additional connections, not only in the emotional vocabulary of many middle-class people but also in wider responses to threat? The answers, inherently difficult, await bold research, but some tantalizing possibilities exist. Was there some relationship between the relatively quick American dismissal of anxieties about atomic warfare, including the even more revealing impulse to dig private shelters during the 1950s, and the way fear was encountered in middle-class socialization?\textsuperscript{105} Whatever the verdict on the sweeping outcomes of successive twentieth-century reevaluations of childhood fears, there is little question that the cultural position of fear did shift and would doubtless shift again, at some point after the 1950s. Parents sought to master new lessons, while many children learned a different vocabulary and a different idea of moral challenge; Victorian standards yielded to twentieth-century concerns. A number of institutions and media responded to the change, while acceptable public evaluations of fear shifted to some extent and the use of fearfulness to measure gender differences diminished. Standards applied to fear had loomed large in the Victorian emotional lexicon, and their reassessment played a central role in the creation of a different emotional culture for the middle decades of the twentieth century.

\textsuperscript{102} This point relates to other judgments about the experience of movie audiences: see Lary May, \textit{Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry} (New York, 1980); and, for Europe, Charles Rearick, "Song and Society in Turn-of-the-Century France," \textit{Journal of Social History}, 22 (1988): 59-83. The adjustment obviously requires comparison with nineteenth-century recreational experiences.

\textsuperscript{103} For discussion of how emotional control standards link to health norms and their moralistic quality in twentieth-century experience, see Arlie Russell Hochschild, \textit{The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling} (Berkeley, Calif., 1983); for a more theoretical statement, see John W. M. Whiting and I. L. Child, \textit{Child Training and Personality} (New York, 1953).


\textsuperscript{105} Paul Boyer, \textit{By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age} (New York, 1986).