Doubting Mom and Dad

By Jon Kyl

The declining well-being of America's children has left us asking ourselves, in what by now is a kind of shorthand: What has gone wrong with "the culture"? Dana Mack's answer is contained in the title of her excellent book, "The Assault on Parenthood" (Simon & Schuster, 368 pages, $25). In the schools, in the Child Protective Services bureaus and in the courts there prevails what she calls a "cult of professional expertise" that tells parents in ways both subtle and overt that they are not fit to raise their own kids. The average parent today feels pretty intimidated by the educators, counselors, therapists and state functionaries whom Ms. Mack dubs the "child-rearing professionals."

The way these professionals see it, they have had to take over because children must be saved from the evils of the family. Their rescue efforts, as this book shows, have left too many children ill-educated, unsettled in their values and hardly less likely to be abused by those parents who truly are unfit. Parents too often describe themselves nowadays using words like "inadequate" and "helpless." The "self-esteem" of children has been pumped up artificially and to no laudable effect; that of parents has been flattened.

Bookshelf

"The Assault on Parenthood"
By Dana Mack

Ms. Mack interviewed many discouraged parents around the country. A mother in Texas, falsely accused by one of her neighbors of physically abusing her son, told the author: "You're never able to be the same with your kids after you go through an investigation. You're afraid. I've become less able to discipline my kids." Surveying the child-welfare literature, Ms. Mack found that 700,000 families a year are falsely reported to the authorities for child abuse. Child welfare bureaucrats chase so many frivolous cases that they haven't time to solve the real ones. As Ms. Mack explains, congressional legislation created this situation. With the best of intentions, the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974 put in place a deadly combination: legal immunity for false reports of child abuse and legal penalties for not reporting a case.

The argument that the problems of America's children cry out for more public spending is hard to sustain in the face of Ms. Mack's analysis. The Child Protective Services failures are caused not by underfunding, she asserts, but by overreporting. Similarly, in education, per-pupil expenditures soar, but what the money is spent on is often "education lite" or worse.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 was adopted with, once again, a noble goal—that of combating discrimination. Part of this act increased aid for minority children in the public schools. But, importantly, other provisions financed the partnership of educators and social-service providers that has steadily driven education off track. How much better would our students' unimpressive achievement scores be, she prompts us to wonder, if the school curriculum had not been colonized by the therapeutic ethic? Today, teaching the three R's takes a back seat to involving kids in "life skills" rap sessions, support groups and other activities encouraging them to correct the "narrow" views they picked up from their parents at home. One math program coordinator in Massachusetts is quoted as saying that traditional arithmetic is unfair because it imposes a "right" and a "wrong" answer, which in turn foists a "white, Western" ethos on an increasingly multicultural student population.

Child-rearing professionals have prescribed that the nuclear family undergo what Ms. Mack calls a "parentectomy." The federal courts have helped to wield the scalpel by protecting the schools from local accountability. The notion of educators being *in loco parentis* did not survive the anti-authority upheavals of the 1960s. Schools are now seen as being allied with the state rather than with the family, and when teachers and administrators circumvent parents—whether by targeting certain students for psychological counseling or by instituting graphic and panderingly hip "sex ed"—the courts tend to find in favor of the state. Ms. Mack nicely shows how the prevailing interpretation of the First Amendment enters in: If it is the state that should raise children, upholders of this doctrine are determined that it be a secularist state that vacuums the public square clean of any references to religion, meanwhile protecting in the name of free speech the raunchiest excesses of popular culture.

Is anyone resisting "parentectomy"? Indeed, the growing number of parents who educate their children at home, or who support school choice or other reforms, are finally organizing politically—though not, Ms. Mack is quick to point out, in alignment with one political party. These Americans want pro-family policies like per-child tax credits, flex-time labor laws and education vouchers, and they don't care who delivers them.

While she titles her final section on parent activism "The Familist Counterculture," the author is quite balanced. She is no advocate of a militia movement for moms. She wisely cautions that disaffection with American institutions endangers our cohesiveness as a society. The new familists are making inroads in public policy that could eventually bring us together again—if elected officials listen, and if the hubris of the "child-rearing professionals" is exposed.

Sen. Kyl (R., Ariz.) serves on the Judiciary Committee.

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