



### ARTICLE

# Wondrous Innocence

Print advertising and the origins of permissive child rearing in the US

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*Abstract.* Early 20th-century American print advertising offered a new model of child rearing grounded in the presumed natural and positive wonderment of childhood that age destroyed and adults found rejuvenating. By focussing on advertising in major magazines that were designed to tap consumers' sentiments and longings, we find representations of parental values. Advertising not only associated commodities with the child's look of wonder, but suggested that children were the portals to the new world of consumption by their natural desires. Advertisers drew upon sentiments rooted in the romanticism of the 18th and early 19th centuries, but, by 1900, these ideas that associated children with a positive view of nature and timeless wonder were adapted to commercialization. While these ideas contrasted sharply with the rational/developmentalist ideas of early 20th-century child-rearing manuals, experts gradually adapted a permissive approach that largely coincided with the messages of advertising.

#### *Key words*

commercialization • cute • *Ladies Home Journal* • romanticism • *Saturday Evening Post* • toys • trade cards

THE MEANING OF CHILDHOOD and practices of child rearing have long been contested terrain. We are accustomed to identifying two broadly contrasting models: conservatives, especially those inspired by traditional religious beliefs, continually embraced original sin and insisted that

children's 'will' be 'broken'; modernists, by contrast, emerging as a dominant force in the early 20th century, argued that the danger of childhood was not so much innate depravity, but environmental threats and that the child must be both sheltered from the harmful external world and systematically nurtured in an orderly developmental process to rationally meet that world.

Yet, there was a third, far less recognized, model that has been ignored by most historians of child rearing. It grounded childhood not in its potential, but in its immanence, expressed as a natural and positive wonderment that age destroyed and adults found rejuvenating. Instead of stressing the modern developmentalist's formula of protection and preparation, this third approach exposed the child to 'delight' and delayed maturation. It celebrated the child's individuality while rejecting the adult's rational and prudential vantage point. Instead, the adult embraced the 'wonder' of childhood as an escape from the disappointments of market society and modernity. In contrast to the modernist developmental view of sheltered innocence, this third, essentially romantic, view was built on the idea of what I call 'wondrous innocence'. It was less obvious because this alternative to the modernist developmental model was not expressed in child-rearing manuals, but in advertising, shop windows, comic strips, new holiday rituals and toys and novelty goods that appeared in the USA in the first 30 years of the 20th century. Merchandisers certainly did not invent wondrous innocence. Its roots in 19th-century romanticism and changing attitudes of middle-class parents will be briefly explored. Yet, this vision of the child served commercial interests and was promoted through commercial culture. Despite the opposition of educators and child development experts (c.1900–30), wondrous innocence seeped, by mid-century, into the language and child-rearing practices of many Americans who rejected the negative implications of sheltered innocence and embraced the view that children's desires were natural and could be satisfied or displaced without repression.

### COMMERCIAL EXPRESSIONS OF THE WONDROUS CHILD

Commercial speech and consumer practice propagated wondrous innocence in many ways, but I will focus on its formative expression in the advertising of the American mass circulation magazine advert as it emerged as a vital force in American life in the first 30 years of the 20th century, culminating in the Great Depression. Middle-class women's magazines like the *Ladies Home Journal* and general family magazines like the *Saturday Evening Post* that I reviewed for this study not only reached millions of readers, but embraced the view that the child was the focal point of home

life. Thus, children and their relations to adults were central to ad messages, both reflecting and reinforcing contemporary adult attitudes (Margerum, 1994: 335; Scanlon, 1995). This was a dramatic change from the advertising of the generation before 1900 when children were rarely shown and their wonder even less (Cross, 2004: Ch. 3). While these ads are hardly evidence of parental behavior any more than were child-rearing manuals, they do reflect a competing ideology to the manuals. And, since they were designed to tap consumers' (i.e. parents') sentiments and longings, they arguably represent at least latent values probably more faithfully than the proscriptive literature of the manuals.

As students of advertising point out, commercial messages associated their products with the often contradictory longings and anxieties of potential customers. Thus, the emerging ideology of the sheltered and scientifically raised child was expressed regularly in ads. Commercial messages in women's magazines promised brighter, happier futures for children whose mothers endowed them with modern products and warned parents of the dangers of disease, financial ruin and lost opportunities if they did not purchase the right soap, life insurance or educational toy or book for their offspring. At the same time, however, commercial writers and artists expressed the romantic idea of the wondrous child at a time when the child-rearing manuals were rigorously in opposition to such thinking. As Dan Cook notes (2000), the emerging field of market research in the 20th century developed an understanding of the child as a naturally independent and volitional being apart from the needs of parents – a view entirely consistent with the romantic view of wondrous innocence.

Early 20th-century ads often mirrored the hectoring advice of child-rearing professionals. They preached against 'rich, heavy food' at the holidays, as did Fleischmann's Yeast, advising that 'instead of overindulging' children, parents should 'give them plenty of bread and milk [for the] best gift of all – health'.<sup>1</sup> This ad touched a sensitive nerve at a time when infant mortality rates were beginning to drop sharply, and, yet, many had personal experience of the sickness and death of a young child or baby, thus evoking the real possibility that parental prudence would be the difference between life and death. The health-giving properties of new chemicals (even lead-based paints) and other products were regularly touted in ads appealing to the protection and care of children (Markowitz and Rosner, 2002: 64–107). In 1925, a Lifebuoy soap ad captured this sentiment well: 'It's so natural and vital, like air and sunshine, this splendid health of our youngsters, that one often forgets how easily it can be lost – and yet how easily safeguarded', by using good soap, for instance, to ward off germs. All this was basically the

mother's duty. As a Ralston Wheat Food ad preached in 1913 in the *Ladies Home Journal*: 'Your child's future health is your present responsibility.'<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, other ads also embodied something that the child-rearing manuals did not stress: the emotional value of children to parents and the growing desire of adults to make themselves happy by evoking the delight of children. The best examples are the seemingly most absurd ads that make the case for wondrous innocence where one would least expect it. Modern radiators, introduced in the mid-1920s, were not merely to ward off colds, but to make children beam with comfort. One ad featured an image of sad and sickly children passing through a set of American Radiators to emerge with a happy, fresh and healthy look. A Lysol cleaning disinfectant ad featured not only a healthy child on the germ-free floor, but also a father happily watching his gleeful child play on that floor. Health-giving products produced a payoff, not merely in doing one's duty to save and protect, but in one's personal delight at the sight of the delightful child.<sup>3</sup>

No longer seen either as 'mouths to feed' or 'assets' to train and exploit, as Viviana Zelizer reminds us (1985), early 20th-century children gave parents pleasure through the 'sacrifice' of parental giving. This was a particular form of vicarious consumption – adults enjoying spending through spending on their offspring. And it was surely a morally acceptable materialism because it was not self-indulgent, or did not seem so, and was expressed as a gift. Anthropologists have long recognized how gifts have been used to reinforce social relationships, and modern shopping certainly fulfilled this purpose (Miller, 1998). Yet, adult spending on children, as in other forms of giving, required a quid pro quo. In this case, it was that special 'look' of wonder that the child gave the expectant parent. Ads suggested that babies naturally expressed wonder when they encountered 'good' things. The commercial message was deceptively simple: children had become the 'natural' object of giving.

In many ads, that 'look' seemed to be what was being sold. A favorite setting was, not surprisingly, the arrival of the wondrous child on Christmas morning to see the presents under the tree. So appealing was this scene of anticipation and delight that it was used to sell products that consumers normally did not associate with this central event in modern American consumer fantasy. In 1914, an ad for boxed raisins showed a toddler boy sliding down the bannister while his sister reached out in glee upon seeing those 'red boxes that seem to be calling out Merry Christmas to them before they're half way down the stairs'. An ad for Spencer heaters showed the same familiar Christmas morning scene, with the caption that their heater 'keeps bare-foot treasure hunters warm'.<sup>4</sup>

The purchase of the look of wondrous innocence was even more explicit in the ads for snapshot and movie cameras in the early 20th century. In a series of ads and brochures, the Kodak company trained parents in the art of capturing the ‘constantly growing charm’ of their children through the regular snapping of pictures with Kodak’s vaunted easy-to-use cameras. Typical was the message that promised to capture innocence and make it timeless:

A Story that never grows old is the picture story of the children – your children, to-day it is filled with the charm of human interest. To-morrow, when the children have outgrown their childhood, it holds you fast – brings back again and again, as you peer over the pages of your snap-shot album, the vivid story of the children *as they were*. (emphasis in original)

The appeal was in the fixing of the ephemeral look of innocence, thus making it timeless. When silent movie cameras came on the consumer market in the mid-1920s, Bell and Howell warned parents not to ‘wait and wish’, but to take movies of the children while they were still charming:

The alchemy of time is changing them day by day – under your very eyes. There is only one way to preserve their present appearance . . . all the sweet and impish ways that endear them to your heart. That way is through your own Motion Pictures.<sup>5</sup>

This commercialization of sentiment went beyond associating commodities with the child’s look of wonder. Advertising in this period strongly suggested that children were the portals to the new world of consumption by their natural desires. In ads, children frequently introduced new products, communicating to receptive middle-class adults that children naturally embraced the new and that the new was natural. In 1910, in a General Electric ad, a happy boy playing with an electric train around a Christmas tree symbolized the pleasures of the electrified home. The scene evoked parental obligations to provide the comforts of the traditional home, but also associated the child with modernity at a time when the electric train was still a novelty. Repeatedly, children in ads introduced the new and the novel, even for products that had no direct connection with child rearing. An ad in 1937, for example, featured a boy and a girl in bright new outfits presenting, with shimmering delight on their faces, a new line of Chevrolet cars.<sup>6</sup>

The broader message was that kids naturally knew what was best. In 1916, a Pearl’s soap ad showed a crying baby with the caption: ‘He won’t

be happy 'till he gets it!' (i.e. the soap), turning the traditional image of the demanding or even devilish child into a discerning consumer. Mennen's talcum powder ads even gave baby a voice: 'Hurry up with Mennen's', showing a naked infant impatiently waiting for her nanny's attention. This theme is taken to a particularly absurd extreme in a set of comical ads by Johnson and Johnson, featuring a baby demanding the company's talcum powder. Their roles are completely reversed when an infant-sized mom asks her gigantic baby for 'more than lullabies to sooth [*sic*] me'. The baby responds: 'Maybe now you see that a baby's skin needs plenty of Johnson's Baby Oil and Johnson's Baby Powder!' The infant is Lord because she knows what is best for her.<sup>7</sup>

Repeatedly, ads featured children 'teaching' their parents. The child was more than attuned to the new; he or she knew naturally what was good. This is shown in an ad in which a girl, directing her mother to Colgate toothpaste, says assuredly: 'Mother, that's the nice kind.' Children became experts not through their scientific knowledge of the nutritional or economic value of a food; rather, they knew what was naturally 'good' in the taste and feel of new foods such as Quaker's Puffed Rice. The traditional hierarchy of value, placing prudence and practicality over comfort and pleasure, was not always reversed. More commonly, both sets of goals became equal. Still, a Kellogg's Corn Flakes ad appearing in the *Ladies Home Journal* in 1911 featured a cherubic child in a glowing light cradling a box of cereal for herself. The caption read: 'You'd be selfish too.' An intense, even antisocial, desire for cornflakes and much else was more than 'understandable'; it was natural and, thus, good. Kids lived in a semi-secret world where they were 'in the know'. In 1913, Kellogg's showed two children, a girl with her mother and a boy alone on a shopping errand, passing each other on the street with the 'right' cornflakes under their arms, simply giving each other knowing looks. The child's world of longing and taste became the standard, equal to, if not more important than, the authority of science or experience.<sup>8</sup>

Other ads took the theme one step further, suggesting that children had desires that naturally went beyond social norms. This was certainly expressed in the ads featuring young children and especially in trademark images. In the 1910s and 1920s, the Campbell Soup Kids (a well-known boy and girl pair dressed in Dutch clothing) were repeatedly featured in ads with their fresh dimpled faces and eyes askance, looking as if they were just about to steal from the cookie jar. These ads crossed gender divisions, but mostly celebrated the 'naughty but nice' boy. A *Saturday Evening Post* ad for a tire pressure gauge illustrated the dangers of underinflated tires by

showing a gang of six rowdy, but essentially good-natured, boys hanging on the back of a family car to the seeming surprise of the couple inside.<sup>9</sup> This toleration of, or even identification with, ‘innocent’ rule breaking in boys seemed to reflect adult expectations that males were not easily domesticated and any effort to enforce rules rigorously would compromise the vitality and ‘wonder’ of boys. This theme appeared over and over in the whimsical cover illustrations of *Colliers* and the *Saturday Evening Post* in the 1910s and 1920s (Cross, 2004: Ch. 3).

Not only did ads legitimate and challenge traditional norms of good behavior in children, but they promised to satisfy these natural, if somewhat antisocial, longings more easily. Particularly in the case of the boy, consumer goods promised to satiate his natural insatiable needs. When his body screamed, ‘Eat some more food quick’, that need could be satisfied with Beach Nut Peanut Butter. Boys were ‘hungry as little bears’, an image upon which a Swift meat ad drew for an ad published in March 1919, when ‘the children are like young animals let loose after the long winter’s cold’. The delighted naughty boy, eating jam from his fingers in the jar, naturally and rightfully feels no guilt. He has only to say: ‘Hey Mom! The best ever!’<sup>10</sup> Impish or bratty behavior became merely playful and self-expressive with the help of modern consumer goods.

Ads legitimized cross-generational male bonding around a natural proclivity towards unrestrained, but playful, desire. A 1927 ad for Post Flakes curiously showed a father and son in suits, suggesting that both boys and men were essentially the same and both needed ‘bulk’. Later, in 1948, the image of common desire across generations had become more childish, as a father and son were shown heartily eating cereal over the caption: ‘Little injuns (big chiefs too) call Kix cereal “heap good”.’ The father–son bonding theme ran through consumer culture from the 1910s to the present in many settings, but a common thread was the natural need of boys of all ages to play. The most common format early in the 20th century was of father and son sharing hours of fun with ‘their’ electric train: ‘To the luckiest men in the world, a Father and Son who are pals’, with Lionel electric trains (Greenfield, 1991: 312–13). Ads for the Daisy air rifle, which appeared regularly in mainstream magazines like the *Saturday Evening Post*, appealed to father–son emotional bonds by reminding fathers of their happy years of shooting and of their duty to pass on this ‘clean manly sport’ to their sons.<sup>11</sup> In males, an essential component of wonder was the bending of (domestic) rules set by mothers and wives. Invariably, women in these ads displayed bemused toleration (Cross, 2004: Ch. 3).

By contrast, girls’ wondrous innocence was represented in ads in ways

that largely mirrored the popular cultural image of the coquettish female rather than the impish male. Again, Pearl soap (1919) offered a glimpse into this domain with a picture of a baby with hair piled high on her head and the caption: 'The beginning of a good complexion.' The baby was already an attractive female who needed to protect her beauty with Pearl soap. Mother and daughter shared a mirror in another ad for Fairy soap, with a caption that advised them both to 'let your mirror frame a lovely face'. Little had changed by the mid-1930s. Ivory soap this time warned: 'Don't envy a baby's skin', but have it for yourself with the right soap.<sup>12</sup> An ad for Chery perfume that answered the age-old question 'what is youth?' also showed the tie between the wondrous child and adult consumer desires. Youth is 'charm that is vivid, bright, changing, always alive, always different. . . . It is charm that comes in a breath, and breathes spring when it is autumn.'<sup>13</sup> The child's 'charming' desire and look could 'refresh' adult longing – even narcissism. The adult woman was to imitate the 'look' of the innocent girl and thus return to her 'spring'. While dads were expected to play with boys, adult women were supposed to look like girls. Occasionally, females across the generations could bond not in play, but in sharing a moment of rest from housework together with a 7-Up, Coke or other refreshing drink.<sup>14</sup>

These ads celebrated an image of childhood that one would seldom see in the child-rearing manuals of this era. These books insisted on scheduled feedings, early weaning and toilet training and gentle, but firm, guidance through the stages of youth to the promised land of adult rationality, competence and self-control. Yet, the ads recognized that parents were torn between the appeals of indulgence and child worship, on the one hand, and a developmentalist/rationalist ideology, on the other. In fact, ads often argued that modern goods offered an effective compromise between these competing ideals (Marchand, 1988: Ch. 10; Seiter, 1993: 7–26, 31–7). Many promised parents that new consumer products would ease the often strained relations with their children by resolving the inevitable conflicts between children's wants and parents' duty to the child's future (as well as adults' present convenience).

Merchandisers instructed parents on how consumer goods could displace and defuse children's desires without repressing them. An ad for Quaker Oats in 1925 offered this parenting advice: 'Are you still telling your children, "eat this, it's good for you?" Please stop – it's so much better to give them the food they need in a form they love!' When they bought Puffed cereal, parents could make their offspring's 'breakfasts a delightful game. Children think these fairy grains are confections – you know they're

rich grain foods.<sup>15</sup> The parent could be permissive, no longer the monitor of the child's desires, because modern consumer culture had spared the parent of troublesome scolding. The necessary and unpleasant no longer had to be sternly instilled as habit. Instead, they could be given in stealth as pleasure. The unstated assumption – that childhood should be a time of innocent pleasure – ran through all of these ads that superficially seem to be so pragmatic and parent-oriented.

### ROMANTIC AND SOCIAL ROOTS OF WONDROUS INNOCENCE

These ads expressed a concept of childhood that facilitated a consumerist lifestyle and, in doing so, contradicted both the disciplinarian values of the religious conservative and the improving rhetoric of the modernist child development movement. They affirmed a distinct understanding of the child that I call wondrous innocence, as opposed to the adaptive rationalist ideal of sheltered innocence so often repeated in the modernist child-rearing manuals.

Wondrous innocence was not invented by advertisers or merchandisers of new products. It originated in the romanticism of 18th- and early 19th-century painters and poets. While the modernist ideology of child rearing developed by John Locke and (ambiguously) J.-J. Rousseau saw children as flexible creatures requiring a controlled environment, the romantics envisioned children as fountains of joy and wisdom not found in the adult world. Wondrous innocence was in many ways the opposite of the sheltered innocence espoused by Locke and his modernist successors, who wrote the child-rearing books that would dominate the early 20th century. Their view was that children were innocent because they had not yet been exposed to the environment, not that they were pure by nature. Locke believed that children were innately selfish, and the developmental tradition recognized the need to build resistance to concupiscence and sensual temptations (Locke, 1968: 58–9, 76–9).

By contrast, in the romantic view, children became, through their spontaneous responses to life, messengers from God. Note William Wordsworth's famous line: 'trailing clouds of glory do we come from God who is our home: Heaven lies about us in our infancy!' (1930: 357). The newborn were no longer 'blank slates' (as in Locke's view) to be prepared rationally for adulthood, but, in historian Hugh Cunningham's words (1995: 73), 'the spring which should nourish the whole life. If adults do not keep the child in them alive, they will become dried up and embittered.' The young still needed to be protected, of course, but less against bad habits or premature responsibility than against the dulling effect of adult life. Even more, this

romantic view made the child's wondrous encounter with the world an ideal for adults to imitate.

The implication was that adults must cherish this revelatory look of the child in art and literature and capture and even evoke it in the joys of child-centered family life. While, as early as the mid-17th century, Dutch paintings of family scenes had begun to feature ordinary children in real life situations (Aries, 1962: 118–19; Steward, 1995: 80–3, 89, 109), by the 19th century, artists celebrated children in their 'natural' pursuits: laughing, blowing bubbles, even fighting with each other (Higonnet, 1998: 31–2). The ads for cameras in the 20th century merely copied these ideas.

William Blake (1913: 9–10) explained the appeal of 'natural' youth when he wrote that children were born 'in pleasure which unsought falls round [their] path'. The innocent knew the pure delight of the senses not simply because they were free of knowledge and prejudice, but because this pleasure was 'unsought'. They experienced nature beyond desire and their feelings of wonder were therefore 'pure'. They were free of the obsession and disappointment that came with the older person's real experience of longing. What made children attractive was their ephemeral joy, their delight free from desire.

Adults found that this romantic view of innocence corresponded to broad changes in how Europeans and Americans understood nature. Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park (1998: 16, 20, 25) tell us that the Enlightenment and its scientific view of nature and bureaucratic vision of society greatly narrowed the feeling of wonder in the western world. The Latin equivalent, *mirabilia*, has roots in the Indo-European verb *miror* (smile), becoming in English both the marvelous and the miraculous. The gleeful look of wonder focussed on the unusual in nature and was a response to the 'outmost limits' of knowledge and possibility that rejected any distinction between the natural and supernatural. This quality of wonder was largely lost when the natural world became an object of control, predictability and systematic reason to adults. Subtly, across the late 18th and 19th centuries, the look and feeling of wonder shifted to the child. Although the association of wonder with nature would survive in a fascination with freaks and reproductions of natural disasters in amusement parks (Fiedler, 1978), nature became an intelligible and mundane object of manipulation for most moderns. Instead, wonder became the response of the uninitiated young to the natural world. When observed, this childish wonder recovered for increasingly jaded and mundane adults a lost delight. The magic of wonder, sacrificed to rationality, could be renewed in the 'smile' of the child as she or he encountered nature. The child unwittingly

became the priest to an increasingly secular society by reuniting the sacred and profane (Higonnet, 1998: 92).

According to this romantic view, the child represented a natural innocence because the youth had not yet entered the flow of temporal life and lived in the 'past' or a timeless world. Innocence was 'lost' as the child matured, but recovered in each young child 'fresh' from the hands of God. The wondrous innocent gave delight and assurance to the adult in a world of modern industrialization and capitalist development, who was often both anxious about the future and alienated from the past and thus disturbed by the flow of time. As historian John Gillis (1996: 83–5) suggests, the timelessness of the young attracted a Victorian culture that had discovered and embraced linear time, but also found in the 'natural' child a refuge from the rush and uncertainties of the day-to-day.

Wonder shifted not only to the face of the child, but also to the child's world of literary fantasy and play. In fact, stories of the marvelous and miraculous which adults had traditionally enjoyed shifted to audiences of children. In the 19th century, middle-class adults began to let children go into the dream worlds that they had abandoned. New stories challenged a moralistic and didactic child-rearing literature that had previously warned and informed. Beginning with fairy tales (Grimm's were translated into English in 1823 and Hans Christian Andersen's in the 1840s), children gained access to a world of pure fantasy. The 'secret garden' of child's delight reached its zenith in late Victorian (British) literature, beginning with Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and culminating in J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1904) (Carpenter, 1985: 106–14; Luthi, 1976: 44–95; Rosenblum, 1988; Wullschlaeger, 1995: 14–17). Mechanical figures, miniatures and even ball games that had once edified or amused adults became the playthings of children. In some ways, this made adult life more 'serious' and less irrational. But it also gave adults permission periodically to join their children in an 'innocent' escape from a world of rationality, competition and achievement. When parents let children lead them back into the dream world, children became the guides and gatekeepers to adult desire (Caillois, 1962; Cross, 1997: Ch. 2; Freeman, 1952: 19; MacLeod, 1975: 20–4; von Boehn, 1932: Ch. 2).

By the end of the 19th century, romantic ideas about nature and timeless childlike wonder were adapted to commercialization. The early 19th-century association of wonder with the child's encounter with nature shifted to consumer culture (a transition aided by both the romantic's cultivation of sensuality and advertisers' association of their products with sensuous nature). If 19th-century romantics needed to see the blossoming

flower or cascading falls through the fresh eyes of the child, it was because the natural world had lost its wonder. Similarly, 20th-century consumers needed to consume through the wondrous innocence of the child because their desire for things, even new and improved things, had already begun to dull the senses. Youthful consumer desire was 'pure' because it was not yet jaded or obsessed. Children's longings had not yet succumbed to the adult's descent into satiation, habit and even addiction. The child could be the Edenic consumer, to adults a reminder of a paradise lost, redeemable only through the child.

As the sociologist Colin Campbell notes (1987), romantic ideas (expressed through the imagining of self in new and exciting situations) easily shifted to consumer longings (dreaming of oneself possessing or experiencing a commodity). While a child might have spontaneously expressed glee in an encounter with nature, adults found that this delight could be evoked in the 'surprise' of gift giving. This became a central rite of Christmas beginning in the 1830s in the US, as wealthy parents in the Northeast began to 'surprise' their offspring with gifts under a tree on Christmas morning (Nissenbaum, 1996: 132–76). By the end of the 19th century, this rite was central to the nearly universal festival of the commercialized American Christmas. The celebration of children's wondrous innocence made the young into ideal consumers and the recipients of adult consumption because their longing was 'innocent', not 'corrupted' by fixation, boredom and selfishness.

Similarly, romantic projections of the past and the timeless onto children shifted to advertising and commercial ephemera (especially toys and novelties). Images of children dressed in archaic clothing and posed in centuries old scenes were a commonplace in popular illustrations and on late 19th-century 'trade cards', distributed widely by American merchants (Cross, 2004: Ch. 3). Parents gave children stories, toys and games that recalled adults' childhood. Thus, toys like Noah's ark play sets, a toy scarcely changed since its German invention in the 16th century, remained classic gifts into the 20th century in a period when everything else seemed to change at an accelerating pace. Even 'new' toys like miniature steam engines of the 1890s were designed to drive animated tableaux of Italian organ grinders, Irish jiggers and sentimentalized scenes of cobblers at work (Cross, 1997: 83–8, 2004: Ch. 4).

At the same time, the commercialization of innocence was advanced when adults romanticized progress and identified the future with children. By the end of the 19th century, novelty products played an especially strong role in helping adults celebrate the timely and the future not as the

mundane and personal, but as fads and fantasies. While the motivation of parents cannot be determined with any certainty, the rise of new categories of gift giving to children suggests an attitude change. Board and card games, formerly the domain of 'improvement', as in moralistic or educational commercial offerings like the Mansion of Happiness or Authors, had become, by the 1880s, gifts of the 'latest thing'. Milton Bradley, McLoughlin Brothers and Parker Brothers sold cheap and rapidly changing games based on current events and newsworthy personalities to parents. Many board games celebrated contemporary world and travel themes, for example, *Around the World with Nellie Bly* of 1887, which drew on a contemporary fascination with global touring and the topical appeal of a famous young female journalist. Toys and dolls, sold as gifts for children, often first appeared on the market as novelties for adults (for example, Ping Pong and Kewpie and Billiken dolls). Similarly, by the 1870s, taking children to see the novelty of Christmas window displays had become common in American cities. Adults shared an optimistic and romantic view of the future by introducing children to these symbols of change (Cross, 1997: 88–92).

Wondrous childhood represented not only a romanticized past and future, but was also an invitation for adults to break with the constraints of Victorian manners and morals. Early signs of this appear in Mark Twain's celebration of the 'good bad boys' (MacLeod, 1994: 69–76; Wullschlaeger, 1995: 109–12). Barrie's mischievous Peter Pan in Never Land offered adults the vicarious joy of temporary freedom from the rules and routine of everyday life. Curiously, and in open subversion of traditional notions of sheltering and guiding the young, adults embraced the amorality of these fictional boys because their 'naughtiness' took place in a child's world (Kincaid, 1992; Rose, 1984: 1–9; Zornado, 2001: Ch. 4). Early 20th-century comic strip characters like Buster Brown and magazine cover art from about 1910 (most often associated with Norman Rockwell in the *Saturday Evening Post*) shared this same 'look' of the naughty but nice child. The popularity of these commercial products suggests that behavior formerly judged to be willful rebellion had become an expression of the merely curious, sensuous, vital and natural.

This sympathetic image of the impish child was closely related to the modern meaning of the word 'cute'. The word is a shortened form of 'acute', signifying 'sharp, quick-witted' and shrewd in an 'underhanded manner'. Only in 1909 (in the *Harper's Weekly*) do we see the word used in connection with children who were both manipulative and charming.<sup>16</sup> The shifting meaning suggests a new tolerance of the willful, even exploitative, child,

especially in the child's desire for things. In this way, the innocent child could now become slightly manipulative because this devious behavior was merely a response to wonder. This was not a naive look of youthful beauty (as children had commonly been portrayed in the 19th century), but instead the image of an energetic and frisky child capable of stealing cookies from the cookie jar, but without real malice or greed. Most of all, cute children could induce parents to buy them something (Cross, 2004: Ch. 3).

By the beginning of the 20th century, a romantic view of the wondrous child slid almost unnoticed into the world of advertising and marketing new products. The selling of the child's look of wonder (unsought pleasure), the identification of the young with natural desire and the new, and the toleration of the impish, even manipulative, child in the cute all had roots in the commercialization of the romantic understanding of innocence. And, despite the preaching of religious conservatives or the teachings of modernist child-rearing experts, wondrous innocence served adult consumer needs (and thus advertisers in their appeals to those consumers).

#### MODERNIST CHILD REARING AND THE COMMERCIALIZED IDEAL OF WONDER

Wondrous innocence contrasted sharply with the rational/developmentalist ideas most often studied in the history of childhood. Proof of this lies in the response of the psychologists, educators and others to the romantic childhood that was adapted by the advertising industry. The cold rationalism of the behavioral psychologist John Watson (1928: 79–82) is the most obvious example. He wrote that parents who coddled children and buried them in gifts were 'starved for love'. He was extreme, but experts of all kinds saw the sentimental commercialism so central to ads as a threat to their vision of the developmentally protected child. They believed that advertisers of sweets, toys and children's comic books violated an implicit contract with the parent to protect childhood from premature contact with desires.

These authorities were openly suspicious of the notion propagated by advertisers that the child was the source of 'wonder' and naturally knew what was 'best' or that parents should regress into a child's fantasy world. In general, early 20th-century child-care manuals reflected an obsession with order, especially an archaic fear of infantile desire. L. Emmett Holt, the early 20th-century author of the widely read *The Care and Feeding of Children*, insisted that only moaning and sharp cries of infants should be responded to, otherwise parents would create a 'spoiled, fussy baby, and a household tyrant whose continual demands make a slave of the mother' (1923: 192–5), much as portrayed in Johnson and Johnson's advertising

image of the demanding giant baby. The US Children's Bureau's 1914 edition of the government guide *Infant Care* even warned that 'much of the play that is indulged in [between parents and children] is more or less harmful' (West, 1914: 60). Children's desires were insatiable, domineering, antisocial and were to be controlled, not 'understood' or accommodated (Hardyment, 1983: 170–4). The preschool educator Patty Smith Hill insisted that parents should dole out playthings to meet changing developmental needs throughout the year rather than lavish gifts on them at Christmas. She shared with many other child development experts the goal of cultivating complex skills, independence and, most of all, tenacity in children rather than evoking delight in them with consumer goods (Hill, 1921: 347; Kawin, 1934: 49–56).

Yet, between 1925 and 1950, experts began to adopt, consciously or not, many of the themes of wondrous innocence. Pediatrician Arnold Gesell of Yale University (1925, 1943 with Frances Ilg) found that naughty behavior was often, in fact, 'typical' for children at different ages, thus reassuring parents that their children were merely 'going through a stage' when they expressed desire. The demanding baby was a natural baby, a short step to the advertising image of the discerning consumer baby. By the 1940s, *Infant Care* had abandoned the advice that babies be toilet trained by eight months, allowing this traditional standard of self-control to wait until the child had reached two years of age. Affirming the point made in ads appearing a generation earlier, baby doctor Benjamin Spock believed in the late 1940s that kids would, without prompting by parents, select the best food in the proper amount. The experts no longer saw the child as a contrary creature that had to be coerced into accepting rational family routines and needs; rather, the young person was a self-regulating organism who cried only to alert parents to physical and emotional needs (Hardyment, 1983: 225; Hulbert, 2003; Wiess, 1978: 35–6, 40–2).

Despite its scientific mantle, early 20th-century child-rearing expertise was still rooted in the traditional distinction between needs and wants, the good versus the merely pleasant, deferred against immediate gratification. Those distinctions disappeared in the new child psychology that emerged after 1925. This may have been good science, but it also conformed to the romantic and commercial idea of the wondrous child. All of this confirmed the advertisers' cliché of the 'captivating child', the advice that the young naturally and morally required the indulgence of their wishes (Jenkins, 1998: Ch. 1; Marchand, 1988: 228–30).

This perspective did not lead entirely to the abandonment of the old goal of manipulating children's desires. The US Children's Bureau's 1930

edition of *Are You Training Your Child to Be Happy?* seems to have embraced the advertising ploy of displacing the child's longings rather than prohibiting them. It advised: 'The best way to break up a bad habit in a child is to keep the child so busy with interesting things to do that he forgets the old habit' (Children's Bureau, 1972: 57). Instead of resisting a child's desire, the parent should diffuse or displace it. This was a step beyond sublimation or raising a lower desire to a 'higher' one. Margaret Ribble in her *The Rights of Infants* (1943: 87) argued that thumb sucking and masturbation were simply fixations on one body part that could easily be diverted without mechanical restraints or chastisement. Replacing the traditional religious fear of concupiscence (the belief that little desires and 'sins' lead to bigger ones) was a new approach. Giving in to the child would satisfy its longings, preventing a 'fixation' that led the child to lifelong obsessions. As anthropologist Martha Wolfenstein put it (1955: 174) in reference to this change since the 1930s:

we developed (without conscious calculation) a new kind of defense against impulses. . . . This defense would consist in diffusion, ceasing to keep gratification deep, intense, and isolated, but allowing it to permeate thickly through all activities, to achieve by a mixture a further mitigation.

Thus, the child would never become obsessed by a frustrating desire if impulses and longings were allowed to be expressed widely. Again, this conformed to the advertisers' ideal: giving into children's consumer desires resolved rather than caused psychological and social tensions.

The parental role was no longer primarily to represent 'reality' and the 'future' to the youngster, but to share the immediacy of enjoyment with the natural child. Like the ads from the 1910s, sharing in play with toys became a crucial child-rearing practice by the 1940s (Cross, 2004: Ch. 4). This 'permissive revolution' in child-rearing advice, which emerged in full force after the Second World War, was virtually identical to the ideas expressed in the 1900s mass circulation magazine ads. The permissive revolution was more than new thinking in child psychology. All along, parents had teachers other than child-care experts and educators. They learned how to raise children through consumer culture. Advertising taught parents that children had the right to have their desires fulfilled and that it was the parents' role to anticipate these longings and, thus, to make their offspring happy. Merchandisers also instructed parents on how consumer goods could displace and diffuse children's desires without repressing them. Spending could end family conflict and even help parents bend their offspring's will,

while apparently giving in to them. But, most of all, consumer culture reinforced the romantic faith that wonder could be recaptured in the delight of the 'gifted' child. This may have caused parental frustration when that look of delight faded, but it surely integrated consumption into modern child rearing.

## Notes

1. Quaker ad, *Ladies Home Journal* (hereafter *LHJ*; Feb. 1913: 67); Fleischmann ad, *LHJ* (19 Dec. 1919: 64).
2. Lifebuoy ad, *LHJ* (July 1925: 89); Ralston ad, *LHJ* (Feb. 1913: 39); Metropolitan Insurance ad, *LHJ* (Mar. 1935: 123); Investor's Syndicate, *Parents* (Apr. 1938: 61); Childcraft ad, *Parents* (Apr. 1950: 59).
3. American Radiator ad, *Collier's* (9 Oct. 1926: 28); Lysol ad, *Saturday Evening Post* (hereafter *SEP*; 11 Nov. 1925: 207).
4. Sun Maid ad, *SEP* (17 Oct. 1914: 32); Spencer ad, *SEP* (7 Dec. 1929: 131).
5. Kodak ad, *SEP* (30 July 1921: 71); Bell and Howell ad, *SEP* (23 July 1927: 61).
6. Chevrolet ad, *Life* (5 Apr. 1937: 50).
7. Pearl ad, *Collier's* (15 Apr. 1916: 31); Mennen's ad, *Theatre Magazine* (1909, cited in Muncaster, 1991: 80–1); Johnson and Johnson ads, *LHJ* (Dec. 1935: 62, Aug. 1948: 149).
8. Colgate ad, *LHJ* (Mar. 1923: 122); Kellogg's ad, *LHJ* (Aug. 1911: back cover); Kellogg's ad, *LHJ* (Aug. 1913: back cover); Muncaster (1991: 26–8).
9. Schrod Gauge ad, *SEP* (12 Dec. 1930: 22).
10. Beach Nut ads, *LHJ* (July 1913: 37, Mar. 1919: 65 and, for quote, May 1919: 43); Swift ad, *LHJ* (Mar. 1919: 66); Welch ad, *LHJ* (Nov. 1948: 117).
11. Post ad, *SEP* (20 Aug. 1927: 36); Kix ad, *LHJ* (July 1948: 129); Lionel ad, *SEP* (2 Dec. 1933: 77); Daisy ad, *SEP* (12 Nov. 1926: 202); Kodak ad, *SEP* (16 Oct. 1948: 72).
12. Pearl ad, *LHJ* (Aug. 1919: 137); Ivory soap ad, *LHJ* (Aug. 1935: 2).
13. CheraMy perfume ad, *LHJ* (Feb. 1926: 75).
14. Coca Cola ad, *LHJ* (Apr. 1935); 7-Up ad, *LHJ* (July 1952: 67).
15. Quaker ad, *LHJ* (Aug. 1925: 72, Oct. 1925: 106).
16. Definitions in *Merriam Webster Dictionary* (online edition). Word search in the online collection of *Harper's Weekly* (1857–1912) at: <http://app.harperweek.com>

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