DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 099 140 PS 007 635

AUTHOR	Borstelmann, L. J.
TITLE	Dr. Locke and Dr. Spock: Continuity and Change in American Conceptions of Childrearing.
PUB DATE	7 Mar 74
NOTE	13p.; Paper presented at the Southeastern Regional Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, March 1974)
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS	*Childhood Needs; *Child Psychology; *Child Rearing; *Comparative Analysis; Discipline; *Educational History; Educational Philosophy; Humanism; Parent Attitudes; Parent Child Relationship; Play; Romanticism; Socialization
IDENTIFIERS	Locke (John); *Spock (Benjamin)

ABSTRACT

An analysis of the ideas of John Locke and Benjamin Spock examines two questions: (1) authors' popularity in their own lifetimes, and (2) congruence and change in American conceptions of child rearing over two centuries. Comparisons of Locke's "Some Thoughts Concerning Education" and Spock's "Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care" include discussion of childrearing goals and methods, parental authority, discipline, and the concept of play. The work of both men reflects the liberal middle class notions of their times: Locke through his shift from a Calvinistic to the Enlightenment conception of man, from the assumption of innate depravity to that of moral neutrality; and Spock, through his twentieth century blend of Enlightenment and Romantic conceptions, of biological and psychoanalytic Darwinism. (CS)

ED 099 140

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION
DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRO
EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM
[illegible]

SEP. 1 1 1974

Cheiron Society
Durham, N. H.
May 31, 1974

Dr. Locke and Dr. Spock:
Continuity and Change in American Conceptions of Childrearing*

L. J. Borstelmann
Duke University

Although the history of childhood is plagued by the paucity of documentary sources about actual childrearing practices and child behaviors, materials about conceptions of childrearing are abundantly available. Treatises on education of the child have been provided for parents by divines, physicians, educators and others throughout the span of American experience. Two such books of great popularity and enduring influence have been John Locke's Some Thoughts Concerning Education (1963) and Benjamin Spock's Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care (1946, 1957, 1968). The present analysis of these two volumes examines two questions: (1) their popularity in their times, and (2) congruence and divergence in their ideas about children, as indicative of stability and change in American conceptions over two centuries.

With such a prodigious leap, do I blithely by-pass many influential purveyors of childrearing counsel merely for the sake of a rhyming title? Do I boldly propose direct intellectual descent of the physician-philosopher to the philosophizing pediatrician? Neither case, I assure you. What intrigued me to make the present study was the long awareness of Spock as a pivotal symbol of sweeping swings in our recent conceptions about the child, and the more recent discovery on my part of Locke's ideas as both strikingly contemporary in many ways and as a landmark of significant change in child orientation of his own times.

---

*A revised version of a paper originally delivered to the southeastern regional meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development in Chapel Hill, N.C., March 7, 1974.

To view Locke's ideas about children in the context of his time, we must cast ourselves backward into the turbulent, yet exhilarating waters of seventeenth century English society. Locke was born 1632 into a west-of-England Puritan family in the decade preceding the political revolution of Parliament. His fifteen years at Oxford straddled the Royal Restoration period. The succeeding twenty years of his more public life as a member of Lord Ashley's London household were concluded with the political stabilization brought about by the assumption of the throne by William and Mary in 1688. Locke was an intimate of the small group of new scientists (Boyle, Sydenham, Newton, etc.) represented in the Royal Society. He was familiar with many continental intellectuals, both ideationally and personally. Although best known as a philosopher and political theorist, his most productive years were not as an academic, but as a civil servant, tutor, and consulting physician. His famous essays on human understanding and civil government, both published in 1690, rapidly became landmarks in the development of Western thought. Locke's Education, published three years after his better known treatises, may be misconstrued as peripheral to his major interests, as merely a series of letters written from abroad to an old friend, offering advice on raising his son. This work is not simply a manual for training the cognitive child, as much of the contents are devoted to the development of personal character.

Locke considered the quality and behavior of a man to be more essential than any particulars of knowledge. This very focus of his ideas about education was especially pertinent to the times. The educational needs of the emerging mercantile economy of England, a greatly increased demand for literacy and for knowledge relating to international affairs, were in conflict with the traditional classically-oriented education model. Many contemporary writers were critical of existing education and made recommendations similar to Locke's. But he was unique to the time in basing such proposals upon a careful philosophical analysis of human understanding and upon a comprehensive view of the human organism. He realized more fully than others before him that children were individuals with their own particular needs, abilities, and patterns of development. In reading Locke from today's perspective, one is struck by his perceptive awareness of the child's point of view. We might expect a certain degree of objectivity because of his life-long bachelor status, yet the evident empathy with the child suggests some continuing personal involvements with the young. Indeed, we find from his biographers (Jeffreys, Axtell) that he greatly loved children and assumed a guardian role with the offspring of all his friends. And at various periods he had more formal tutorial responsibilities, especially with Lord Ashley's family.

Locke's prudent, practical, sensible, insightful approach to childrearing suited the temper of the times in America as much as in England and France. Earle (1915) tells us that during the eighteenth century "the book" was in many New England libraries and among the scant volumes on single bookshelves. Also, abstracts and transpositions of his precepts were frequently found in almanacs, the most widely circulated of all publications save the Bible. His educational notions were favorably known to liberal representatives of the middle class. They welcomed his emphasis on the importance of a sound mind in a sound body, on wisdom in managing one's affairs, on the training of the senses rather than memory, and on the stressing of reason rather than authority.

Ending this brief tour into the embryonic stage of our republic, we climb back in our time machine and hurtle forward two centuries to the end of World War II and the arrival on the public scene of Dr. Benjamin Spock with initial publication of his book in 1946.

Ben Spock, the oldest of six children, is a child of this century, born 1903 in New Haven where his father was an attorney for the railroad. His mother was an old-line New Englander of staunch self-confidence and a no-nonsense approach to childrearing. She never needed her famous son's "opening dictum: 'Trust yourself. You know more than you think you do.' For she did trust herself, absolutely." (Bloom, p. 3) Ben became a boola-boola boy at Yale and went on to medical training in the late 1920's, a time when Milton Senn tells us that pediatrics had little interest in child behaviors. Spock became a father and began pediatric practice in New York City in the early 30's. He thereby came into professional and personal contact with many resident scholars of the new child development movement--Mead, McGraw, Frank, etc.--and became interested in psychoanalytic developmental concepts. During World War II he served as a navy medical officer and began to write 'the book.'

Spock's book is clearly indicative of his sensitive awareness of mothers' concerns and anxieties about development of their children, a somewhat unusual posture among pediatricians of the day, who were more likely to approach the child as a conglomeration of organ systems in need of repair and the mother as an extension of their prescriptive procedures. For informing mothers on behavioral development, Spock relied heavily on Gesell's ideas and data. He shares Gesell's basic assumption of an inherently positive growth force in man, Spock viewing the child as innately curious, rational, affectionate, self-regulating and resilient. But he also gives much attention to the adaptive, interpersonal learning of the child and mother. Thus, Spock sees the process of socialization as one of mutual accommodation, wherein desired learnings cannot simply be imposed by parental force. The basis for socialization is seen as the generally positive identification of the child with his basic caretakers, leading easily to such acquisitions as proper sex-role and the discipline of self-control through conscience. Here we see Spock as the public prophet of psychoanalytic childrearing, bringing Freud into the nursery. Although the literati had played with infantile sexuality in the parlor since the 20's, the prevailing mandates to mothers before Spock had been a melange of Gesellian norms as comparative benchmarks for child achievement and of Watsonian mandates for strict manipulation of the child. What Spock accomplished was to carry forth the Gesellian positive growth force conception, while signalling to mothers the switch from a rigorous, no-nonsense regime to a newer doctrine of parental warmth and permissiveness. Spock attributed to the child as built-in qualities those very attributes that mothers had been trying anxiously to insert into the child. So his basic message to mothers was to relax and enjoy the child, to follow their own intuitions, to "do their own thing."

Especially intriguing about Spock's preseentation of the child is his pervasive use of psychoanalytic concepts without either citing sources or using any of the linguistic jargon (Bach, 1974). Was he simply not aware of incorporation and translation of such doctrine, or did he deliberately choose to speak to mothers in common parlance without rousing the scarecrows of Freudian promiscuity? Clearly the latter rather than the former, perhaps because psychoanalytic theory is premised on a Calvinistic model of human nature, that man is innately selfish in his motivations (id), but controllable through the rational processes of others (super-ego) and himself (ego). Such a view of the human condition would have been quite familiar to Locke, the gentle Puritan, but was not compatible with the Gesell-Spock model of man, derived from Darwin and Rousseau, as an organism of inherently positive growth forces.

The immediate and continuing popularity of Spock's book may be attributed to a combination of effects--his practical, common-sense, simple language approach; the perceptive sensitivity to both mother and child with recognition of their mutuality of needs; the shift to an optimistic, child-centered perspective, as distinct from the anxiety evoking mother-centered focus of the previous era; the reassertion of the romantic conception of the child as inherently good, rather than innately neutral; and, the post-war explosion of the paperback book market. The timing of the book could not have been more apt. A whole generation of recent, immediate, and anticipated parents had been weaned by Holt, socialized (albeit uneasily) by Watson, and benchmarked by Gesell; they had been adolescents of the

Depression years and come of age as defenders of their national culture. Heirs to the economic and political anxieties of their elders, they eagerly sought a post-war world of both accomplishment and security. Subject to the successive demanding regimes of pediatricians, psychologists, and the military life, they valued freedom for both their own lives and for their children's. Yet they also valued expert counsel relating to their own affairs, offered as aids rather than demands. For such parental needs, Spock was and is your man.

A comparison of the ideas of Locke and Spock may provide us with some indication of stability and change over two centuries of American conceptions about children. Some direct parallels are immediately obvious in that both books were written by physicians as practical advice to parents, in plain language, for the accomplishment of immediate child management, as well as long-range training goals. As physicians, both were interested in a sound body as well as a sound mind, giving considerable attention to physical care.

When we turn to issues of childrearing goals and methods, we find both agreement and divergence. For Locke, the goals of educating the child were quite explicit--to socialize the child in terms of desired values and appropriate behaviors, yet always allowing sufficient freedom for each child to develop his unique potentials. His hierarchy of values consisted first and foremost of virtue, the tempering of desire and appetite by rational self-control. Next came wisdom, the managing of one's own affairs; then breeding, behaviors appropriate to one's life station. Last of all was learning, wherein he was more concerned with good habits of study and thinking, than with particular contents. By contrast, the goals for Spock are less clear, more implicit in his litany of innate potentials in the child--a curious, rational, affectionate, self-regulating, and resilient being.

Apparently differing views of the role of parental authority in the socialization process reflect their conceptions of human nature as men of their times. Locke's lifetime spanned the transition of English society from traditional allegiance to hierarchical authority to the emergence of an adherence to the consensual authority of peers. Thus, not surprisingly, Locke stressed early, absolute, parental control (but always to be exercised kindly and on rational premises), yielding to self-control as quickly as the child's own rational powers permitted, eventuating in a youth age comradeship of peers. By Spock's time the American collateral orientation, peers as the basic reference group in human affairs, had been long established. Lineal authority had become a tenuous, suspect power, though necessary within the bounds of certain proscribed tasks, such as work supervision or child care. Thus, for Spock parental authority is assumed but used tentatively, never to be forced, and based upon affection and instrumental competence rather than a priori status or privilege. Locke's conception of essentially neutral innate moral status necessitated the parental molding of proper character, based upon awe and respect of the parent engendered through early and absolute parental control. Spock's conception of inherent positive growth forces requires not imposed authority but rather the nurturance of parental guidance. Yet for both men the interactive influence of parent-child relations and the potency of parental molding are important.

Although starting from different premises about innate human nature and thus parental authority, their practical applications in terms of discipline sound identical--lead the child, don't force him; be firm but friendly. Both regard physical punishment as unwarranted, ineffective, and even deleterious. Verbal threats are considered to be not only ineffective but actually weakening of the child's respect for the parent. Both authors advocate discipline directed to psychological motivation as most effective for regulating and changing child behavior, stressing the impact upon the child of parental approval and disapproval. Spock places more emphasis upon fear of losing parental love, while Locke sees the corrective effect as due more to guilt about disappointing the revered parent.

Other similar perspectives evident from reading our two authors include their sensitivity to the child's point-of-view, perhaps novel in Locke's time, but a standard feature of current childrearing beliefs, though often honored more in the breech. Two characteristics of children were respected by both Locke and Spoch--their playfulness and their reasoning powers. Locke saw the "foolishness" of children as an important but transitory stage of their development, to be freely exercised for maintaining their good health and spirits. Spock, in the Freudian vein, goes further in seeing play as an essential arena for developmental coping. Locke found children to be capable of good reasoning much earlier than adults allow, and also that they love to be dealt with as reasonable beings. He, of course, is speaking of logical, rational thought. Spock would agree with his venerable predecessor, but also attempts to explain to mothers the logic of emotions, that children's behaviors are emotionally determined and not merely fractious or fortuitous.

In summary, Locke was very representative of his times in the shift from the Calvinistic to the Enlightenment conception of man and his education--from the assumption of innate depravity to that of inherent moral neutrality (though still wary of Adam's sin of pride and its encouragement by indulgence), from lineal to collateral authority with a basic commitment to the ideals of rational humanism. Consequently, education in Locke's day was becoming more a matter of forming the mind and character than of controlling built-in negative qualities, of developing the powers of reasoning for secular purposes, not only as a means of serving faith in the Lord's way. Yet salvation remained of central importance and man retained his special status with God. In his turn, Spock represents the twentieth century blend of Enlightenment and Romantic conceptions, of biological and psychoanalytic Darwinism--child experience as formative of the man, but within a context of assumptions about inherent positive growth potentials that are a product of man's evolutionary status, not specially God-given. From such formulations it follows that education is more a process of nurturance and modeling than authoritarian implantation, with an emphasis upon emotional gratification and the all important power of parental love.

A final comment of appreciation.--in change there is continuity; in continuity there is change; at least in child care land. As John Locke represented the seventeenth century British experience at its best, so does Ben Spock eloquently express the humane wisdom of this century of the child. In his own particular way Spock exquisitely represents the warp and woof of our contemporary tapestry about children, a complex pattern of varying emphases upon the Calvinistic, Enlightenment, and Romantic conceptions of the human condition. Raised in the puritanical mode, but with a basic nurturance of an optimistic view of life, educated into the modern scientific ethos of rational solutions to problems, Spock's views of children and their proper care reflect a basic concern with an equitable, workable balance of authority and freedom, of socialized reasonableness and personal affection between parent and child, and among all mankind. So in his initial publication of 1946 he counters the childrearing rigidities of the prior period by emphasis upon parental warmth and child freedom. By 1958 with his second edition of the book, he was redressing the balance of parental overindulgence and resultant anxiety by stressing the child and parent's needs for clear limits on child behavior. Most recently in the third edition of 1968, out of the turmoils of the interim and his very personal involvement therein, he had found common cause with his ancestors in a philosophic posture of service to others as a primary guiding purpose. Yet this incorribly activist grandfather of our own times sits not in a quietly venerated state, but rather has been the convenient scapegoat for both the reactionary rightists of authoritarian control, and the militant leftists of women's liberation. But then, we are always uneasy with our prophets and wise men.

References

Axtell, James L. The Educational Writings of John Locke. Cambridge: University Press, 1968.

Back, William G. The influence of psychoanalytic thought on Benjamin Spock's 'Baby and Child Care.' J. History of Behavioral Sciences, 10, 91-94, 1974.

Bloom, Lynn Z. Doctor Spock. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1972.

Earle, Alice. Child-Life in Colonial Days. New York: Macmillan, 1915.

Gesell, Arnold & Ilg, Frances L. Infant and Child in the Culture of Today. New York: Harper & Bros., 1943.

Holt, L. Emmett. The Care and Feeding of Children. New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1905.

Jeffreys, M. V. C. John Locke. London: Methuen, 1967.

Senn, Milton. Autobiographical statement. Bethesda: National Library of Medicine, Historical Archives, 1970.

Watson, John B. Psychological Care of Infant and Child. New York: Norton, 1928.