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Parents, Obey Your Children?

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Literary critic Lionel Trilling once referred to “the dark and bloody crossroads where literature and politics meet.” In reality, almost all literature is political in some sense. Oddly enough, the most explicitly subversive literature is often presented to the very youngest among us — our children. Far too many parents seem not to notice.

In “[The Defiant Ones](#),” a recent essay published in the *New Yorker*, Daniel Zalewski argues that picture books for children now reflect a world turned upside down in terms of the relationship between parent and child. As he explains, in the newest picture books for children, the kids are solidly in charge.

In this sense, the books we read to our children reflect the cultural values of our age. Inescapably, these narratives for children reveal far more than a storyline. Indeed, the books tell us more than we may want to know about the tenor of our times.

And Zalewski explains:

Like the novel or the sitcom, the picture book records shifts in domestic life: newspaper-burrowing fathers have been replaced by eager, if bumbling, diaper-changers. Similarly, the stern disciplinarians of the past—in Robert McCloskey books, parents instruct children not to cry—have largely vanished. The parents in today’s stories suffer the same diminution in authority felt by the parents reading them aloud (an hour past bedtime). The typical adult in a contemporary picture book is harried and befuddled, scurrying to fulfill a child’s wishes and then hesitantly drawing the line.

Zalewski’s insight into the revelatory character of books for children is truly important. As he knows, today’s parents have indeed experienced a “diminution in authority” that is unprecedented in human history. Increasingly, it is children who have the upper hand in the power equation. Parents, who have been drinking deeply from the wells of contemporary secular parenting advice, have largely become passive facilitators in the lives of their children.

As Zalewski argues, today’s young parents “learn that there are many things they must never do to their willful young child: spank, scold, bestow frequent praise, criticize, plead, withhold affection, take away toys, ‘model’ angry emotions, intimidate, bargain, nag.” In other words, “nearly all forms of discipline appear morally suspect.”

Modern “experts” like Alfie Kohn now go so far as to argue that rewarding children for good behavior is virtually as injurious to the child as punishing children for negative behavior. Arguing against what he calls “conditional parenting,” Kohn came out against everything from the “time out” to positive reinforcement. Writing recently in *The New York Times*, Kohn asserted:

Conditional parenting isn’t limited to old-school authoritarians. Some people who wouldn’t dream of spanking choose instead to discipline their young children by forcibly isolating them, a tactic we prefer to call “time out.” Conversely, “positive reinforcement” teaches children that they are loved, and lovable, only when they do whatever we decide is a “good job.”

Today's parents, advised by the likes of Alfie Kohn, are themselves the children and grandchildren of a generation raised by parents who abandoned traditional parenting for the advice of Dr. Benjamin Spock. The war against parental authority gained momentum throughout the 20th century. Now, today's children are often virtually undisciplined — their parents having abandoned the central role of disciplinarian due to distraction, ideological intimidation, cultural pressure, or sheer confusion.

In his essay, Zalewski reviewed some of the most popular of the picture books released in recent years. In these books, “the default temperament of the child is bratty.” Indeed, the brattiness of the children depicted in these books is often “so zesty and creative that the behavioral transgressions take on the quality of art.” Parents are presented as frustrated, bewildered, and concerned — but clearly not in charge.

It was not always so. As Zalewski observes, “The parents in picture books used to be tougher.” Parents used to set the rules, and children were expected to obey. Disobedient children were corrected and (gasp!) even punished. The new literature for children presents a world in which parents are more likely to obey their children.

Indeed, in today's world “nearly all forms of discipline appear morally suspect.” Do parents have any clue that it is the *lack* of discipline that is far more likely to harm a child?

Today's Christian parents must push hard against the prevailing secular wisdom if they are to be faithful. The Bible makes clear (and simple observation affirms) that children desperately need discipline from their parents. Furthermore, the Bible reveals that the faithful and wise parent disciplines, teaches, corrects, chastens, rewards, and punishes the child as a demonstration of true love and parental responsibility.

Furthermore, the Bible straightforwardly presents a model of the family in which the parents possess an authority over their children that is nonnegotiable and essential for the health and happiness of the entire family. Indeed, the faithful parent is the one who rightly exercises and fulfills that authority. In our current cultural context, there are few collisions more direct and determinative than that between the secular and biblical conceptions of the role of parents.

Once again, we are reminded that books matter. In this case, Daniel Zalewski's essay reminds us that books intended for the very youngest matter very much. The picture books we put in front of our children help frame their expectation and understanding of their place in life and in the family. Today's parents must look carefully at the books they put before the eyes of their children. Some of the most subversive literature in the land is designed to put children — and not parents — firmly in charge.

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