

**A Call From a Child:
Help Seeking Behavior Among
Early Twentieth Century American Youth***

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ABSTRACT

"I feel as though I was stuck between two high walls with no way out, nothing to do but be a 'good for nothing.'" Thus began a detailed letter from a teenage girl in 1937. The youngster was hoping that the recipient of the letter, a widely-recognized child rearing authority, would guide her through her plight. "Please tell me what to try next. My Dad won't even speak to me unless necessary, he dislikes me so." This and similar kinds of letters, written between 1923 and 1944, offer a unique and sometimes sad commentary on family life in the early twentieth century, and demonstrate how, even under difficult circumstances, children can be not only social products of adult culture but also active reproducers of that culture--and ultimately of themselves.

*Ralph LaRossa. "A Call from a Child: Help Seeking Behavior Among Early Twentieth Century American Youth." *Contemporary Perspectives on Family Research*, 1999, vol. 1, pp. 157-175. Chapter 8 in Constance L. Shehan (ed.), *Through the Eyes of the Child: Re-Visioning Children as Active Agents of Family Life*. JAI Press, 1999.

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One of the most important shifts in the history of early twentieth century childhood was the expanding role of "experts" in the shaping of parental attitudes toward the young. During the Progressive Era (1890-1920) and particularly the Machine Age (1918-1941), fathers and mothers increasingly turned to experts--that is, physicians, psychologists, social workers, and teachers--for guidance on how to raise their children. Although parents may not always have followed the experts' dictates, they were at least inclined to monitor what the experts said. To do otherwise would mean being "old fashioned." Then, as now, the science of child rearing was a force to be reckoned with (Cravens 1985, Hawes 1997, West 1996).

Generally speaking, historians of childhood have focused on the collaborative efforts of experts and parents in the socialization and control of the young. The standard narrative has been that experts talked to parents, and that parents talked to experts, about children. But what about other lines of collaboration, that is, instances of young people communicating directly to the experts about *their* problems? This is an important question to ask not only for the sake of historical accuracy but also for the purpose of gaining insight into the sociology of childhood. For if it turns out that children enlisted the help of experts too, then a more complex picture of childhood emerges--one that shows children more actively engaged in the early twentieth century self-help movement than traditional theories of childhood would have us believe.

Drawing on data originally gathered for a study of fatherhood in early twentieth century America (LaRossa 1997), this chapter presents and analyzes 52 letters, written between 1923 and 1944, in which children, age 10 to early adulthood, sought advice and assistance from a well-known and older authority. The letters illustrate how, during this critical time in history, the youth of the country both learned from and, in turn, used popular culture to try to achieve a desired end. Rather than being suppressed or beaten by "the system," these children endeavored to "work it." The letters also offer perceptions of family life in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s that are missing from most accounts (which tend to rely on the reports of parents, particularly mothers) and document episodes, ranging from the sublime to the surreal, that otherwise might be overlooked or forgotten. "Kids say the darnedest thing" is a well-known refrain. As we shall see here, they also can demand to be heard.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Theories of childhood largely have been built on the principle of societal determinism and have focused on child adaptation and internalization. The tendency has been to view children as passive recipients of a future planned by adults. In recent years, however, less-deterministic/more-constructivist theories of childhood have been advanced and shown to have some utility. From this alternative angle, children--even at a young age--are seen as savvy negotiators and co-creators of their own makeup and development.

The first approach still holds sway. Deterministic theories of childhood are so much a part of the social and behavioral sciences that it is hard for some to think of children in any way other than

acted upon. Becoming human requires a societal context, to be sure. But building a society also requires a human context (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Thus, if we give too much weight to "society," reifying it in the process, we can become blind to the reciprocal and dialectical relationship between social reality and human behavior, between structure and agency (Abrams 1982). People, young and old, are not the equivalent of clay.

William A. Corsaro, one of the leading proponents of a constructivist approach, sees the problem in the application of the term *socialization* to childhood (as in *child socialization*). Socialization, he says, "has an individualistic and forward-looking connotation that is inescapable. One hears the term and the idea of training and preparing the individual for the future keeps coming right back to mind" (Corsaro 1997, p. 18; see also Thorne 1993, pp. 3-6). As a substitute, Corsaro introduces the notion of *interpretive reproduction* which he believes is more descriptive of how child socialization actually operates.

The term *interpretive* captures the *innovative* and *creative* aspects of children's participation in society. . . . The term *reproduction* captures the idea that children are not simply internalizing society and culture, but are actively *contributing to cultural production and change*. The term also implies that children are, by their very participation in society, *constrained by the existing social structure and by social reproduction*. That is, children and their childhoods are affected by the societies and cultures of which they are members. These societies and cultures have, in turn, been shaped and affected by processes of historical change (Corsaro 1997, p. 18; italics in original).

Corsaro is arguing essentially that children, like adults, are constrained by societal mandates but that they still have choices. The available scripts, for one thing, are open to a variety of interpretations, that is, there are many ways to read a book or homework assignment. Second, the mandates themselves exist only in and through the social interactions of the parties involved, children and adults alike. A household rule specifying that preteens must be in bed by 10 pm is a social construction, a product of adult-child interaction. Challenged, the rule can change. Forgotten, the rule is erased. Lastly, the social world is a historical world, influenced by major events and always subject to revision. To paraphrase the late C. Wright Mills, the study of childhood must invariably come back to the problems of biography and history and the intersection between the two (Mills 1959).

THE LETTERS

The child study movement of the early twentieth century led to a proliferation of books, pamphlets, periodicals, and later radio shows devoted to child care. Families were bombarded with advice from a variety of experts. Among the many authorities who claimed to have "the answers" were the U.S. Children's Bureau, a government agency founded in 1912 and the publisher of the enormously popular and influential manual, *Infant Care*; and Angelo Patri (1875-1965), a junior high school principal in New York City who, during the 1920s and 1930s in particular, hosted a radio show on parenthood and wrote a syndicated newspaper column titled "Our Children." Because of

their durability and visibility (*Infant Care* went through eight editions between 1914 and 1945, while countless numbers tuned in to the principal's broadcasts and read his columns), the Children's Bureau and Angelo Patri were huge slices of the child rearing media pie.

One of the interesting elements to the child study movement was how interactive it was. The experts not only dispensed advice, they also listened. Both the Bureau and Patri received thousands of letters from people across the United States, and many if not most of the people who wrote were sent a carefully-worded reply. Over 95 percent of the letters were from parents. The rest were from other professionals (physicians, educators, etc.), from salespeople seeking product endorsements, *or from children*.

The last group was something of a surprise. While I was at the National Archives and Library of Congress, examining the papers of the Children's Bureau and Angelo Patri, I noticed that sprinkled throughout the collections were letters from youngsters. Because previously published reports on early twentieth century advice seeking correspondence had referred mainly to the writings of mothers (e.g., see Ladd-Taylor 1986, Weiss 1977), the presence of children's letters in the collections was a little bit unexpected. Though I was intrigued by the children's requests for aid, my primary focus remained on fatherhood, hence I did not attempt to identify every piece of mail from a youngster. However, I did photocopy a sample of the *kinds* of children's letters I saw, putting them aside for future reference.

The Children's Bureau collection at the National Archives is made up of hundreds of boxes, each filled with a wealth of information about the Bureau's activities. During my visits to Washington, I managed to review a considerable amount of material, but I did not look through every box. Among the 200 some odd items ultimately photocopied were six handwritten notes from children. The Angelo Patri collection at the Library of Congress, by comparison, is a smaller collection but a richer repository of data pertaining to fatherhood. Here, I read every one of the 7,000 plus letters in the collection and brought back close to 1,000 letters for further review. Of these, 46 were from children. Combining what was obtained from the two collections yields a sample of 52 children's letters--all written between 1923 and 1944. (For more detailed information about the Children's Bureau and Angelo Patri collections, see LaRossa 1997; LaRossa and Reitzes 1993 and 1995).

The parents who wrote to the Children's Bureau and Patri generally did not provide information about their social class. Nor did the children. The socioeconomic background of the letter writers, however, may be inferred. In the case of the Children's Bureau correspondence, the content of the letters, as well as the quality of stationery, penmanship, spelling, and grammar all suggest that both lower and middle class parents/children would write. The same variables, when applied to the Patri correspondence, indicate that middle class parents/children were by far the most likely to seek Patri's aid.

The gender profile of the parents' letters was about 90 percent in favor of mothers. The gender profile of the children's letters also was unbalanced but was not as sharp: 65 percent (34 of the 52 letters) came from youngsters who had female first names. Whereas the gender of letter writers generally could be determined, the age of the children sometimes was unstated: 12 of the cases had to be categorized as "age unknown." In the remaining 40 cases, the letter writers ranged

from 10 years old to early adulthood, with adolescents being more likely to write than any other group: 55 percent (22 of the 40) were from children between 13 and 19.

A CALL FROM A CHILD

What did the children write about? It turns out any number of things. Two asked Patri for his autograph: "I am entering the Waterman's Autograph Contest and if you would be so kind as to send me your signature, I assure you I shall be most grateful" (N. K. [female] to Angelo Patri, Box 18, June 1932). "I have entered the Waterman's Autograph Contest for boys and girls and am trying to make a collection of signatures of well-known people. It would help me toward winning a prize if you would be willing to sign your name on the enclosed slip of paper and mail it to me in the enclosed envelope" (R. N. [male] to Angelo Patri, Box 20, September 1932).¹

Two others, a man and a woman in their twenties, solicited advice on business ventures. The man was looking to start an orphanage (W. M. [male] to Angelo Patri, Box 31, 5 March 1936), while the woman, the only person in the sample to identify herself by race ("I am a young colored college graduate") was thinking about organizing a club for preteen and teenage girls: "Mr. Patri, I am most sincere and interested in making my first effort with the young public a success. I have talked with my mother and dad, and friends and they all believe that it is worth something to try myself at it, and that it is needed and will be appreciated by the parents" (T. J. [female] to Angelo Patri, Box 22, 5 January 1933).

In a letter that was strikingly contemporary, a high school student asked the Children's Bureau for its thoughts on the topic she had chosen for her valedictorian address and on the questions she intended to raise.

As Valedictorian of the graduating class of S. High School, I am preparing to speak on the topic, "What the Future Holds for the Youth of Today," considered from its Social side. I am seeking the opinions of a few outstanding leaders in the field of Sociology and have selected you as one whose ideas on the subject I will value greatly. I will appreciate any information or assistance you can give me either on the general topic mentioned above or in answer to the following questions:

1. Can the modern home be said to have broken down or is it merely undergoing a change to meet the conditions of a new era?
2. Will the American home in the future be more or less the center of the family's activities?
3. What effect will the increased leisure time, which is being forced upon the people, make on the home?
4. What effect will the Repeal of the 18th Amendment have on the social order?

¹The notation for referencing each letter includes the initials and gender of the letter writer, the agency or individual to whom the letter is addressed, the box number in the collection where the letter may be found, and the date that the letter was written or, in the absence of a specific date, received. The letters are reproduced verbatim, with spelling and grammatical errors left intact. Periodically, I have inserted bracketed remarks if doing so seemed to make the letter writer's message more intelligible. Ellipses are used to show where, in some cases, I have edited sections of a letter. Initials substitute for names to disguise the writer's identity.

5. What effect will the increasing number of divorces have on the youth and the home?
6. How is the church affecting the youth of today?
7. How is the problem of eliminating poverty to be solved? (E. W. [female] to Children's Bureau, Box 477, 4 April 1934).

The above letters may be interesting but they are not the most representative--or the most poignant. How best to talk about the letters is, however, a dilemma. Offering snippets here and there may communicate the breadth of the children's musings but minimize the depth of the children's feelings. Also, conceptually classifying the letters is intricate because letter writers did not always limit themselves to one problem per letter. After considering several ways to present the materials, I opted for a middle course. I would first allow the children's stories--or at least a subsample of the children's stories--the space that they deserved, and then, looking at the letters as a whole, point to larger themes implied in the texts.

"My mother and dad are pretty swell in most ways, but they just make a baby out of me"

The most common kinds of letters were ones in which the children asked for a second opinion to settle an argument with a parent. Some of the pleas were brief; a number were fairly long. The most direct requests for help dealt with toys or time.

I would like to have an air rifle. I am almost fourteen years old and where I live there is plenty of room to use one but my parents object and might change there mind on your opinion which I hope will be to my advantage (L. S. [male] to Angelo Patri, Box 25, 23 November 1933).

I am a girl of 12. Every night my father and I have an argument as to what time I should go to bed. Please tell me the time a girl of my age should go to bed. I usually rise about 7:30. Thank you (R. B. [female] to Angelo Patri, Box 27, 21 March 1934).

I want to know if my father and mother should force me to be late. I want to go to the E. Beach Club for an athletic class. It 20 min. late already. P.S. I cannot go 'till my father is ready (P. G. [male] to Angelo Patri, Box 18, July 1932).

Somewhat more detailed, but still pretty direct, were requests that Patri rule on whether a family should have a dog or whether a child should help his father on weekends.

I am faced with a very difficult problem and I would appreciate it very much if you would advise me as to the wisest thing to do. As long as I can remember I have been a lover of dogs. My parents likewise are fond of dogs. In spite of those facts I have had only one dog and that when I was only three years old. If I ask my father [he] refers me to my mother saying that it's all up to her. When I ask my mother [she] refuses saying that I would soon get tired of it and then she would have the entire responsibility and care. I am 12 1/2 years old, in the 7B Grade and I am sure that I would give any dog the proper care. I have no brothers or sisters and I am sure that a dog would be a much needed pal. As both mother and my self read and heed your advice I am sure that a few words of advice would go a long way toward solving our problem (S. C. [male] to Angelo Patri, Box 17, 20 August 1931).

I am a boy of 18 yrs of age. My occupation is in the line of printing. I am working steady and most of the time I work overtime. During the week I have no time for any enjoyment. Only on Saturday night & Sunday I could have some enjoyment. My father is 48 yrs of age, and is a sickly man suffering from Neuralgia. The last several weeks he has suffered very much on his legs. My father wants me to help him out once Saturday or Sunday on his paperstand. Do you think it is fair for my father to ask me to work for him during my two days which I have my enjoyment? . . . (D. W. [male] to Angelo Patri, Box 18, June 1932).

Next in complexity were letters that focused on the children's relationships with friends, and the perceived unwillingness on the part of parents to give the children the freedom and trust they felt they were due.

I know that you get most of your letters from adults, asking advice, but here you have a letter from a 13 year old girl, grade 8A. My mother and dad are pretty swell in most ways, but they just make a baby out of me. All the girls and boys I know like me pretty well. We don't have many parties, but the kids generally go over to other houses after supper, and have fun in the evenings. I get asked over all the time, but I never can go. I never get back after 9:30 P.M., either. There is a carnival a few blocks away, and the kids have been going over all week, but I am never allowed to go. Like any girl, I want to be popular, but the others get the impression I don't want to come. This evening when I asked if I could go, they said they just don't feel that they raise me right if they let me "run around" after dark. I have never, hardly, been allowed after supper, and I go to bed at 8:00 P.M. I don't think they should treat me this way, do you? Please write me of your opinion on the matter (L. E. [female] to Angelo Patri, Box 34, May 1938).

I am writing to you in the hope of getting your help. I am a sixteen year old girl of Italian parentage. My parents have those old Italian ideas about the conduct of a girl, which do not agree with me at all. My parents have restricted me from going swimming, from going to a park here where dancing is held twice a week and where most of the young people go, and from being in the company of girls of my age after dark. My father saw me talking to a boy at the park one night and after I came home he scolded me about it and said a girl should not speak to a boy unless she is going to marry him. My girl friends are dropping me because my parents are blaming them for taking me out, and soon I will be a girl without friends. When I receive a telephone call they try to listen to the conversation. My father tells my mother that the calls are from boys, which gives her the clue for telling me that I will not be allowed to go out of the house that evening and I am watched very closely from then on. My mother also goes up to my room and tries to find things which she can use to call me down for. My father tells me he does not trust me one bit, which makes me feel very badly. My parents' continuous nagging is either going to drive me out of my mind or out of the house. And so, Mr. Patri, if you will kindly write my father a good strong letter, which might change his ideas, I will appreciate it very much. I am sending a self addressed envelope (L. A. R. [female] to Angelo Patri, Box 172, 2 September 1929).

I am writing to you for advice and counsel. It seems strange that during a period of mental distress I should turn to a stranger. But it seems as though I know you. I have read your column in the paper for years. I know that you really understand young people. I do hope you will answer me as I know

young people going through the same mental agony that I am. I am a young girl of eighteen - next month. My father and I have clashed, we quarrel, argue and hate each other intensely. We've come to the point where he utters insulting names and cruel remarks, follows and shames me before my friends. He does not wish me to have girl or boy friends. He insists that when a young boy and girl are friends only evil can result. I feel that I should be allowed to go out at least once a week. My mother approves of my friends, and would allow me to go out. My father thinks narrow mindedly and will see no view point other than his own. It has come to the point where his presence is hateful. He has driven me to the point of thinking that death would be better than going on like this. I feel that my youth will not be lasting; so far things have not been easy for us and I would like to have the memory of a happy girlhood. He says that my being of age has no bearing on the matter. I am finishing school, and am dependent upon him. Can you tell me if I am wrong, or what to do, I would gladly make amends. Please be gracious enough to answer me. I beg your pardon if I have taken up your valuable time (L. C. [female] to Angelo Patri, Box 20, 18 September 1932).

I have read several of your articles perused over a book or two of yours and know you are glad to help young people. I am a boy fifteen years of age. At the date of this writing I am thinking strongly of leaving home with another boy. We will go to Hollywood. Now Mr. Patri I can imagine the smile that is flitting over your face if you have read the above. In your mind you think: another foolish addelescent, he is beginning to realize he is an individual, he wants to know things about the unusual. But Mr. Patri as you may have guessed I want to be an actor. I am not going at this blindly. I know I possess acting talent. I know what it takes. I also realize that there are fourteen thousand registered extras. But I also know that it is in me to act as well as any of the actors I have seen. Now Mr. Patri if it were not for the fact that I am a junior in High school with loving parents, I would make my way to the famous city and start the climb to Mt. Olympus. But they wish me to go to school, my mother is anxious for me to do something with service as the object. . . . What would you advise me to do? I will take your advice for (If you will excuse the slang) you know your stuff. . . . (H. M.[male] to Angelo Patri, Box 5, 29 November 1927).

"Dear Mr. President"

Several of the children's letters in the 1930s were addressed not to the Children=s Bureau or to Angelo Patri but to the President of the United States (then Franklin Delano Roosevelt). The letters were found among the Children's Bureau papers because they had been forwarded to the Bureau with a request from the White House that the agency respond.

I am writing you to see if you could help a little boy like me. I am thirteen years of age and in the seventh grade at school and am making the highest grades in my class so I expect to be valedictorian of my class when I graduate next June. My problem is this, I stammer very badly so much so that it would be impossible for me to get up before a crowd and make a talk. I wonder if you know of any school where I could go and be cured of my stammering before time for me to graduate next June. My parents are very poor and could not send me to a school where expenses would run into a few hundred dollars. So far I have been able to locate only one school for stammerers and they charge so much it is impossible for me to attend now. I thought perhaps there would be a free school or at least one where I could pay as I am able. If you know of any place where I could be cured and would let me know I would be everlastingly grateful as life has gotten to be almost not worth living to me. I realize you are

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a very busy man but hope you can see fit to help me some way (T. D. [male] to President F.D.R., Box 519, 9 October 1933).

I am a small child at the age of 12 and have been good for the year and last year. Will you please give me my permission to live with my Grandmother the rest of my life or write a letter to my mother and father telling them that I should have more consentancen [consideration?] around home and in the public. I have been watching them for quite few months and I have noticed that they don't care for me as much as most most mothers and fathers do about their children. I am the only one in my family and my mother has never been skoled for a thing that the other person done & she don't know how it feels. I hope you & your family all of the succuss (R. H. [female] to President F.D.R., Box 519, 29 May 1934).

While every one has gone off and left me this morning I will try and write you a few lines. I am a girl 15 years old, brown hair, blue eyes and freckled complection. My father is a trucker but never seems to make any money we owe very much. "The S. L. Drive" highway goes right in front of our house the men are here now cleaning the highway. I can't go to school because I have to work to hard at home, but still mother and Dad seem to think I don't do anything. I have a big brother they send him to school and buy him pretty clothes while I haven't hardly any clothes. What I do have are not pretty like other girls one. Daddy drinks very much and always is cussing me. I wonder why they can be so mean to me if I'm really their child. I used to play my guiator every spare minute I had but I didn't play to suit mother and she made me stop. Mr. Roosevelt I am so very unhappy what can I do that will make my life happy? I know you haven't time to fool with a little girl like me, but you was the only one I know to tell my story to. Well I'll stop for I have to scrub the floors and get dinner before mother gets back. Love, P.S. Answer soon as possible. My parents would whip me if they knew I wrote you. I'll wait for the mail though so please ans (H. W. [female] to President F.D.R., Box 702, 8 October 1938).

"He kicks and hits me and makes me so nervous I don't know what to do"

The President was not the only one to receive letters from children living in oppressive homes. Patri got them, too.

I am a boy of 14 yrs. my name is H.. I have a brother named R. he has all the pleasures a boy would want my father can be so nice to my brother but to me he is very crabby he is forever finding fault with me and he is very unreasonable with me. I listen to your broadcasting and like it very much. Can you advise me how to act toward my brother and father. I am Sincere. Please do not speak of this letter on the radio as I fear the worst. Please reply by mail to my letter. Thank you (H. S. [male] to Angelo Patri, Box 17, 9 May 1932).

Patri responded to this child as he did to all the other children whose letters are filed at the Library of Congress. What is unusual, however, is that the child wrote back, giving us a rare view of the kind of dialogue that could develop between the high school principal and his youthful admirers.

Dear H: I would like you to sit down and thoughtfully go over the situation and then write to me exactly what you do that brings this attitude toward you from your people. What is they find fault

with? What is they think you are failing to do? Tell me exactly what happens and I will do my best to help you set yourself right. There is always a way out of a difficulty, but before we can find it we have to know the nature of the difficulty. I am very glad you wrote to me and I shall be looking for your answer (Angelo Patri to H. S., Box 17, 2 June 1932).

I received your letter on the 4 [of June] I sat right down as soon as I got it school on Monday and wrote this letter. At night I have the dishes to do, cellar to clean and lawn to cut and water after I come from work at the garage. My brother rides his bike or goes swimming he has been in swimming about 50 times where I haven't been in once. At Christmas time my brother asked for a bike he got one which cost \$30.98 and my father said I couldn't have anything over \$2.00. I asked for a ring I got a .50 ring and I haven't worn it more than a week because he that is my father took it away and has never gave it back. After I have done the dishes the best I can he says they are dirty then he kicks and hits me and makes me so nervous I don't know what to do. On Sunday after we have had a big dinner every body goes out and leaves me with all the dishes to do. And I am told not to leave the house. Every thing I get is taken away from me. I had a poll-parrot given to me from a very good friend, then I had a wite rat he tried to get rid of it but he could not. Mr. Patri I have something to tell you that an old man who knows my father very well, he told me that, Lord would surely punish him because he is marrid and yet goes out with other girls. . . . [H]e used to make me so nervous I had to taken out of school and go to the hospitle. I hope you can help me. Your friend. Hope you can read this without glasses (H. S. [male] to Angelo Patri, Box 17, 7 June 1932).

Not surprisingly, some of the letters detailing abuse were written by children who described themselves in very negative terms.

I am writing to you as a real pal. As one who has a great understanding of and sympathy for my type. Every article you write seems to be directly to me. I am fourteen years old and in first term high of E. H. H.S. I am coming to you with a miserable confession, which I hope will be solved by you. This of course will be personal between you and me. Lord only knows that you certainly are what your name means. Well here goes. I am one who greatly *fears* my father as well as my mother. Not so much mother as Dad. Alas and alack - my report card came and Oh! I failed in more than I expected, I failed in Latin and Biology. I feared facing my father because he thinks so much of me more than I am worthy of. I kept preparing him the later part of this month that I would not pass Biology because of my horrid drawing. Oh! I did not think I would fail in Latin. I did! Well, I erased the "F" which was on my card and the red circle around it and showed the card. I had it signed and re fixed it! Well I do go to Sunday school and I know a low, filthy sin when I hear of it. And I always tell others right ways and here I did this. It is all right now but my conscience what will I do. As it is I am a nervous wreck. Always biting my nails. I am not perfectly healthy either. I have "sinus" trouble ear aches, and, I was told in school my eyes are not good! But to make things worse my darling Dad and I are the best of pals. He always takes me out and does things for me. Dad is very bright. He graduated from A. College, B. University, and a college preparing for lawyers. He was a teacher for two years and when he took a test to enter college as other schools gave he came out second highest in the City! I also have two sisters at C. University who get perfectly wonderful works way up in the nineties. My father in other words expects the same from me. Please Oh! P L E A S E -----Help! How shall I come out with this horrid thing. My father will lose so much love for me. I am disappointing him so. It will be

horrid. Besides he scolds so horridly and he hits me when he gets angry at me Oh! I am afraid. . . . (L. R. [female] to Angelo Patri, Box 11, 30 October 1929).

I am fifteen years of age, a lower senior in high school, and I wonder if you can answer a question for me. Before proceeding, I wish to tell you that I read your column nightly; both enjoy and analyze it. I read it entirely, then underline the major ideas and finally study those underlined as a given assignment is studied. Some, I paste into a book for future reference. I write poetry exclusively, and have recently completed an autobiography, in which I've mentioned the fact, "My interest in child psychology is great and I follow up a column written by a fine child psychologist." Please do not vaguely imagine that I'm trying to flatter you, because every word I write is in earnest. This is the question: "Does every child, at one time or another, pass through a phase of laziness?" If I refrain from obeying a command, which has of late occurred frequently my parents refer it to laziness. I have just begun to notice this and I am miserable from the constant reminder of my extreme laziness. I think my parents should regard my condition as temporary, and treat it with skill and patience, and not make a scene each and every time. My father keeps remarking, in my presence, "I'll knock it out of her even if violence is necessary." I understand child psychology well; much better, I fear, than do my parents, and it hurts me to see them do the opposite of what they ought to, when dealing with a child. They are far from ignorant, but they are losing my respect and confidence slowly but surely. Perhaps I'm too young yet to read your column and to criticize my parents. Perhaps. Will you answer me, Mr. Patri, by use of the enclosed envelope, as soon as your convenience allows? (T. K. [female] to Angelo Patri, Box 24, 13 February 1933).

How may I overcome fear? I am a young lady 20 years old. My friends say that my personality is decidedly winning when I let myself go, but much of the time I am all tied up. I will relate a few incidents which will help you approach my problem. The family has always struggled against poverty, however having periods which were better than others. When I have gone to school with toes sticking out, I have been so self conscious that I felt paralyzed. I have gone to school hungry a few times too. Poverty however has its advantages. It has made the whole family go-getters and Daddy is finally successful in business. At ten years old, we were crowded for bedroom [space] and because my parents had implicit confidence in my grandfather, I slept with him. He was weak or low and was too familiar not going to the last step, however. I carried the guilt of this sex play for three years until the torture became horrible that my mother asked me what was the matter and I told her. Then she explained that I was forgiven and shouldn't carry any more guilt. . . . (J. S. [female] to Angelo Patri, Box 35, 21 September 1938).

"Each night I find myself almost sick with remorse over the day's unhappiness"

Low regard for oneself was a theme of a number of other letters as well. A call from a child could be a call in the proverbial wild.

Today the psychiatrist told me about the way to get children. I knew how it was done before, but he told me and also illustrated it on paper. I couldn't get it out of mind, and now tonight I slipped twice. I had just begun to think I had mastered the temptation. It is very hard to believe him when he says such practices are harmless when I have read in several psychology books that the punishment besides the mental remorse is insanity or at least half wittedness. This sex problem must have ruined the

minds of many people and the nervous systems too. Tomorrow will be a new day and I will begin my fight against sinful temptation once more. Next week I am going to have all my teeth extracted. But what's the use of me getting my physical health repaired when I am ruining myself in another way. I wish I had a dog. Very sincerely yours, P.S. I love my mother more than anyone knows. Enclosed is a picture of the maid we had and myself. My daddy made the swing. Will you please enclose the picture again? (J. R. M. [female] to Angelo Patri, Box 25, 23 November 1933).

I feel as though I was stuck between two high walls with no way out, nothing to do but be a "good - for - nothing." Running away, would'nt help because I can't leave myself behind and I seem to be my chief trouble. I used to try to reform but I've gotten to where I can't even ressurect courage to do that. I'm afraid, just plain scared of growing up as useless and worthless as I am. Since I first went to school people have disliked me and found fault with me from my hair and walk to my very morals. I suppose you'll say it's because I'm in my teens that I feel this way and perhaps it is, but I have been a mess since long before I ever thought of getting to be fifteen and being hopeless isn't imagination. Of course it was as I grew older that I realized the necessity for being something in this world. The trouble is I'm getting so I can't stand hearing my faults told to me and other people, by everyone from family to school chum. People have told me what was wrong with me, but how to help it? No. So I laid awake nights planning how good I'd be when I was a little girl and now how I will make myself reform. But my faults just increased it seems, and I'm afraid to live on this earth, with all my faults, and I've given up thinking of ways to change, but everybody, including my parents, are still working over-time telling me what I shouldn't do. I'm trying to sound cheerful but I'm really very serious. This all has gotten me to acting very much like a moron. I can[t] stand hearing what's wrong with me, trying, failing trying again for about three months, then I begin holding my ears, then I tell them all to shut up, and then when nobody's around I have a nice case of hysterics. After that I feel better and make out an outline, list, schedule, or something else I have thought of to assist in my reformation, and start all over again. . . . Please tell me what to try next? My Dad won't even speak to me unless necessary, he dislikes me so . . . (H. S. B. [female] to Angelo Patri, Box 33, 28 May 1937).

"I would like to hear your opinion about my daddy and my two older brothers and sister"

Finally, there were letters where children said that their brothers and sisters were cruel to them or another family member. There also were letters where children were concerned about a sibling's or parent's welfare.

I am sorry that I didn't write and tell you about my self sooner. Well, I am eleven years old, I am in the seventh grade, I have a sister and brother, they are both younger. How can I make my sister understand that she is not to touch my things? I tried to keep my temper back today when I found that she had been in my room and messed it up, for she broke my doll and crib, she lost some of my dolls clothes and wrote on my wall too. I think that I have my temper more under control. Oh, I forgot to tell you that I went past your house last week. I want you to keep on the radio. [I]f you don't [keep on,] you tell the Cream of Wheat Co. that I won't eat cream of Wheat. I have notused that the children at school don't tease me any more. I get angry but then I get over that by just sitting down at my desk and not saying a word. Today I was angry at my teacher and I did that, was that right? Some time I might come to see you. Please tell me what days that you are home. Love P.S. Remember to keep on the air (L. G. [female] to Angelo Patri, Box 18, 8 June 1932).

I feel very bold to ask your personal advice on this matter but if it is possible for you to help and you are willing to do so I shall feel extremely grateful to you. I have a sixteen year old brother who is going through a very unhappy time. Perhaps it is adolescence. At any rate he is gloomy, grouchy, and very determined to have his own way. This is not exactly his own fault as he has had practically his own way all his life. He entered High School in September but has played truant so much that he was finally discharged. His objection to school like so many other boys' is that you have to study such "silly" things as Botany and languages as well as the things that are really worth while. Now, my opinion of him is that there is a whole lot of good, fine "stuff" in him. He is honest and honorable and is generous and kind. But he is terribly difficult to manage. Anything "high-brow" is disgusting to him - apparently - and yet he admits that one must be educated if he is to accomplish anything and says he wants an education but doesn't want all the "extra" and to him seemingly unnecessary subjects. His parents have been able to do nothing with him. I am very much afraid that the chief inspiration he gets from them now is scolding. I know he must be very miserable and very depressed, and I want to get him over this awful time and have him come through a better person instead of a failure as he surely will unless something wakes him up and shows him that there is a chance for him to make something of himself . . . (L. B. [female] to Angelo Patri, Box 2, 28 December 1923).

I am a girl 10 1/2 years of age. I am always listening to your broadcast over the radio, about parents and children; therefore I would like to hear your opinion about my daddy and my two older brothers and sister. I believe they are acting unfair against our daddy who is always trying his best for his children. My oldest brother is married and is a father of a child. My sister who is twenty-two years of age lives with us. The younger brother who is twenty - years of age does not live with us because he doesn't think he has a father. I heard him saying that to ma-ma. Ma-ma did not answer anything, but I felt like telling him "if you have no father than I am not your sister." However, I was afraid for ma-ma. Several weeks ago on a Sunday night daddy went to the married son's house. When he rang the bell, the daughter-in-law looked to see who it was. The son was in back of her. When he saw daddy he gave a big laugh and turned away as if he didn't know him. He had made a party for the twenty year old brother. My oldest sister was also there. On the next day she told me that the action of the brother was right, because he had a party he didn't have to call daddy in. Do you think that the action of my brother was right to make a fool out of his own father? Please give me your opinion. I thank you. I am enclosing a self-addressed stamped envelope. Thanking you in advance, I am (L. T. [female] to Angelo Patri, Box 27, 15 March 1934).

DISCUSSION

What prompted the children to write? Actually, the more basic question may be, how did the children *know* to write, that is, what made them think that sending a letter to a non-familial authority figure was a viable way to deal with a personal problem?

Today, with millions of people seeking guidance from television, radio, and print celebrities, it may seem only "natural" that children in the early twentieth century would look to someone outside their families for assistance. Explaining why these children wrote, however, requires an understanding of the period in which they lived, because the likelihood that someone would turn to a

non-familial authority figure and the kind of information expected in return has varied over time. Although child rearing advice in one form or another has been dispensed throughout history, the Progressive Era and the Machine Age were periods of increased attention to the science of child rearing, which means, among other things, that traditional modes of parenting (e.g., relying on generational lore) were being challenged. As a corollary to this, the extent to which people conceived of the family as either a private enclave immune to intervention, or a public institution subject to the folkways and mores of the community, also changed. More and more, family life was subjected to the scrutiny of "experts." Thus, it was during the Progressive Era and the Machine Age that social work was professionalized and bureaucratized, compulsory schooling became the norm, and pediatrics and child psychology gained in power and prestige (Cravens 1985, Hawes 1997, Pawluch 1983). The Children's Bureau is but one example of these shifts. Its very purpose was to tell parents how to raise their children "the government way" (Ladd-Taylor 1986).

Still, it is interesting and somewhat unexpected that children themselves would choose to take pen in hand, since the whole child study movement was geared to help parents raise their kids. If the letters are to be believed, we would have to conclude that some children were caught up in the movement, too. Youngsters talked about how they were "daily readers" of Patri's columns and "perusers" of his books. One 15 year old said she not only anticipated Patri's column, she analyzed it: "I read it entirely, then underline the major ideas and finally study those underlined as a given assignment is studied. Some, I paste into a book for future reference" (T. K. [female] to Angelo Patri, Box 24, 13 February 1933). This particular high school student also claimed to have a greater knowledge of child psychology than her father or mother. But, after reading the letters, we see that she was not the only one to belittle her parents for being out of touch.

Part of what was going on, no doubt, was that the people from whom the children sought help were familiar to them--veritable household names. During the heyday of radio in the 1930s, the President of the United States certainly was a presence in many a home. The same could be said of Patri who, besides having a syndicated newspaper column, had a child rearing program on the air. Said one girl to Patri: "It seems strange that during a period of mental distress I should turn to a stranger. But it seems as though I know you" (L. C. [female] to Angelo Patri, Box 20, 18 September 1932). Reported another: "I have a definite picture of you formed in my mind, and I'm going to write to you as if I were talking to someone who is sure to understand" (M.O. [female] to Angelo Patri, Box 36, 1 June 1939). A third disclosed that she had gone past Patri's house and wanted to know what days he planned to be in, so she could come by to see him. Understanding the connection between ratings and revenue, she also threatened to boycott Patri's sponsor if his show was cancelled: "I want you to keep on the radio. [I]f you don't [keep on,] you tell the Cream of Wheat Co. that I won't eat Cream of Wheat" (L. G. [female] to Angelo Patri, Box 18, 8 June 1932).

Some of the children assumed that Patri's primary clients were fathers and mothers, and that their writing to him was out of the ordinary: "I know that you get most of your letters from adults, but here you have a letter from a 13 year old girl, grade A" (L. E. [female] to Angelo Patri, Box 34, May 1938). And: "I realize that you are an authority on solving problems for parents, but I would like to have you make an exception in my case" (N. R. G. [female] to Angelo Patri, Box 35, 23 October 1938). Most of the children, however, did not appear to think twice about whether it was

appropriate for a youngster to write, and a few conveyed the sense that Patri was there *for them*: "I am writing to you as a real pal. As one who has a great understanding of and sympathy for my type. Every article you write seems to be directly to me" (L. R. [female] to Angelo Patri, Box 11, 30 October 1929).

Did the children's requests for help make any difference in their lives? It is hard to say, because we do not know what happened to these children--who today would be in their seventies or eighties or would be deceased. We can read the letters that the Children's Bureau and Patri sent in response and wonder what effect they might have had, but that is about as far as we can go. (In the case of the parents' letters, there were a number of cases where the files contained an ongoing correspondence between the advisor and the advisee [see LaRossa 1997]. Only one of the photocopied children's files reflected such an exchange.)

The impact of the children's letters to the President was that the children's laments were routed to the Children's Bureau. The 1934 letter from the "small child at the age of 12" who wanted permission to live with her grandmother, because her parents did not care for her "as most mothers and fathers do about their children," was forwarded to the Bureau where it got the attention of Bureau Chief, Katherine Lenroot:

My dear R.: The President of the United States is always glad to have letters from children or their parents, but of course it is not possible for him to reply to all these letters personally and so he asks people who would be especially interested to answer some of them for him. It is not within the power of the President or anyone in Washington to arrange for you to live with your grandmother. The only person who could make such a decision if your parents did not agree, would be a judge. I am wondering whether your parents do not care for you a great deal more than you think. Very often children of your age miss the expressions of affection which were given them when they were little and imagine that their mothers and fathers do not care for them as much as they used to, when as a matter of fact the change is due simply to part of the natural experience of growing up. However, it may be that you do need help and understanding from some outside person. I am writing to a friend in Amarillo who is interested in children and their parents, asking whether she could not put you in touch with some older person who could be a friend to you. With best wishes (Katherine Lenroot to R. H. [female], Box 519, 21 June 1934).

As for Patri's responses, we know what he advised, but we do not know what happened after that. One might think that, being an adult himself, he would inevitably side with adults, that is, the parents. But the truth is that his opinions could vary. (I say "being an adult himself" rather than "being a parent himself," because Patri did not have any children.) For example, on the air rifle and bedtime questions, Patri agreed with the parents: no beebie gun, and in bed early. On the time-to-leave-for-athletic-class issue, Patri said he needed more information before he could deliver a ruling: "I am afraid I cannot give you an opinion because I don't know enough about the conditions. Had you told me your age, how far away the Club is and if it is a place to which your parents wish you to go I might have been able to answer your question" (Angelo Patri to P. G. [male], Box 18, 7 July 1932). On the have-a-dog problem, Patri agreed with the child: "I think you ought to have that dog. I am quite sure a boy of your intelligence and understanding would take care of him" (Angelo Patri to S. C. [male], Box 17, 1 September 1931). And on whether the son needed to help his father at the

newstand on weekends, Patri said he did not think he should: "I do not think it is right for you have to give up your Saturdays and Sundays if there is any other way out. I think it would be much better for you to pay someone to relieve your father for a few hours each day than for you to give up all your recreation" (Angelo Patri to D. W. [male], Box 18, 15 June 1932). Finally, in response to the "sixteen year old girl of Italian parentage" who complained about her parents, and especially about her father, for having "those old Italian ideas about the conduct of a girl," Patri (who was born in Italy) did precisely what the child requested and wrote directly to the father: "I received a letter from your daughter saying that she will soon be a girl without friends. May I ask you to please give her a chance to meet her friends at her home. Children need friends of their own age in order to grow normally and if the home is open for them they will not need to go outside to fulfill this necessity" (Angelo Patri to Mr. R., Box 11, 19 September 1929).

Did the parents of the children realize that Patri would sometimes side with their children rather than with them? Some did. One mother was so fearful of the possibility that she destroyed her child's letter: "As you remember (or through your files) last year, I asked for your advice. I waited and waited for an answer, but none seemed to come. It was recently that my mother admitted to me that she received and opened my letter. Being afraid that I might follow your advice, mother tore up the letter and burned it" (W. M. [male] to Angelo Patri, Box 31, 5 March 1936). Angelo Patri was marketed to his readers and listeners as "The Children's Friend," and the children who wrote to him apparently saw him that way. Parents may have too, but a few also saw the association between Patri and their children as a threat to their parental prerogatives.

Among the letters sent, the ones that are the most troubling are those that detail physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Many, though not all, of these letters come from young girls, some of whom fault themselves for being targets--classic cases of blaming the victim. The children's words burn a hole in our soul. We anguish over their plight, and now many years later can only speculate on how they fared: "Daddy drinks very much and always is cussing me. I wonder why they can be so mean to me if I'm really their child. . . . Answer as soon as possible. My parents would whip me if they knew I wrote you" (H. W. [female] to President F. D. R., Box 702, 8 October 1938). "My father and I have clashed, we quarrel, we argue and hate each other intensely. We've come to the point where he utters insulting names and cruel remarks, follows and shames me before my friends" (N. R. G. [female] to Angelo Patri, Box 35, 23 October 1938). "After I have done the dishes the best I can he [my father] says they are dirty then he kicks and hits me and makes me so nervous I don't know what to do" (H. S. [male] to Angelo Patri, Box 17, 7 June 1932). "At ten years old, we were crowded for bedroom [space] and because my parents had implicit confidence in my grandfather, I slept with him" (J. S. [female] to Angelo Patri, Box 35, 21 September 1938). "My parents . . . beat [my brother], stand him up before the rest of our horrible family and laugh at him, tell him that he is a fool, that he is good for nothing, and that he will end up by being a ditch digger" (S. P. [female] to Angelo Patri, Box 31, 12 March 1936).

These letters and others uncovered by historians writing on the topic of family violence (e.g., Gordon 1988) underscore the tragedy that scholars did not "discover" child abuse as a major social problem until the late 1960s and early 1970s. The evidence was there in the early twentieth century (and before) for the child study experts to see, yet it was ignored. Imagine the countless number of

lives that would have been changed for the better, had the level and rate of abuse been acknowledged sooner.

Also disturbing are the letters from adolescent girls who are riddled with self doubt: "I feared facing my father because he thinks so much more of me than I am worthy of" (L. R. [female] to Angelo Patri, Box 11, 30 October 1929). "I'm afraid, just plain scared of growing up as useless and worthless as I am. Since I first went to school people have disliked me and found fault with me from my hair and walk to my very morals" (H. S. B. [female] to Angelo Patri, Box 33, 23 May 1937). The letters remind us of the extraordinary demands placed on kids and how females often are the most vulnerable. "Saving the selves of adolescent girls" apparently was as serious a challenge then, as it is today (Pipher 1994).

While it is gut wrenching to read the reports of abuse and self recrimination, it is also heart warming to see the stories of intimacy and care. "I have a sixteen year old brother who is going through a very unhappy time" (L. B. [female] to Angelo Patri, Box 2, 28 December 1923). "I believe [my two older brothers and sisters] are acting unfair against our daddy who is always trying his best for his children" (L. T. [female] to Angelo Patri, Box 27, 15 March 1934). Testimonials of praise are less in abundance in the collections, not because loving parents and siblings were rare in the early twentieth century, but because the general purpose behind advice-seeking letters was, well, to *complain*. Which brings us back to the value of the letters for understanding children as "interpretive reproducers" (Corsaro 1997).

Scholars who have examined the relationship between the institutionalization of the child study industry and the sociology of childhood have either painted an oppressive view of children, showing how an educational bureaucracy forced youngster to conform, or described children in an almost perpetual state of flight, running away from adults and toward other children. While the former characterization focuses on child adaptation and internalization and comes closer to a deterministic view of childhood, the latter focuses on the development of sophisticated peer group structures and comes closer to a constructivist view. Thus, historian Joseph M. Hawes, in his book *Children Between the Wars: American Childhood 1920-1940*, says that the science of child rearing had the effect of making young America "much more rigidly stratified," and that the emergence of a professionally legitimated caste system, separating adults and children, contributed to the burgeoning of a youth subculture in the 1920s and 1930s. In other words, to combat the stifling effect of child science, manifested in greater interference in their everyday lives (with compulsory schooling being just one example), children joined with other children to create their own age-segregated worlds (Hawes 1997, p. 3). In a similar vein, William A. Corsaro devotes four chapters, in his book *The Sociology of Childhood*, to "children's cultures," hammering home the point that children are "active agents" (Corsaro 1997).

What is theoretically interesting about the letters presented here, however, is that they do not depict children in an adult avoidance mode. These are children who work with adults and particularly experts to try to reach a desired goal and who sometimes are successful at getting what they want. Using one adult (the expert) against another adult (a parent), the children are complementary participants in the child study system, much the same as child workers are complementary participants in the economic system (see Corsaro 1997, pp. 34-35). The Children's

Bureau and Angelo Patri correspondence thus suggest that yesterday's children were not necessarily objects of child science and specimens to be studied. If having the gumption to complain is an indicator of being unwilling to let things "just happen," and if knowing where to strategically lodge a complaint is a measure of cunning, then these children could be said to be serious players in the child rearing game. Not simply for them, but in and through them, the self-help movement was constructed and maintained.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This research was supported by grants from the National Science Foundation (SES-8812583) and Georgia State University (RIG-99017). I would like to thank Maureen Mulligan LaRossa for her input to the project and her suggestions for this chapter; Pamela Priddy Daniels, Betty Anne Gordon, and Ronald Jay Werner-Wilson for their assistance in organizing the historical materials; Aloha South of the National Archives, and Fred Bauman and Mary Wolfskill of the Library of Congress, for their help in accessing the Children's Bureau and Angelo Patri collections, respectively; and the family of Angelo Patri, especially Frank Merolla, for making the Patri papers available for study.

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