

TRENDS IN THE BEHAVIOR AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING
OF U.S. CHILDREN
(FINDINGS FROM A NATIONAL SURVEY)

by

Nicholas Zill
and
James L. Peterson

Child Trends, Inc.
1990 M Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C.

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ABSTRACT

Patterns of family life in the U.S. have been changing at a rapid pace for more than two decades and much concern has been expressed over what the changes might mean for the moral development and emotional well-being of American children. The National Survey of Children, sponsored by the Foundation for Child Development, was designed, in part, to provide a picture of how often various behavior problems occur among U.S. children of grammar-school age. For a limited set of behavior items, it was possible to make comparisons with national data collected during the 1950's and 1960's in order to get some notion of whether and how the behavior of American children has changed over time. Trend data were based on both parent and teacher ratings of child behavior. Data from the FCD study and earlier surveys suggest that both negative and positive developments have occurred. For example, classroom decorum has deteriorated in comparison with the 1950's. Childhood stress has increased as a result of the rise in family disruption. Obedience has declined as a virtue. Parents seem to be placing less emphasis on industry and achievement in their children. On the other hand, the data do not support the contention that a massive upsurge in child mental health problems and behavior problems is underway. The majority of U.S. children seem to be reasonably well-behaved at home and in school, at least by contemporary standards. There were even some signs of improvement in the behavior reports.

The condition of children in the U.S. is more complex and multifaceted than it is usually portrayed. There is a need for more data on the behavior, emotional well-being and social development of children. While there is room for further development of measures, the FCD survey has demonstrated the feasibility of collecting this kind of information on a national basis. By developing an accurate statistical profile of youthful attitudes and behavior, and by getting the facts out to the voting-age public, it may be possible to counteract some of the negativism about young people that is now so prevalent.

Patterns of family life in the U.S. have been changing at a rapid pace for more than two decades and much concern has been expressed over what the changes might mean for the moral development and emotional well-being of American children. Two indicators that illustrate the rapid pace at which family living conditions have changed are the proportion of children whose mothers work outside the home and the fraction of children who live with one parent only. From 1970 to 1981, the percentage of U.S. children under 18 whose mothers worked outside the home went from a minority of 39 percent to a majority of 54 percent.¹ Over the same period, the fraction of children under 18 who were living in single-parent households went from 12 percent to 20 percent.² It has been estimated that nearly half of the children born in the 1970's and 1980's will spend some part of their childhood in a single-parent household, usually as a result of parental separation or divorce, or birth out of wedlock.³

There has been considerable speculation -- most of it pessimistic -- about how the mental health and behavior of American children has been affected by these and other changes.⁴ Much of the public believes that the behavior and mental health of "the younger generation" are deteriorating. In addition to the increased prevalence of divorce and working mothers, reasons usually offered are lax discipline in many homes and schools, and the decay of

traditional standards and values in American society in general.

If teenage suicide, crime, drug use, and sexual activity may be taken as indicators of emotional maladjustment and moral misdevelopment, then there would appear to be evidence to support this moral decay hypothesis. For example, teenage suicide has been increasing.⁵ Adolescent homicide (of which teenagers are often the perpetrators as well as the victims) has also been on the rise.⁶ Juveniles are arrested more frequently for crimes of violence or theft than they were in the "turbulent" 1960's.⁷

Contrary to popular impressions, however, not all of the statistical news concerning the younger generation is bad. Trends in teenage drug use appear to be levelling off or even reversing.⁸ Juvenile arrest rates seem to have peaked in the mid-1970's and are now on the decline.⁹ Studies of juvenile crime based not on police records but on victim reports in the National Crime Survey indicate that the frequency of personal crimes involving youthful offenders has also levelled off.¹⁰

An alternative to the moral decay hypothesis has been proposed by several sociologists and demographers.¹¹ They argue that the higher rates of crime and other social problems of the last two decades may have more to do with the changing size, ethnic composition, and geographical distribution of the youthful population in the U.S. than

with the moral rectitude or mental health of the average teenager. They note that the years of adolescence and young adulthood have always been a time of rebellion and delinquency. Moreover, crime and other forms of deviant behavior have traditionally been more frequent in urban than in rural areas and more common among immigrant and minority groups than among more established and advantaged groups in society.

The large numbers of children born in the U.S. during the "baby boom" years -- more than 76 million between 1946 and 1964 -- resulted in a "bulge" in the teenage and young adult portion of the population through most of the 1960's and 1970's.¹² It was only in the late 1970's that the number of teenagers started to decrease and it will be well into the 1980's before the number of young adults tapers off substantially.¹³ Furthermore, the proportion of young people from minority backgrounds has increased as a result of immigration, higher fertility rates, and a marked reduction in infant mortality, especially among blacks in the U.S.¹⁴ These minority youth are not randomly distributed across the country; they are concentrated in the large urban areas.¹⁵

Thus, there have been unprecedented numbers of individuals in the "delinquency-prone" age, ethnic, and residential groups. While population trends cannot account for all of the observed changes in youthful misbehavior, they do play a major role in determining the overall

magnitude. social impact. and visibility of these problems.

In contrast to the fairly extensive set of survey data now available concerning the behavior and misbehavior of adolescents in the U.S., comparatively little information based on nationally representative samples has been collected about the behavior and emotional adjustment of pre-teenage children. However, there is at least limited evidence which suggests that the incidence of a number of child behavior problems has not changed greatly in the past 50 years. Psychologists at the University of California at Berkeley assembled evidence from eight different studies, both American and British, in which parents reported on specific behavior problems and temperamental characteristics of their children. The children were mostly in the 9-11 age range and the studies ranged in time from 1931 to 1972.¹⁶

A surprising degree of agreement was found in the reported frequency of some behavior problems, despite major differences in the ways in which the samples were drawn and the parent reports were obtained. Overall, there did not appear to be "any systematic relationship between the year in which data were collected, and the prevalence of problem behavior," even though there had been "rather major changes in family life styles and patterns of child rearing" over the same time span. The Berkeley group concluded that:

"The absence of clear time trends in the studies reported here suggests that child behavior is relatively more stable than parenting behavior.

perhaps because the latter is only one of the influences determining the former. It may well be that while sources of tension change, all children are subjected to a certain amount of stress which can be expressed only in a finite behavior repertory founded in the biological structure of the developing organism."¹⁷

These findings seem to pose a challenge to conventional assumptions about the effects of changes in child-rearing patterns on children's behavior. But there is clearly a need for better data on how children's behavior is changing over time; data concerning a range of behaviors (positive as well as negative); data which are based on equivalent methods and comparable samples and which take the severity and persistence of children's behavior problems into account.

The National Survey of Children, sponsored by the Foundation for Child Development (FCD) was designed, in part, to provide a picture of how often various behavior problems occur among U.S. children of grammar-school age. For a limited set of behavior items, it was possible to make comparisons with national data collected during the 1950's and 1960's in order to get some notion of whether and how the behavior of American children has changed over time. Trend data were based on both parent and teacher ratings of child behavior. The survey found, as had the Berkeley study, that there was a lack of change over time in some

measures of child behavior. But the survey also obtained evidence of changes in teacher and parent ratings over the previous two decades. These changes did not conform to the popular image that children's behavior is just getting worse all the time.

THE DESIGN OF THE SURVEY

The FCD survey, conducted in the fall of 1976, was based on a multistage stratified probability sample of households in the continental United States containing at least one child age 7 through 11 at that time. Interviews were conducted with the eligible child and the parent most capable of providing information about the child, usually the mother. In families with two eligible children, both were interviewed; if there were three or more, two were selected at random. Interviews were completed with 2279 children in 1747 households; the completion rate was 80%. Black households were oversampled to produce interviews with 500 black children. Weights were developed to adjust for this oversampling, for the number of eligible children, and to correct for minor differentials between census and sample figures for age, sex, race of child, and residential location. A follow-up study of schools attended by the children in the survey was carried out in the spring of 1977. School information was obtained on 1682 children, or 74% of those interviewed.

CHANGES IN TEACHER RATINGS OF PUPIL BEHAVIOR

A Comparison With the 1950's

One of the studies that provided a point of comparison was a nationwide survey of classroom teachers, including some 2,000 elementary-school teachers, which had been conducted by the National Education Association in 1955-56. In this survey, teachers were asked: "On the whole, how would you classify the pupils you are teaching this year?" The teachers were given four response alternatives, ranging from: "They are an exceptionally well-behaved group," to "They misbehave very frequently and are almost always difficult to handle." The question was repeated verbatim in the FCD school survey conducted in 1977.¹⁸

A comparison of teachers' responses in the two surveys indicates that the proportion of classes that were "difficult to handle" had increased over the two decades that separated the studies. (See Table 1.) In 1955-56, just over 5 percent of the teachers said that their pupils misbehaved "frequently" or "very frequently." By 1977, that proportion had doubled, so that nearly 11 percent of the teachers gave similar responses. The proportion of teachers describing their pupils as "exceptionally well-behaved" dropped from 38 percent in the mid-50's to 29 percent in the seventies.

Although this seems to be evidence in support of the "things are getting worse" viewpoint, several qualifications are in order. First, even with the increase in misconduct,

Table 1

U.S. Elementary School Teachers' Evaluations
of Over-All Behavior
of Pupils They Teach, 1955-56 and 1977

| "On the whole, how would you classify the pupils you are teaching this year?" | Percentage of teachers giving each answer in: | |
|--|---|---------|
| | 1955-56 | 1977 |
| "They are an exceptionally well-behaved group" | 38.1% | 29.0% |
| "They are a reasonably well-behaved group, but they are difficult to handle on occasions" . . . | 56.6 | 60.3 |
| "They misbehave frequently and are often difficult to handle" | 4.4 | 9.1 |
| "They misbehave very frequently and are almost always difficult to handle" | 0.9 | 1.5 |
| | 100.0% | 99.9% |
| | N=2,069 | N=1,651 |

the vast majority of teachers in the FCD survey -- 89 percent -- described their classes as "reasonably well-behaved" or "exceptionally well-behaved" groups. Second, the "difficult to handle" classes were not evenly distributed across all communities and school systems. They tended to be concentrated in inner-city public schools with large numbers of minority students. (See Table 2.) Thus, among teachers who taught at schools in giant central cities 23 percent said their pupils were "often..." or "always difficult to handle" while only 10 and 6 percent of teachers who taught in suburban and rural areas, respectively, responded in the same way. Similarly, teachers with a high proportion of black children in their classes were three times more likely to report that their pupils misbehaved frequently than were teachers with a relatively low proportion (10 percent or less) of black pupils.

Needless to say, black pupils in ghetto schools tend to be behind in academic achievement and to come from disrupted, low-education, low-income families. These factors were more directly associated with pupil misbehavior than was race itself.

A Comparison With the 1960's

Quite a different trend pattern emerged when the elementary-school children of 1977 were compared not with those of the mid-1950's, but with those of the mid-1960's. The FCD school survey duplicated questions from a teacher questionnaire used in the 1963-65 Health Examination Survey

Table 2

Proportion of Teachers Reporting Frequent Class Misbehavior
By Type of Community and Ethnic Composition of Class,
U.S. Children Aged 7-11, 1977

| | | Percentage of Teachers Reporting Their Pupils Misbehave "Frequently" or "Very Frequently" |
|--|--|--|
| All Children | | 11% |
| <u>Type of Community</u> | | |
| Giant Central Cities | | 23% |
| Large and Medium Central Cities | | 9 |
| Suburban Areas | | 10 |
| Small Towns (outside SMSAs) | | 15 |
| Extreme Rural Areas | | 6 |
| | | eta=.15 |
| <u>Proportion of Black Children In Class</u> | | |
| None | | 7% |
| 1 - 9% | | 7 |
| 10 - 24% | | 11 |
| 25 - 49% | | 24 |
| 50 - 99% | | 23 |
| 100% | | 29 |
| | | eta=.22 |

of children. The items dealt with the behavior of the specific children in the survey sample, rather than with the class as a whole. Teachers were asked whether the child needed any of a variety of special resources for physical handicaps, learning or behavior problems. The proportion of children identified as needing special help for the "emotionally disturbed" was nearly identical in both surveys, 3.4 percent and 3.6 percent respectively.

Teachers were also asked "How often, if ever, is any specific disciplinary action required for this child: frequently, occasionally, or never?"¹⁹ The proportion of children who were described as requiring discipline "frequently" was about the same in both surveys: just over 7 percent in the Health Examination Survey and just under 8 percent in the FCD survey. But the proportion of children who "occasionally" needed disciplinary action dropped from 52 percent to 42 percent whereas the proportion who "never" needed discipline rose from 40 to 50 percent. In other words, the major change between the two surveys was an apparent improvement in pupil conduct.

In both the 60's survey and the 70's survey, there were substantial differences in teacher discipline ratings depending on the sex and race of the child. (See Tables 3 and 4.) Thus, in the FCD survey the proportion of children who needed discipline "frequently" was 20 percent for black males; 11 percent for non-minority males; 7 percent for black females; and only 2 1/2 percent for non-

Table 3

Teacher Reports of Frequency With Which Individual Pupils
Require Disciplinary Action, By Sex of Child,
U.S. Children Aged 7-11, 1963-65 and 1977

| "How often, if ever, is any specific disciplinary action required for this child?" | All Children | | Boys | | Girls | |
|--|--------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| | 1963-65 | 1977 | 1963-65 | 1977 | 1963-65 | 1977 |
| "Frequently" | 7.4% | 7.8% | 11.9% | 12.5% | 2.6% | 3.1% |
| "Occasionally" | 52.2 | 41.8 | 60.9 | 53.2 | 43.0 | 30.5 |
| "Never" | <u>40.4</u> | <u>50.4</u> | <u>27.2</u> | <u>34.3</u> | <u>54.4</u> | <u>66.4</u> |
| | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |
| | (N=5,461) | (N=1,635) | (2,803) | (N=795) | (2,658) | (N=840) |

Table 4

Teacher Reports of Frequency With Which Individual Pupils
Require Disciplinary Action, By Ethnic Group,
U.S. Children Aged 7-11, 1963-65 and 1977

| "How often, if ever, is any specific disciplinary action required for this child?" | Non-Minority Children | | Black Children | |
|--|-----------------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|
| | 1963-65 | 1977 | 1963-65 | 1977 |
| "Frequently" | 7.1% | 6.9% | 8.8% | 13.4% |
| "Occasionally" | 51.0 | 41.1 | 60.9 | 46.6 |
| "Never" | <u>41.9</u> | <u>52.0</u> | <u>30.3</u> | <u>40.0</u> |
| | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |
| | (N=4,707) | (N=1,230) | (N=730) | (N=330) |

minority females. For each of these subgroups, the proportion of children who "never" needed discipline rose between the two surveys. However, among black children, there was also some indication of an increase in the proportion of pupils who "frequently" needed discipline. This fraction went from 14 percent to 20 percent for black males; and from 4 percent to 7 percent for black females. Similar increases were not observed among non-minority children.

In short, the trends in pupil behavior seem to be a good deal more complicated than a "doom and gloom" perspective would allow. The overall level of classroom misconduct did seem to be higher than it was in the 1950's. But most elementary-school classes in 1977 appeared to be reasonably well-behaved. While there were at least as many pupils who misbehaved frequently, there were also more children -- both black and white -- who were well-behaved in school.

It might be argued that the increase in children who "never" needed discipline reflects a lowering of teachers' standards rather than an improvement in pupil behavior. It may be that some forms of misbehavior which were formerly the occasion for disciplinary action are now simply tolerated by teachers. However, this argument does not explain why the proportion of children who "frequently" needed discipline remained more or less constant for non-

minority children and perhaps even increased for black children.

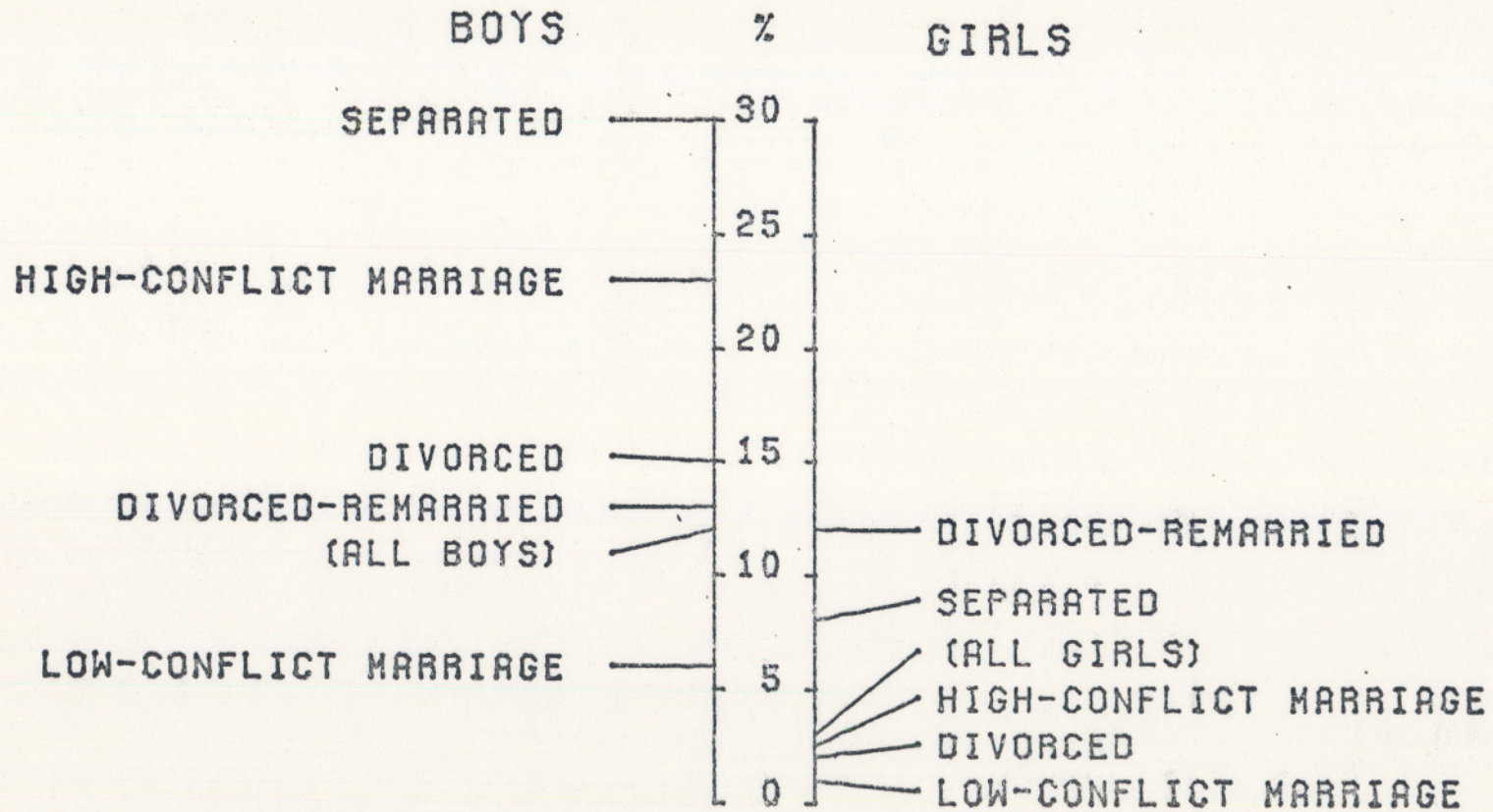
Family Disruption And School Discipline Problems

Teacher reports on the need for disciplinary action showed a significant relationship with the marital situation of the child's parents. Children -- especially boys -- from separated or divorced families were more likely than children from intact families to require frequent disciplinary action.²⁰ (See Figure 1.) This poses something of a puzzle. If family disruption is related to disciplinary problems in school, and if the frequency of separation and divorce increased between the 1963-65 survey and the 1977 survey -- which it did -- then why did the overall proportion of children who needed discipline not increase also? There are several factors which may account for this apparent anomaly.

First, it was not only children from disrupted families who were more likely to require discipline. Children in intact but high-conflict families were also apt to have disciplinary problems at school. We do not know how many children were in high-conflict families in the 1963-65 survey, because questions about marital conflict were not asked. It is conceivable, however, that the proportion of children in high-conflict marriages went down between the surveys because more of these marriages ended in divorce. If this is so, it would tend to offset the expected increase in disciplinary problems.

FIGURE 1

CHILD "FREQUENTLY" NEEDS DISCIPLINE
(TEACHER REPORT)



Second, it should be remembered that although the proportion of children who experienced family disruption rose dramatically between the surveys, these children were still only a minority of all U.S. children (at least as of 1977) and that only a fraction of children from disrupted families actually exhibit such problems at any given time. Furthermore, the frequency of these problems usually declines significantly within a few years after the disruption. Thus, it would appear that the size of the overall increase due to marital disruption could well be small enough as to be undetectable in the survey.

Other changes might be expected to have a beneficial effect on pupil behavior. For example, there has been a rise in the average educational attainment of parents in the U.S. Parent education was positively correlated with teacher ratings of pupil conduct. Among black children, parent education was even stronger than the parents' marital situation as a predictor of teacher behavior ratings.

Moreover, the sheer number of children of elementary-school age in the U.S. was declining in the 1970's, after rising throughout the 1950's and much of the 1960's as a result of the post-World War II baby boom. These demographic trends have led to changes in student-teacher ratios and in other school organizational arrangements.²¹ These administrative changes may have had some influence, in turn, on the disciplinary burden faced by the average elementary-school teacher.

CHANGES IN PARENT REPORTS ON CHILD BEHAVIOR

The Frequency of Upsetting Events

The Health Examination Survey of 1963-65 contained a number of questions to parents concerning the behavior and emotional adjustment of their children.²² Several of these items were repeated in the FCD survey. The item which showed the most dramatic change between the two surveys was a question as to whether anything had ever happened to "seriously upset or disturb" the child. The proportion of parents who acknowledged a traumatic incident rose from 27 percent in the mid-sixties to 37 percent in the seventies. (See Table 5.)

Since separation, divorce, and other marital discord events were the leading source of childhood upset, and since the proportion of children who had experienced family disruptions rose between the surveys, it seems logical to attribute the increase in upsetting events to the rise in the divorce rate. There was, moreover, a significant relationship between the parents' marital situation and the frequency of reported upsets. Children of divorced or divorced-and-remarried parents were more likely to have had a seriously disturbing experience, either due to the divorce itself or to other life circumstances preceding and following the divorce, than were children in intact families. (See Figure 2.)

However, the increase in reported upsets was too large to be wholly accounted for by the increased prevalence of

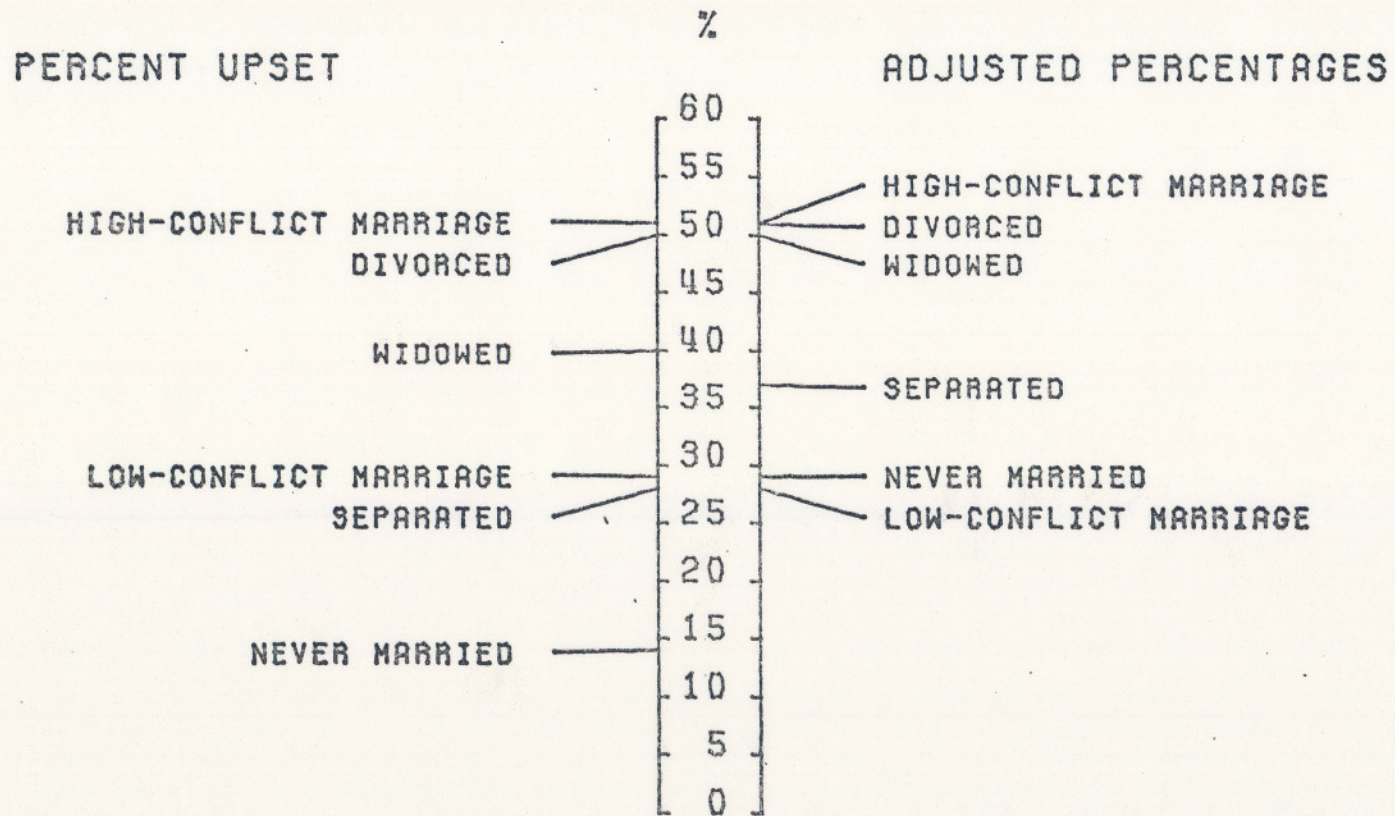
Table 5

Percentage of Parents Reporting That
Child Had Seriously Upsetting Experience,
By Parent Education Level and Race,
U.S. Children Aged 7-11 in 1963-65 and 1976

| | 1963-65 | 1976 | Change |
|-------------------------------|-----------|-----------|--------|
| All Children | 27% | 37% | +10 |
| <u>Parent Education Level</u> | | | |
| Grammar school only | 22% | 26% | + 4 |
| Some high school | 25 | 30 | + 5 |
| High school graduate | 27 | 40 | +13 |
| Some college | 30 | 43 | +13 |
| College graduate | 32 | 35 | + 3 |
| <u>Race</u> | | | |
| White | 28% | 40% | +12 |
| Black | 20 | 24 | + 4 |
| | (N=6,008) | (N=2,265) | |

FIGURE 2

PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN REPORTED TO HAVE HAD A SERIOUSLY UPSETTING EXPERIENCE, BY MARITAL SITUATION. RAW PERCENTS AND PERCENTS ADJUSTED FOR PARENTS' EDUCATION AND RACE



divorce. The proportion of parents who mentioned divorce or marital discord as the cause of their child's disturbance rose, but only by about 3 percent, whereas the increase in total upsets amounted to 10 percent.²³ Furthermore, other types of events -- such as the death of a grandparent or other relative, and school-related upsets -- were reported more often in the FCD survey than in the earlier survey, even though there was no obvious reason for believing that these events had increased in frequency between the surveys. There must have been some other factor working to increase parent reporting of traumatic incidents.

Answers to the question about the child's upsetting experiences were obviously dependent on the interpretation and recall of the parent respondent. Parents with less than a high school education were not as likely to report a disturbing experience as were better educated parents. Black parents were less likely than non-minority parents to report that their children had been upset, even when differences in parent education were taken into account. Yet we would expect that the environments in which black children and children of high-school dropouts live are at least as stressful as those in which other children live, if not more so. Thus, the increase in reported upsets could well have been due to a greater willingness on the part of parents to acknowledge and report some kinds of upsetting events, rather than -- or in addition to -- an increase in the actual frequency of these events.

The rise in parent educational attainment during the decade between the surveys could be one possible reason for more frequent reporting of stressful events. This explanation was only partially supported by the data, since there was still a significant increase in reported upsets when parent education was controlled. However, the increase was not uniform across all education groups. The change in reporting of upsets was pronounced among parents who were high school graduates and among parents with some college education. But the increases were comparatively small among parents at lower and higher education levels. There was also relatively little increase in the number of upsets reported by black parents, even though there was an enormous growth in the number of black children living in single-parent families.

Apart from the rise in years of formal education among U.S. adults, there has been an increase in public awareness concerning psychological matters. Talk shows on television, advice columns in newspapers, articles in popular magazines and self-help books have helped to spread information (and misinformation) about a variety of psychological and social problems, including those of children. As a result, there may be increased sensitivity to childhood disturbances among U.S. parents, as well as a greater openness in admitting to family problems that were formerly kept private. There was no way of testing whether these factors were responsible for some of the increase in upset reports observed in the

survey. It does seem plausible, however, that the influence of mass-media instruction in "pop psychology" would be most apparent among parents who were educated but not highly educated.

Thus, the change in the frequency of upsetting events seems to reflect both a real increase in childhood stress and a greater tendency of parents to acknowledge traumatic experiences. Life has become somewhat more stressful for children, primarily because of the increase in family disruption. But parents have also become more open and perhaps more sensitive about emotional upsets in their children.

Ratings of Tension and Temper

Parents in the Health Examination Survey of 1963-65 were asked to rate the degree of tension or nervousness shown by their children by placing the child into one of four categories: "rather high strung, tense and nervous"; "moderately tense"; "moderately relaxed"; or "unusually calm or relaxed". The phrasing of the response alternatives was less than ideal, but the wording was repeated in the FCD parent interview to help insure comparability. Another question in the Health Examination Survey asked parents to describe their children's temper, using four categories which ranged from: "has a very strong temper, losing it easily." to: "hardly ever gets angry or shows any temper." This item and a question on shyness were also repeated in the FCD survey.

A comparison between the two surveys revealed more similarities than differences in the parent ratings. (See Tables 6 and 7.) For example, the proportion of children described as "rather high strung, tense and nervous" was 18 percent in Health Examination Survey and 14 percent in the FCD Survey. The proportion rated as having a "very strong temper" and "losing it easily" was 17 percent in both surveys.

There was some indication that the children in the later survey were slightly less apt to be rated as "high strung" or "moderately tense," and somewhat more apt to be described as "unusually calm or relaxed." It is unclear whether or not this should be viewed as a good sign. On the one hand, children who were described as high strung, tense and nervous were more apt to need or be getting professional help than children who received more moderate ratings. Thus, the trend in parent ratings of nervousness might suggest a slight improvement in the mental health of U.S. elementary-school children. On the other hand, it can be argued that American children have less to be tense about because their parents are placing fewer demands on them for proper behavior. It is also possible to interpret the change as a trend toward unresponsiveness or apathy.

When the temper ratings for sons and daughters were examined separately, there were fewer girls than boys who had a "very strong temper." This was true in both surveys. But the proportion of girls who displayed "a fairly strong

Table 6

Parent Ratings of Child's Tension or Nervousness,
By Sex of Child, U.S. Children Aged 7-11
in 1963-65 and 1976

| "In general, is (CHILD): | All Children | | Boys | | Girls | |
|---|--------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|-----------|
| | 1963-65 | 1976 | 1963-65 | 1976 | 1963-65 | 1976 |
| "Rather high strung, tense and nervous | 17.8% | 14.3% | 18.4% | 14.9% | 16.8% | 13.7% |
| "Moderately tense, | 28.3 | 25.3 | 29.4 | 27.2 | 26.0 | 23.4 |
| "Moderately relaxed, or | 44.2 | 44.3 | 42.5 | 42.0 | 47.6 | 46.7 |
| "Unusually calm or relaxed?" | 8.9 | 15.9 | 9.1 | 15.7 | 8.8 | 16.2 |
| Don't know, No answer | <u>0.8</u> | <u>0.2</u> | <u>0.6</u> | <u>0.3</u> | <u>0.8</u> | <u>-</u> |
| | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.1% | 100.0% | 100.0% |
| | (N=6,008) | (N=2,265) | (N=2,951) | (N=1,129) | (N=3,057) | (N=1,136) |

Table 7

Parent Ratings of Child's Temper, By Sex of Child,
U.S. Children Aged 7-11 in 1963-65 and 1976

| "With respect to (his/her) temper, would you say that (he/she):" | All Children | | Boys | | Girls | |
|---|--------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|-----------|
| | 1963-65 | 1976 | 1963-65 | 1976 | 1963-65 | 1976 |
| "Has a very strong temper, losing it easily, | 17.0% | 17.1% | 19.5% | 20.3% | 14.5% | 13.8% |
| "Occasionally shows a fairly strong temper, | 33.6 | 36.6 | 36.6 | 36.3 | 30.7 | 37.0 |
| "Gets angry once in a while, but does not have a particular strong temper, or | 36.2 | 36.6 | 33.3 | 34.3 | 39.1 | 39.0 |
| "Hardly ever gets angry or shows any temper?" | 12.7 | 9.5 | 10.4 | 8.8 | 15.3 | 10.2 |
| Don't know, No answer | <u>0.4</u> | <u>0.2</u> | <u>0.2</u> | <u>0.3</u> | <u>0.4</u> | <u>-</u> |
| | 99.9% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |
| | (N=6,008) | (N=2,265) | (N=2,951) | (N=1,129) | (N=3,057) | (N=1,136) |

temper" rose from 31 percent to 37 percent, while the equivalent proportion for boys showed essentially no change over time. Girls seem to have become somewhat more like boys, at least with respect to showing (or being allowed to show) bad temper. While this may please some Women's Liberationists, many parents might wish to see a change in the opposite direction.

Getting Help for Child Behavior Problems

Although the number of children in the survey who had a recent emotional upset or showed some current problem behavior was quite large, the proportion who had received medical care or psychological counselling for these problems was relatively small. Parents were asked: "Have you felt, or has anyone said or suggested, that your child needed professional help for any emotional, behavior, mental or learning problem during the past year?" The answer was "yes" for slightly more than 8 percent of the children in the survey.

Of those parents who felt or were told that the child needed help, 70 percent actually got some kind of help. About 3 1/2 percent of the children in the survey had seen a psychologist, psychiatrist, or psychoanalyst within the past year; 6 1/2 percent had seen such a person at some point during their lives. Slightly less than 2 percent of the children were currently taking tranquilizers, Ritalin, Dilantin, or some other drug to help control their activity level or behavior. A total of 12 percent had either gotten

psychological treatment in the past or were perceived as needing such help during the previous year. Unfortunately there are no good baseline data with which to compare these figures.

Things Parents Like Best About Their Children

In the Health Examination Survey, parents were asked to name the child's "best (or strongest) and worst (or weakest) points." Similar questions were put to parents in the FCD survey. It is hazardous to try to make precise comparisons across the surveys with such open-ended questions, particularly since the responses that parents gave were quite diverse. It was apparent that parents' responses to these open-ended questions were influenced to some extent by other questions that appeared in the survey interview. Nevertheless, a comparison of the virtues and vices that parents chose to emphasize does provide some hints as to changes in the quality of parent-child interaction in the U. S.

When the characteristics most frequently mentioned by parents in each of the two surveys were listed in rank order, the lists contained many similarities.²⁴ (See Table 8.) Among the top ten "best things" mentioned in both surveys were such qualities as being helpful, cooperative; considerate, thoughtful; friendly, outgoing; easy to get along with; happy, good-natured; and bright, intelligent.

There were some notable changes, however, in the order in which some characteristics appeared on the two lists.

Table 3

Child's Best or Strongest Points: Characteristics Most Frequently Mentioned
By Parents of U.S. Children Aged 7-11 In 1963-65 and 1976

| 1963-65 | | 1976 | |
|---|------------------------|---|------------------------|
| Best Characteristic of Child in Rank Order | Percent Mentioning* | Best Characteristic of Child in Rank Order | Percent Mentioning* |
| 1) Obedient, minds well | 13.5% | 1) Helpful, cooperative | 13.0% |
| 2) Helpful, cooperative | 13.0 | 2) Affectionate, loving | 10.4 |
| 3) Good student | 10.1 | 3) Considerate, thoughtful | 10.4 |
| 4) Friendly, outgoing | 8.2 | 4) Friendly, outgoing | 10.2 |
| 5) Good child | 7.9 | 5) Good personality | 8.0 |
| 6) Easy to get along with, gets along well | 7.5 | 6) Easy to get along with, gets along well | 7.4 |
| 7) Happy, good-natured | 7.5 | 7) Loveable, sweet | 7.3 |
| 8) Considerate, thoughtful | 7.4 | 8) Happy, good-natured | 7.2 |
| 9) Bright, intelligent | 6.0 | 9) Bright, intelligent | 6.9 |
| 10) Kind, gentle | 6.0 | 10) Obedient, minds well | 6.3 |
| 11) Affectionate, loving | 5.4 | 11) Enthusiastic, interested in many things | 6.0 |
| 12) Loveable, sweet | 5.2 | 12) Kind, gentle | 5.4 |
| 13) Polite, courteous | 5.0 | 13) Compassionate, caring | 5.3 |
| 14) Conscientious | 4.5 | 14) Good child | 5.1 |
| 15) Unselfish | 4.2 | 15) Good student | 5.0 |
| Don't know | 3.7% | Don't know | 2.6% |
| | (N=3,024) | | (N=2,264) |

* More than one response possible

The most frequently mentioned positive characteristic of the children in 1963-65 -- named by almost 14 percent of the parents -- was being obedient and "minding" parents well. By 1976, this virtue had slipped from first to tenth place and was mentioned by only 6 percent of the parents. We cannot say for certain whether parents valued obedience less or whether the children in 1976 were less obedient, or both. However, the change seems to support the notion that American child rearing has become more "democratic" (if you like the trend) or more "permissive" (if you do not).

Another quality which showed a decline between the two surveys was being "a good student." This response fell from third place to fifteenth place on the list. It was mentioned by 10 percent of the parents in the Health Examination Survey, but by only 5 percent of the parents in the FCD survey. Among the qualities which were mentioned more frequently in the later survey was being affectionate or loving, and having a "good personality." These changes are consistent with a trend toward more emphasis on interpersonal skills and relationships and less emphasis on obedience and individual achievement.

Things Parents Would Change About Their Children

When parents in 1963-65 were asked what the child's worst or weakest point was, a sizable proportion -- 19 percent -- said they did not know or that the child did not have any worst characteristic. The question was posed differently in 1976, partly to try to reduce the number of

non-specific answers. Parents in the FCD survey were asked: "If you could change one thing about the child, what would it be?" The strategy backfired when even more parents -- 36 percent -- said that they would not change anything about their child.

Most of the responses given by parents who did want to change something about the child dealt with changes in behavior or emotional adjustment. (See Table 9.) The leading "worst" thing in 1963-65 was the child's temper. This was also the characteristic that parents most often wanted to change in 1976. Temper problems were mentioned by about 10 percent of the parents in each survey.

One prominent complaint that parents had about their children in the mid-sixties was being lazy or not industrious. This was the second leading "worst point" in the earlier survey, but it was not mentioned frequently in the later survey. Unless there was an upsurge in the number of industrious children between the two surveys, which does not seem likely, this seems to indicate that parents in the seventies were placing less emphasis on getting their children to work hard at their chores and studies. Once again, a trend toward less-demanding child rearing is suggested.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

In all, the trend data from the FCD survey present a decidedly mixed picture. Proponents of the moral decay hypothesis can certainly find things to deplore in the

Table 9

Child's Worst Point or Thing Parent Would Like To Change About Child:
 Characteristics Most Frequently Mentioned
 By Parents of U.S. Children Aged 7-11 In 1963-65 and 1976

| 1963-65 | | 1976 | |
|--|-----------------------|--|-----------------------|
| Worst Characteristic of Child In Rank Order | Percent Mentioning | Thing Parent Would Change About Child in Rank Order | Percent Mentioning |
| 1) Temper | 10.4% | 1) Temper | 9.9% |
| 2) Lazy, not industrious | 7.9 | 2) Less shy | 3.3 |
| 3) Stubborn, headstrong | 5.7 | 3) Less stubborn, headstrong | 2.9 |
| 4) Crying, whining | 4.3 | 4) Improved health, eliminate handicap | 2.5 |
| 5) Disobedient | 3.8 | 5) Curb hyperactivity, less restless, fidgety | 2.1 |
| 6) Argues, fights with siblings | 3.5 | 6) Get along better with siblings | 2.0 |
| 7) Too sensitive, feelings hurt too easily | 2.6 | 7) More self-confident | 2.0 |
| 8) Too bossy, aggressive, a bully | 2.3 | 8) More obedient | 1.8 |
| 9) Careless, messy | 2.2 | 9) Less talkative, noisy | 1.8 |
| 10) Too shy | 2.1 | 10) Stop crying, whining | 1.7 |
| 11) Too talkative, noisy | 1.8 | 11) More relaxed, less tense | 1.7 |
| 12) Not a good student | 1.8 | 12) Be a better student | 1.6 |
| 13) Poor eating habits | 1.7 | 13) More careful, less messy | 1.5 |
| 14) Selfish, doesn't share | 1.7 | 14) More patient, more adaptable | 1.5 |
| No worst characteristic, don't know | 18.7% | Wouldn't change anything about child, don't know | 36.0% |
| | (N=3,024) | | (N=2,264) |

survey findings. Classroom decorum has deteriorated in comparison with the 1950's. Childhood stress has increased as a result of the rise in family disruption. Obedience has declined as a virtue. Parents seem to be placing less emphasis on industry and achievement in their children.

On the other hand, the data do not support the contention that a massive upsurge in child mental health problems and behavior problems is underway. The majority of U.S. children seem to be reasonably well-behaved at home and in school, at least by contemporary standards. There were even some signs of improvement in the behavior reports. The proportion of children who required frequent disciplinary action at school was about the same in 1977 as it had been in the mid-sixties, but there was a reduction in the proportion of pupils who occasionally required disciplining. The fraction of children who showed "a very strong temper" at home did not change. The proportion who were described by parents as "high strung, tense and nervous" was, if anything, slightly lower in the seventies than it had been in the sixties.

There were indications of an increase in the proportion of black children who pose severe disciplinary problems to their teachers. But this increase was considerably smaller than the growth in the proportion of black children who live in single-parent families. And while there were apparently more black children who "frequently" needed discipline, there were also more black children who "never" needed

discipline at school.

Some of the improvement in teacher disciplinary ratings since the sixties may have been due to a lowering of teachers' standards of conduct or to changes in school administrative arrangements, such as a reduction in the average number of pupils per class. However the emphasis on negative (or supposedly negative) social trends has obscured the fact that there has been some important positive developments in children's school and home environments in recent decades. American parents may be more permissive and more prone to divorce than they were in the past, but they also have more education. Parent education tends to have a beneficial effect on child-rearing practices and, hence, on children's behavior. Educational gains have been particularly dramatic among black parents.

The proportion of children living in poverty has not been further reduced in recent years, but the debilitating effects of poverty have been ameliorated through government programs which have made adequate nutrition and health care available to indigent families. The smaller size of today's families may be another positive development as far as the supervision and socialization of children is concerned. With regard to the school environment, the FCD data show that schools are providing more special resources for children with learning problems and other disabilities.

In short, the condition of children in the U.S. is more complex and multifaceted than it is usually portrayed. In

order to do justice to this complexity, more and better data are needed on what is happening to American children. And more analysis is needed to establish why changes are occurring. There is a particular need for data on the behavior, emotional well-being and social development of children. While there is room for further development of measures, the FCD survey has demonstrated the feasibility of collecting this kind of information on a national basis.

The constant emphasis on what is wrong with our children, rather than on the genuine progress that has been made in some areas, has probably helped to undermine support for those social programs which have contributed to this progress. This may be reflected in the current public willingness to see many social programs reduced or dismantled. Moreover, media coverage of the actions and attitudes of a deviant minority of youngsters often overshadows the positive development and prosocial behavior of the majority. By developing an accurate statistical profile of youthful attitudes and behavior, and by getting the facts out to the voting-age public, it may be possible to counteract some of the negativism about young people that is now so prevalent.

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⁵The suicide rate among 15-19 year-olds in the U.S. more than tripled between 1950 and 1977, going from 2.7 to 8.9 per 100,000. See Rice and Danchik, "Changing Needs of Children." (1979); and National Center for Health Statistics, Vital Statistics of the U.S., Vol. 2. Mortality, annual issues. See also Stevens, "Youth and Violence: A Look at 4 Lost Lives." (1981).

⁶The homicide rate among 15-19 year-olds in the U.S. more than doubled between 1950 and 1977, going from 3.9 to 9.6 per 100,000. See Rice and Danchik (1979). Also, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Prevention, 1980.

⁷See U.S. Department of Commerce, Social Indicators, 1976, (1977). Tables 6/12 and 6/13, pp. 250-251; U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Uniform Crime Reports for the United States, annual issues 1975-80.

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¹¹For example. see Biderman. "Social Indicators and Goals." (1966), pp. 122-125; Easterlin. Birth and Fortune: The Impact of Numbers on Personal Welfare, (1980); Jones. Great Expectations: America and the Baby Boom Generation, (1980).

¹²See U.S. Department of Commerce. Social Indicators. 1976, (1977). Table 1/5, p. 25.

¹³See Kovar (1979), Table 1. p. 110. Also U.S. Bureau of the Census. "Projections of the Population of the United States: 1977 to 2050," (1977).

¹⁴See Biderman (1966), p. 123. Also Health, United States, 1980, pp. 29-33; Social Indicators. 1976, Table 1/6. p. 26.

¹⁵See Sternlieb and Hughes. "The Changing Demography of the Central City." (1980).

¹⁶See Tuddenham. Brooks and Milkovich. "Mothers' Reports of Behavior of Ten-Year-Olds." (1974).

¹⁷Tuddenham. et al., (1974). p. 968.

¹⁸See National Education Association. "Teacher Opinion on Pupil Behavior. 1955-56." (1956). Data for comparison with the FCD survey were drawn from Table 15. p.67.

¹⁹See National Center for Health Statistics. "Behavior Patterns of Children in School." (1972). Data were retabulated to include only children of ages 7-11 and to

exclude cases where teachers said they had "no basis for judging" how frequently the child needed discipline.

²⁰In addition to the evidence presented in Chapter 10 of this volume. see data in Brown (1980).

²¹For evidence that student-teacher ratios declined in U.S. elementary schools between 1965 and 1977. see National Center for Education Statistics. The Condition of Education (1980), Table 2.8, p.70; U.S. Department of Commerce. Social Indicators III, (1980). Table 6/5, p. 289. For evidence on the relationship between class size and disciplinary problems, see National Education Association. (1956), pp. 67-68.

²²See National Center for Health Statistics. "Parent Ratings of Behavioral Patterns of Children." (1971); and "Relationships Among Parent Ratings of Behavioral Characteristics of Children." (1972). Data from the Health Examination Survey were retabulated to exclude children of age 6.

²³Unpublished data on the specific events reported in the Health Examination Survey were obtained from the National Center for Health Statistics.

²⁴Unpublished data on the "best and worst points" reported by parents in the Health Examination Survey were obtained from the National Center for Health Statistics. Tabulations were based on a random subsample of 3,024 cases. Data for 6-year-olds were excluded.