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Home-Along America: Mary Eberstadt Speaks Up for Kids

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"Of all the explosive subjects in America today," Eberstadt argues, "none is as cordoned off, as surrounded by rhetorical land mines, as the question of whether and just how much children need their parents—especially their mothers. In an age littered with discarded taboos, this one in particular remains virtually untouched."

Untouched, that is, until Mary Eberstadt came along with her research and persuasive argument. Home-Along America is a book with a mission and a message. As Mary Eberstadt explains, "It strives to shed light on one of the fundamental changes of our time: the ongoing, massive, and historically unprecedented experiment in family-child separation in which the United States and most other advanced societies are now engaged."

Remainder tables are now littered with books taking various sides in the debates over daycare, divorce, working mothers, and related points of controversy. Though these books enjoy something like a half-life through footnotes and continuing references, most have passed into the world of dated irrelevance. It's likely to be a long time before Home-Along America meets that same fate. Why? Because Mary Eberstadt focuses precisely on children themselves. Her book identifies divorce (with its result of absent fathers) and working mothers (with the result of children home alone) as the major culprits behind the pathologies harming America's children. She really isn't concerned about the parents themselves; instead, she looks specifically and strategically at the impact of these social trends on children.

As Eberstadt explains, advanced economies have produced massive social changes that impact the lives of children—and that impact can be measured in childhood sickness, rising rates of diagnosed mental illnesses, the skyrocketing use of psychotropic drugs, childhood violence, and even the epidemic of childhood obesity. Nevertheless, even as these social indicators have tracked the tragic impact of these experiments on the lives of children, many of these questions have been put off-limits to public discussion. Feminists, along with other ideologically driven interest groups, insist that the focus should be on the health and happiness of the parents—especially women. Eberstadt rejects this focus on the adults. "Whether celebratory or critical, left wing or right wing, fictitious or factual, most of the literature devoted so far to this great social experiment has one critical common denominator: It is all about the adult side, and particularly the female adult side, of the absent-parent home."

Eberstadt, Research Fellow at the Hoover Institution, lives in Washington, D.C., with her husband and four children. She brings personal experience as a mother to this project, and adds to that a wealth of academic and research experience. Readers of Policy Review, the excellent journal now published by the Hoover Institution, have watched Home-Along America emerge in early form as a series of articles and essays published there. In a series of fascinating chapters, Eberstadt walks the reader through a litany of problems, illnesses, and pathologies that affect so many of today's children.

She blames two major trends as the root causes of most of these problems. In the first place, fathers have been removed from the households through easy divorce, unwed motherhood, and sexual promiscuity. The absence of the father is the single most important explanatory factor behind many of the problems now affecting America's youth, ranging from childhood sexual abuse to out-of-control boys and sexual promiscuity among girls. The second factor Eberstadt bravely addresses is the absence of mothers from the home and the fact that so many children spend so much time without any parent present in the household. This absence leads to any number of ills, injuries, and problems, and many of these are directly associated with the institutionalization of children in daycare and other forms of alternative parenting.

According to Eberstadt, taking a child-level look at daycare reveals epidemics of ear infections and other illnesses, due to the undeniable fact that daycare centers function as "germ factories." Additionally, institutionalized childcare is also associated with children becoming more belligerent and aggressive. While the advocates of childcare defend all this in terms of "early socialization," the fact is that no child would willingly choose daycare over care by Mom in the home.

In a helpful move likely to change the terms of our debate over daycare and divorce, Eberstadt coins a new word for the ideology that suggests children can be raised in institutionalized settings just as productively, wholesomely, and healthfully as in the home with parents. She identifies those making such arguments as "separationists," some of whom go on to argue that it is actually better for children to be "socialized" in institutional settings and removed from the influence of parents—especially the mother. Eberstadt cites family scholar Allan Carlson, who has traced this anti-motherhood ideology all the way back to Plato and his utopian vision of children being taken away from their mothers and raised by the community. The result is hardly utopian.

Eberstadt goes on to look at the phenomenon of "feral behavior" in children, with the most extreme forms of violence now becoming routine in some settings. Many bureaucrats and experts choose to redefine the problem in ways that ignore the obvious, Eberstadt claims. Producing reports that indicate periodic downturns in the most extreme forms of violence—such as the Columbine massacre in Colorado—these "experts" try to argue that the situation of America's children is improving. As Eberstadt notes, "When Columbine is your moral yardstick, there is a lot you won't be getting to measure."

Childhood obesity is a problem now receiving a fair amount of attention in the nation's press and is thus now a concern for those making public policy. Eberstadt traces this to the fact that, without a parent in the home, children are more likely to eat without restriction, to be rewarded with food rather than with parental presence, and to sit in front of the television, eating the worst kind of foods in the worst way possible.

As she explains, "People generally eat more when sitting in front of the television than they do when sitting at a table, and if they have no one to talk to, they also eat faster. Moreover, because metabolism slows to almost sleeplike levels after enough time in front of the tube, the food taken in is metabolized more slowly—hence, in a more fat-friendly way—than it would be otherwise."

Childhood obesity is also tied to a lack of exercise, the fact that children—especially latch-key children—tend to play inside the home rather than going outdoors, and to the fact that fewer children are breast-fed for at least the first year of life.

In a fascinating chapter, Eberstadt turns to "the mental health catastrophe" that has produced, not only worrying social indicators, but an entire industry of psychotropic drugs, psychological and psychiatric professionals, and a myriad of new illnesses and syndromes.

By any measure, children and teenagers are now diagnosed with mental health problems at rates unprecedented in human history. Much of this is due to the pervasive influence of the therapeutic worldview throughout the society, but the impact of this worldview on children is especially pernicious. At the same time, Eberstadt argues that many children are, in fact, more troubled, depressed, and anxious than ever before. She traces the rise and imperialistic march of newly-identified disorders such as ADD and ADHD, noting that the diagnosis for these problems remains extremely subjective. She moves on to consider the tremendous increase in children diagnosed with forms of autism, explaining that autism is no longer a specific disease identified by unmistakable criteria, but is now just one disorder identified in a continuum known as "PDDs" or "pervasive developmental disorders." While many of these children exhibit undeniable symptoms, and some children are unquestionably troubled by severe mental illness, others are simply lumped into a category of one disorder or another and prescribed psychotropic drugs.

The production of just one drug—Ritalin—increased more than 700 percent between 1990 and 2000, she reports. Ritalin, we should note, is a drug that is so chemically similar to cocaine that as one journalist explained, “it takes a chemist to tell the difference.” In a section that will surprise many readers—this reader included—Eberstadt reports that America’s armed services will not allow the appointment, enlistment, or induction of applicants who have taken psychotropic drugs during their teenage years. In other words, we are drugging an entire generation of young people who will be disqualified for service in the armed forces. That ought to tell us something.

In successive chapters, Eberstadt moves through other problems and pathologies that affect America’s children, ranging from the screaming angst of teenage music to the epidemic of teenage sexual promiscuity. In the end, she comes to a simple conclusion: “It would be better for both children and adults if more American parents were with their children more of the time.” That short sentence, clear and irrefutable, should launch a social revolution.

Mary Eberstadt has performed a great public service in writing *Home-Along America*, and this book should be read by every concerned parent, pastor, and policy maker.

While she notes that America’s adults are doing better than ever before in so many ways, Mary Eberstadt honestly reports that “life is not better for many American children, no matter how many extra Game Boys they have, no matter how much more pocket money they may have for the vending machines, and no matter how nice it is that Dad’s new wife gave them their own weekend bedroom in his new place. In fact, for a significant number of today’s kids, life is worse in important ways than it was for their parents. And somewhere inside, many of us adults know it.” Now—what are we going to do with that knowledge?

