

# CULTURE, *et cetera*

## Obeying takes back seat to autonomy

### Parents teach kids to question authority figures

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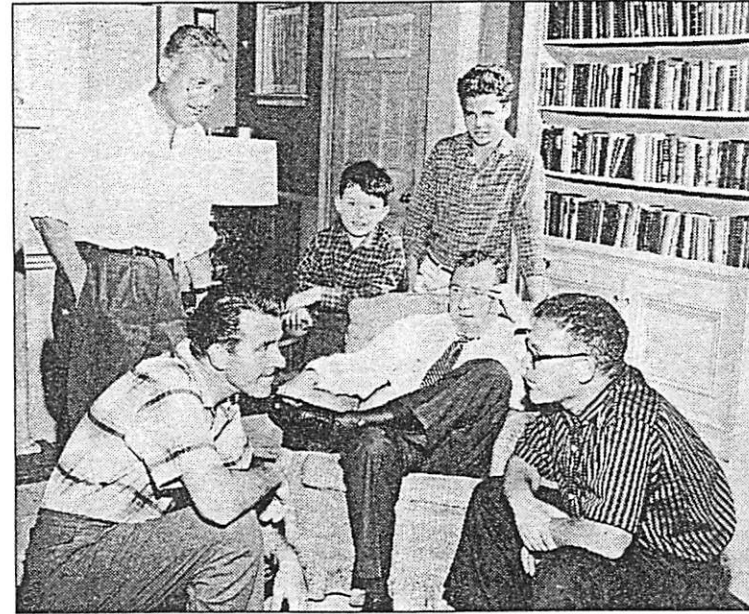
**S**o your kids don't mind you? And you think you're alone? Welcome to America. A University of Michigan researcher has found that of the five qualities parents value most in their children, "to obey" has taken a big tumble since the Beaver Cleaver years.

Parents have always ranked "to think for oneself" as the value or skill that will best prepare their children for life. But in the late 1950s, when most moms stayed home and fathers supposedly knew best, "to obey" was a close second, followed by "helping others" and "working hard." Meanwhile, that children "be well-liked or popular" consistently has ranked last.

Today's parents, however — who were weaned on social revolution and generated profound demographic shifts — rank "working hard" and "helping others" as more important than "obeying." The changes reflect a growing emphasis by parents on helping children to become independent and autonomous, says Duane F. Alwin, the Michigan professor of sociology who compiled the study results.

"People are willing to question authority, to not necessarily believe that the parental generation is right or the church is right or some institutional authority is right," says Mr. Alwin, who has studied changes in parental attitudes for more than a decade. "I think we're teaching our children that, and I think that's what these responses show."

Social researchers have traced parental values in the United States since the 1920s, when sociologists Helen and Robert Lynd surveyed nearly 140 mothers in Muncie, Ind., about their child-rearing practices. Those mothers in the so-called "Middletown"



Universal Studios

Parents put less emphasis on the value of obedience today than they did in the days of "Leave It to Beaver" — and many would say it shows.

study preferred traits such as "loyalty to the church" and "strict obedience."

As in the language of marriage vows, "to obey" held sway for several decades hence. But by the early 1970s, it had slipped to third behind "thinking for oneself" and "helping others," according to parents' responses in the Detroit Area Study, a regional survey first undertaken in 1958 and repeated in 1971 and 1988. By 1988, "to obey" had dropped to fourth.

By comparing the Detroit study with the national General Social Survey, conducted annually since 1972 to monitor social trends, Mr. Alwin saw those same attitudes reflected on a national scale. The GSS posed the same child-rearing question from 1986 through 1991, and each year, "to obey" ranked fourth, as it had in the Detroit samples.

The changing preference for children's autonomy is consistent, Mr. Alwin believes, with major economic and demographic shifts over the last 40 years: smaller families, higher divorce rates, more women working outside the home and declines in church attendance.

The shorthand? Today's kids

grow up faster.

Other professionals who study and work with families say they were not surprised by Mr. Alwin's findings, particularly in the context of accelerated technological and social change.

"The whole society is moving so fast, and I think technology has a lot to do with the pace at which people have to live now. Being able to master [the changes] is uppermost in parents' minds, rather than [children] being obedient," says Bernice Weissbourd, founder and president of Family Focus Inc., a Chicago-based organization of family-support programs.

But Ms. Weissbourd believes that casual readers of the surveys should not assume that a declining preference for obedience means that parents don't want their children to behave — or, to use the politically correct language of preschool playgrounds — to "co-operate."

"A child can be encouraged to be an independent thinker and at the same time know there are rules to follow," she says. "A child who doesn't have that balance, for whom anything goes, is really in trouble."

Kristi Hamrick, a spokeswoman for the Family Research Council, a conservative, self-described "pro-family" organization based in Washington, says it is understandable that younger parents are more skeptical of authority, especially considering well-publicized cases of child molestations among teachers, priests and other authority figures that they themselves were taught to trust blindly.

"As a straight-up statement — to obey — we don't trust people like we used to," Ms. Hamrick says.

She also found it heartening that parents emphasized "hard work" as a way to success. They do so, she insists, against prevailing cultural norms.

"In so many ways, the messages of our culture have diminished the value of hard work," she says. "This is the culture where some slovenly rock star who can barely put two notes together makes millions of dollars by writing a song calling for the murder of a particular group of people that he or she hates."

Still, some child-development experts wonder if our emphasis on self-reliance and independence goes too far, if we expect our children to be adults before they're ready.

Children are incredibly stressed, says Eugene Roehlke-partain, director of communication and education for the Search Institute in Minneapolis, a non-profit research organization specializing in children and youth. Pushing them too far too early can sometimes result in a litany of troubles in adolescence: drug or alcohol abuse, declining performance, teen pregnancy and other forms of juvenile delinquency.

"Are we turning kids into the workaholics that we've become?" he asks.

"I think there's a lot of ambivalence about children in our culture," he adds. "Kids, they're priceless, but we as parents and a society are not necessarily prepared to meet that price, we're not as committed to children. We take care of children when it's convenient, and I think we're paying the price of that."