

Free Play versus Structured Childhood: A Content Analysis on Childrearing Practices in *Parents Magazine*



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Senior Comprehensive Research Project

Background

- Research Question:
 - How does the media portray parenting in popular parenting magazines?
 - What childrearing practice is discussed most within the content of *Parents* magazine?
 - How has this changed over time?

Thesis

- This paper argues that advice in *Parents* emphasizes particular parenting styles, specifically concerted cultivation and natural growth, based on the historical era during which the articles were written. Overall, this study finds that *Parents* is directed toward a specific audience that consists of white, middle-class parents and that target audience has remained constant regardless of era.

Theory

- Social Construction Theory
 - *The Social Construction of Reality* (Berger & Luckmann, 1966)
 - *Encoding and Decoding Model of Communication* (Hall, 1980)

Literature Review

- Concerted Cultivation and Natural Growth
 - Lareau (2002, 2003)
 - Redford et. al (2009)
 - Chin and Phillips (2004)
- Messages the Media Conveys about Parenting
 - Francis-Connolly (2013)
 - Luke (1994)
 - Tsal and Shumow (2011)
 - Johnson and Swanson (2003)
 - Kakinuma (1993)
 - Rutherford (2009, 2011)
 - Carlson & Crase (1983)
 - Hoffman (2009)

Methodology

- Content Analysis
- Focuses on four articles from each of the following years: 1930, 1950, 1970, 2010. Four issues per year were analyzed in order to find each article: January, April, July, October
 - n=16 total articles
- Semi-open coding
 - pre-constructed coding sheet

Race of People in Images

	Cover Images			Article Images		
Year	White	Black	Other	White	Black	Other
1930	17	0	0	10	0	0
1950	20	0	0	15	0	0
1970	13	1	0	7	0	0
2010	13	1	1	3	1	0
Total	63 (95.5%)	2 (3.0%)	1 (1.5%)	35 (97.2%)	1 (2.8%)	0 (0%)

On Raising Children From Crib To College

August 1970 50c

PARENTS'

MAGAZINE & BETTER FAMILY LIVING

More than 2,700,000 Circulation

Helping Children
Cope with Sorrow

How to Be a
Successful
Parent

Summer Fun
with Baby



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Parenting Styles Expressed

Year	Natural Growth	Concerted Cultivation	Total
1930	2 (12.5%)	2 (12.5%)	4 (25%)
1950	3 (18.75%)	1 (6.25%)	4 (25%)
1970	4 (25%)	0 (0%)	4 (25%)
2010	1 (6.25%)	3 (18.75%)	4 (25%)
Total	10 (62.5%)	6 (37.5%)	16 (100%)

Descriptions of Natural Growth

Years	1930	1950	1970	2010	Total
Independence	1	3	3	0	7 (29.3%)
Free Play	0	2	3	1	6 (25.0%)
Freedom	2	1	2	0	5 (20.8%)
Unsupervised	0	1	1	0	2 (8.3%)
Responsibility	0	1	1	0	2 (8.3%)
Self-Directed	0	1	1	0	2 (8.3%)
Total	3 (12.5%)	9 (37.5%)	11 (45.8%)	1 (4.2%)	24 (100%)

Natural Growth

“Too many club meetings and planned activities can rob a youngster of the quiet time he needs for creative play and self discovery.” (1970)

“Adolescents need freedom to explore and learn about themselves and other people. Wise parents know when to keep hands off.” (1950)

Descriptions of Concerted Cultivation

Years	1930	1950	1970	2010	Total
Parent-Assisted	1	1	0	3	5 (35.8%)
Adult Surveillance	1	0	0	2	3 (21.4%)
Planned	0	1	0	2	3 (21.4%)
Challenging Authority	2	0	0	2	2 (14.3%)
Authoritative	1	0	0	0	1 (7.1%)
Total	5 (35.7%)	2 (14.3%)	0 (0%)	7 (50.0%)	14 (100%)

Concerted Cultivation

“A parent and child usually learn together – so you not only have to attend your kids lessons, you’ll be expected to participate as well.” (2010)

“Your job is to help her develop strategies for expressing and dealing with this powerful emotion.” (2010)

Discussion

- Reflection of American cultural and lifestyle trends during the historical period the articles were written in
- What has caused the shift in childrearing practices discussed in the media?
- “The Culture of Fear” Phenomenon