

## The Parent as Pariah

*The Assault on Parenthood* by Dana Mack (1997)

To begin, a definition for “pariah”: simply put, it means an outcast. Okay, I can relate; a parent can be an outcast – made so by any number of causes, not the least being a false profile or otherwise, a lie...

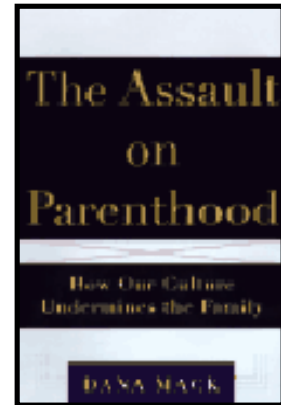
**“Are parents really so dangerous?”** – ask Dana.

She continues on this question and its background:

We live in a society in which the family is becoming an increasingly volatile unit.

But “volatile” not because of what you might think – as parents speak out. As Dana concludes from the majority of her interviews (with parents):

...the overwhelming majority of parents I’ve talked to insist that they pale as authority figures in comparison to their own parents.



This random but frequent assessment comes in the wake of an age when, from 1976 to 1994, reports of child abuse skyrocketed from 669,000 to 3 million per year. Of the recent statistics (at the time of the book’s publication), only a third of these cases were substantiated and, of that figure, only 3% involved injury requiring medical attention. While any case of abuse is traumatic for the child, the statistics must be viewed – not on the personal level of a single child – but on the volume of cases that are unsubstantiated or, in total, contribute to both the changing definition of child abuse and the implications to parenthood.

Describing a series of key counseling influencers of the modern day, Dana shows that the role and responsibilities of parents have been ever performed in a forum of pacifism; that is, that the authoritarian figure of yesteryears has been way to the concepts of counseling with permissiveness.

Early outcomes of this changing role have not been promising however – as Dana describes:

...as the baby boomers entered adulthood, the shortcomings of permissive parenting became undeniable – in their self-absorption, their greed, their flightiness, and even in their peculiar propensity to violent crime.

She continues on the history with:

By the 1980’s, faced with incontrovertible statistical evidence of a continuing rise in substance abuse, violence, delinquency, and teen pregnancy, a new generation of experts called for a return to more authority and discipline in child-rearing...

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Okay, an experiment *gone bad*; but what may have been packaged as the latest panacea for parents ended-up producing the far worse outcome. Even in the vague description of both methods and outcomes, the general understanding was that such permissiveness – or lack of authority – did not bode well for raising a child – or at least some children.

Moving ahead to the 1980's, the revised methods or mindset was commonly described as a *kinder and gentler* parent – where a kind of “contract” could be crafted into the relationships. In the day-to-day activity of the child, parents must display the kind of “detached resolve and authority that a teacher or eventual employer might.” In short, Dana describes this method as:

**Good parenting...was conceived along the lines of a personnel management model.**

Where the aforementioned profiling of parenthood picks-up is about this time period; when a series of mental health experts complied ideas and concepts targeting parents as the cause for developmental problems of any sort. Whatever the problems were – from teen to adult – the cause was rooted in the parents as “caustic.” Naming names and offering brief descriptions of their views, Dana points the reader to the certainty that such influences have been the culprits to the present day views of parenthood. She writes:

The credo of family pathology (or the study of disease) and the panacea (or cure-all) of therapeutic intervention is pressed upon children, too. The National Department of Health and Human Services has set aside funds for the establishment of “crisis” centers in communities across the country, appealing to children to bring in their parents for counseling, conflict mediation, and child-rearing intervention.

In the age where the authority has shifted (or is shifting) from parent to child, a comment from one father best sums up the paradox: “You know, I think I would rather be locked up for trying to keep my child on the straight and narrow than be locked up for not doing it.”

In this example and so many others, the question that Dana ask is:

**Is parenthood the repository of brutality, tyranny, and incompetence our culture implies it is?**

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In the above question, Ms. Mack argues: “If this were true (about parenthood), the increase influence of” these sundry of experts and educators would be making impact toward “psychologically healthier, better socialized children.” She continues:

**But instead, our youth have become more and more vulnerable** to social pathologies as the professionals have moved to restrict parental authority and influence our children.

But the outcome or increased incidence of teen problems is not exclusively caused by the removal of parental authority; but also by the limited parental time given to the children, she adds.

One of the more trustworthy barometers of rising delinquency, teen pregnancy, and school failure among postwar American youth has been the growing number of parents who neglect their children in striving for economic gain, who leave their children to their own devices, or cede their authority to “professionals” in hopes that they will pick-up the slack.

As a coincidence, the book *Home Alone America* by Mary Eberstadt refers to this form of parenting as *laissez faire*. Dana adds still more sources that describe this condition; the book *The Hurried* by David Elkind, points out that this movement to “liberate” the child from parenting has less to do with the concern for the welfare of the children, and more to with the adult’s desire to free themselves from the heavy responsibilities of family life.

In her conclusion, Dana brings to light the cultural view of parenthood:

In its recent preoccupation with social pathology and child mistreatment, our culture has all too irresponsibly put the institution of parenthood on trial for crimes it only imagines are disposed to commit.

She continues with the expressed realization that child abuse occurs or, in other ways, children are exposed to “suffering and oppression”. But the “preoccupation” and the predominate view of the alleged or assumed abusiveness of parents is just plain wrong. **“If parents today display a destructive disposition”, she adds; it is not so much their tendency (to abuse their authority) – but their temptation to abdicate it.**