

Childhood

Flanders, Judith. *Inside the Victorian Home: A Portrait of Domestic Life in Victorian England*. W.W. Norton, 2003.

Moral law was to many synonymous with religious law. It enshrined the duty of obedience owed to God. The head of the family derived his authority from God; the wife of the head derived hers from the head; and so on. Any disobedience subverted this notion of order. Therefore

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disobedience was, of itself, subversive, and it was the idea of rebellion that needed to be punished, not whatever the act of disobedience itself was. Laura Forster, a clergyman's daughter (and later the aunt of E. M. Forster), noted that "we were expected to be obedient without any reason being given," but she tried to give extenuating circumstances: "We shared our mother's confidence as soon as we were of a suitable age, and I think this helped to give us the conviction that we all had that nothing was forbidden us capriciously, and that some day we should know, if we did not understand at the time, why this or that was forbidden. "

Most parents felt that discipline could not begin too early. A mother's or nurse's refusal to feed her infant except at stated hours taught the infant the benefits of "order and punctuality. " Having their crying ignored taught babies self-restraint; Mrs. Warren said that if a child cried for something, on principle it should never be given-- "Even a babe of three months, when I held up my finger and put on a grave look, knew that such was the language of reproof." Instead of beatings, which children earlier in the century might have routinely expected, administered by father, mother, or teachers, depending on family circumstances, children were now told of the disappointment they caused to their parents and to God. Mrs. Warren suggested that children who were disobedient should be told they were breaking the Fifth Commandment, by not honoring their fathers and mothers; Marion Jane Bradley, wife of a master at Rugby School, told her son that "God was looking at him with great sorrow and saying 'that little boy has been in a wicked passion, he cannot come up and live with me unless he is good.'"

Corporal punishment, although lessened in force and frequency, vanished only slowly over the next hundred years. When Marion Jane Bradley's son Arthur (nicknamed Wa) was three, she wrote: "He was not good yesterday and surprised me by saying, 'Wa was naughty in London Town and Papa and Mama did whip Wa very hard'-- I did not believe he could have remembered anything so long ago [three months before]. This whipping certainly had its effect. It was the first and last. Long and obstinate struggle who was to be the master." Louise

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Creighton, who said that in her own childhood she was never beaten but put in a dark cupboard that induced only boredom, punished her own children in a way that she acknowledged "may be considered brutal by some people. Cuthbert was a very mischievous boy, & used to play with fire & cut things with knives, so when he played with fire I held his finger on the bar of the grate for a minute that he might feel how fire burnt, & when he cut woodwork with his knife I gave his fingers a little cut." Despite what might today be described as savagery, she thought it important to end with "I never

whipt any child." What seemed harsh changed over time. A guide to the sickroom advised, almost in passing, that if a child refused medicine, "at once fasten the child's hand behind him, throw him on his back, pinch his nose to force his mouth open, and ... pour [the liquid] down his throat with a medicine spoon." This it called acting with "firmness."

It was still, however, a different world from the one in which Mr. Pontifex had ruled. Children were moving to the center of their parents' lives. This was displayed in graphic form over the century by the pattern books that furniture makers and shops produced to advertise their wares. In the early part of the nineteenth century there was no furniture made specifically for children; then in 1833 Loudon's *Encyclopaedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa Architecture* (which, despite its name, was a very metropolitan, bourgeois publication) had a short section for children's furniture, most of it miniaturized versions of adult objects. By the end of the century every shop and every catalogue had a full range of furniture designed specially for children's needs.

Different families adapted to this new ethos more or less quickly and comfortably; how quickly and comfortably was based on character and on personal and social background. Many remained convinced that the marital relationship was the primary one. Louise Creighton reported that Walter Pater's sister had once said to her about the novelist Mrs. Humphry Ward and her husband that "she always preferred Mary [Ward]'s company when Humphry was present, because if he was absent Mary was always wondering where he could be; but she preferred me without Max, for when he was there I was so occupied with him & with what he was saying that I was no use to anyone else

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... I think this was true all my life." She did not make the connection with her own mother's behavior in her childhood: when Mr. von Glehn, Louise's father, was due back from London in the evenings, "my mother always grew expectant some time before his train arrived & was very fidgety & anxious." Her husband was her focus, as it had been her mother's, and "only the fact that I nursed [my children] kept me from going about much, and this ... did prevent me sharing many of Max's expeditions & walks which was a very real deprivation."

Advice books, fiction, and reality converge here. Mrs. Warren's model housewife always made her children understand that when their father came home from work he was to be considered first in all things; otherwise she felt it was entirely to be expected if he became "cold and indifferent." Mrs. Panton believed children should have rooms where they do not "interfer[e] unduly with the comfort of the heads of the establishment." Many novels touched on the same theme. In George Gissing's *New Grub Street* the failed novelist Edwin Reardon looks back on his collapsing marriage: "Their evenings together had never been the same since the birth of the child ... The little boy had come

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between him and his mother, as must always be the case in poor homes." His view is that marriages prosper not because they become child-centered but because the family can afford servants to remove the children from the adult sphere.

Mrs. Henry Wood, in *East Lynne*, provided the clearest apologia for this adult-centered view. Mr. Carlyle's second wife expounds her views to her predecessor, Lady Isabel (who is for complex plot reasons currently disguised as a French governess, Mme Vine). The two women agree on this point, and as the reader has spent hundreds of pages learning to sympathize with Lady Isabel it is

hard to imagine that her concurrence with Mrs. Carlyle does not imply that this was also Mrs. Henry Wood's view. It is worth quoting at length, for the insight it gives into the adult-centered worldview. Mrs. Carlyle says:

I never was fond of being troubled with children ... I hold an opinion, Madame Vine, that too many mothers pursue a mistaken system in the management of their family. There are some, we know, who, lost in the pleasures of the world, in frivolity, wholly neglect them: of those I do not speak; nothing can be more thoughtless, more reprehensible, but there are others who err on the opposite side. They are never happy but when with their children; they must be in the nursery; or, the children in the drawing-room. They wash them, dress them, feed them; rendering themselves slaves ... [Such a mother] has no leisure, no spirits for any higher training: and as they grow old she loses her authority ... The discipline of that house soon becomes broken. The children run wild; the husband is sick of it, and seeks peace and solace elsewhere ... I consider it a most mistaken and pernicious system ...

Now, what I trust I shall never give up to another, will be the training of my children ... Let the offices, properly belonging to a nurse, be performed by the nurse ... Let her have the *trouble* of the children, their noise, their romping; in short, let the nursery be her place and the children's place. But I hope I shall never fail to gather my children round me daily, at stated periods, for higher

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purposes: to instil into them Christian and moral duties; to strive to teach them how best to fulfil life's obligations. *This* is a mother's task.

Or, as the novelist Mrs. Gaskell had the governess in Ruth say more succinctly to the children in her care, "All that your papa wants always, is that you are quiet and out of the way." Mothers as well as fathers wanted quiet, but for women it was important that the morality of self-restraint be stressed.

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