



## **Taking Parenting Public: The Case for a New Social Movement**

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### **INTRODUCTION (Excerpt) Nancy Rankin**

The Dow Jones has climbed fivefold since 1987, breaking records and rewarding investors with huge gains for much of the nineties. Now imagine if during the same period there had been a similar index measuring parent well-being. The headlines would have looked quite different: *Stocks Soar; Parenting Plummet*. Because despite more than a decade of prosperity, mothers and fathers are struggling to do a good job raising their children.

You need only listen to the language we use to describe the daily dilemmas facing parents today - *the juggling act, the moral meltdown, the time crunch, toxic entertainment, the sandwich generation* - to know that these are stressful times. At home, we see parenting increasingly squeezed into the residual moments of our busy lives and contracted out to others. In the public arena, as well, reality falls short of rhetoric. We hear endless talk from the Republicans about "family values" and from the Democrats about "working families." Yet in the 2000 presidential campaign, as just one example, both parties proposed spending three times as much federal money on buying prescription drug coverage for our oldest citizens as on improving schools for our youngest. Whether personally or as a nation, when we underinvest in parenting, the bottom line cannot be good for our children.

The material drawn together in this volume present a litany of sobering evidence that parenting today gets too little time and attention and not enough support and status. The essays were originally prepared to provoke debate at a series of roundtable discussions hosted by the National Parenting Association. Parents, academics, and leaders from the worlds of business, labor, government, religion and the media were invited to examine the state of parenting at the close of the twentieth century. We deliberately sought out different points of view. The forums were noteworthy because, though parenthood is a defining experience in the lives of nearly all the participants, such a diverse group of men and women almost never come together to speak publicly about it.

This was brought home to us at one of our first sessions. As is common at meetings of this sort, we began by going around the table and introducing ourselves. One by one, the participants defined themselves with their impressive credentials and titles, until we came to Enola Aird, who stopped us dead in our tracks. She said, "I like to introduce myself, first, as a mother." Aird, of course, could have started with other items from her glowing resume - Yale-educated lawyer, think-tank scholar, radio producer, and so on - but she chose instead to offer, first and foremost among her identities, her role as mother.

"Taking parenting public," then, is about parents, ourselves, giving our roles as mothers and fathers more priority in our personal lives. It is about raising our voices and speaking out loud about our concerns as parents. And it is about creating a sea change in our culture that gives the important work of parenting the recognition it deserves. Deep attitudinal change is needed to drive institutional change - a rethinking of how we organize our work lives, schools, religious and communal groups, and our public places and policies to support mothers and fathers in nurturing children. Such change is not meant to undermine the accomplishments of the women's movement. On the contrary, if we really want to give women equal opportunities, then we need to transform other aspects of society to make it succeed. This is not a plea to return to the 1950s. It is a call to imagine new paths for the twenty-first century.

Parents, of course, have a tremendous stake in how well they do at raising their kids. But society has an important stake as well. When children grow up to be productive, caring and ethical citizens, co-workers and neighbors, the public reaps the benefits. And of course, if parents fail to do a good job, society bears many of the costs. "Taking parenting public" recognizes that we are all stockholders in "the next generation."

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