



The Country Lifers' emphasis on children and education was neither surprising nor unique. Confronting so many difficulties in changing adult behavior and transforming established social groups, reformers naturally found childhood an inviting target. Certainly young people should be more malleable than their elders. "A far-sighted policy, such as the training of the young, is," E. A. Ross wrote, "preferable to the summary regulation of the adult."⁶⁴

Reformers saw danger as well as opportunity among the young; they were disturbed by just how far childhood in America diverged from the middle-class ideal. Jane Addams and other progressives worried particularly about rural and working-class children taken prematurely out of school and put to work. At the turn of the century, the middle class was stunned by the reality of child labor. "Walking up the long, orderly building, deafened by the racket," reported a visitor to a Southern textile mill, "you become suddenly aware of a little gray shadow flitting restlessly up and down the aisles—a small girl, and with bare feet and pale face. She has a worn and anxious aspect, as if a weight of care and responsibility rested already on her baby shoulders. . . . A thread breaks first at one end of the long frame, then at the other. The tiny fingers repair the damage at the first place and she walks listlessly to the other. . . . With a great shock it dawns on you that this child is working." Reformers refused to believe that any circumstances in working-class homes, any form of mutualistic family economy, truly justified sending such children out to wage work. "We know the curse of child labor," said Jacob Riis. "Experience has taught us that it is loss, all loss, ever tending downward. . . . Child-life and citizenship are lost; for the children of to-day are the men of tomorrow." To reformers, it was clear that all American children should have what Simon Patten called "the enormous advantage of prolonged childhood." Every working-class and agrarian child, that is, should have a more middle-class youth.⁶⁵

The same was true for upper-class children. Progressives relentlessly

blasted the upbringing of the wealthy. Upper-class families, David Graham Phillips complained, "educate their children to folly and superciliousness and economic helplessness or at best give them a training not in business, in useful labor, but in the truly aristocratic chicanery of high finance." Elite colleges only made matters worse for the typical rich man's son. "In place of a brain," Phillips lamented, "the boy acquired at college and elsewhere a lump of vanities, affectations and poses." As president of Princeton, Woodrow Wilson feared that universities were failing to educate the children of the upper class. "Colleges must not be mere country clubs in which to breed up a leisure class," Wilson warned in 1909. If the "sideshows" of leisure and pleasure were taking over for the education in the university's "main tent," he said in a revealing image, "I don't know that I want to continue as ringmaster. . . ."⁶⁶

Worrying about other classes' children and also their own, middle-class adults focused their fears on adolescence, the crucial period from the mid-to late teens when middle-class children should be preparing for adulthood. In his influential book, *Adolescence*, published in 1904, G. Stanley Hall, the president of Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, argued that youth recapitulated the stages of human evolution. Adolescence, corresponding to humanity's transition from savagery to civilization, was accordingly a difficult period. Progressives fretted over teenage sexuality, especially because puberty arrived increasingly earlier. They feared the dangers of sexual experimentation for adolescent girls. And they feared for adolescent boys, so much more likely than girls to leave school for the streets. Once again questioning the wisdom of individualism, some middle-class observers wondered whether mothers and fathers had allowed their children too much freedom. "We have removed from the single pair and their children all the props and discipline of the patriarchal family, and now we are rapidly democratizing the family," said Anna Garlin Spencer. "[W]e are even afraid of controlling effectively our own children lest we check their growth toward self-government." Fortunately, a solution was at hand in the nature of adolescence itself. This was, as reformers noted, "the period of childhood when character is plastic and can be moulded for good or evil as clay in the potter's hands."⁶⁷

To mold childhood "for good" and allow it to serve the progressives' transformative purpose, reformers had to make sure children were out of work, off the streets, in school, and under control. That meant, first of all,

the passage of laws limiting child labor. Naturally many employers, particularly Southern mill owners, resisted such legislation. Many working-class families, so dependent on income from their sons and daughters, also opposed this threat to their livelihood. But settlement workers and other middle-class reformers pressed hard for legislation. They had allies in organized labor, who believed that child labor forced down adult wages. In 1903, the child labor crusaders demonstrated their power. In New York, a child labor committee, formed by Florence Kelley and other settlement workers, led the drive for a model state law. In Illinois, settlement workers, women's clubs, and the state federation of labor helped to push a child labor bill through the legislature. In Alabama, the state's Child Labor Committee, sparked by Edgar Gardner Murphy, an Episcopal rector in Montgomery, won a law setting twelve as the minimum age for industrial work. Similar laws passed elsewhere, but loopholes and hostile courts limited their impact. Turning in frustration to federal power, Murphy, Kelley, Jane Addams, and Lillian Wald joined to form the National Child Labor Committee in 1904. But any kind of federal legislation faced strong opposition from employers, workers, Catholics hostile to state intrusion into family life, romantic defenders of the work ethic, and states-rights Southerners suspicious of Washington. In 1916, Congress finally enacted the Keating-Owen Child Labor Act, a modest measure that applied to less than 10 percent of wage-earning children. Ruling two years later in *Hammer v. Dagenhart*, the Supreme Court struck down the law as an unconstitutional violation of the limits of federal power over interstate commerce. Despite progressives' efforts, child labor was still pervasive in rural and urban America.⁶⁸

In addition to getting children out of work, reformers had to get them into school. Obviously education was crucial to any effort to reshape young Americans. "A child that came to this country and began to go to school had taken the first step into the New World," Rahel Golub affirmed. "But the child that was put into the shop remained in the old environment with the old people, held back by the old traditions, held back by illiteracy." Others put the promise of education more bluntly; E. A. Ross called it "'breaking in' the colt to the harness."⁶⁹

Around the country, progressives mounted a host of campaigns to improve public education and make it mandatory. Along with efforts to replace one-room country schools with "consolidated" schools, there were

attempts to raise spending, lengthen school terms, increase attendance, improve school buildings, raise teacher salaries, strengthen vocational training for working-class children, and add high schools. In the South, where education lagged behind the rest of the country, the drive for education was especially fervent. In 1901, the Southern Education Board, with Edgar Gardner Murphy as executive secretary, formed to publicize the need for reform and for increased taxes and appropriations. Southern education became one of John D. Rockefeller's favorite causes: from 1902 to 1909, the oil man put \$53 million into the General Education Board, which in turn funneled resources to various campaigns in the South.⁷⁰

Many Americans rejected education reform. Farmers and workers resisted compulsory attendance for their older children; immigrants, wary of coercive attempts to "Americanize" their children, maintained their own private schools; white Southerners worried about high taxes, Yankee interference, and the specter of educated African-Americans. Agrarians particularly sniffed out and resented the progressive assault on their values. "Individuality will be lost . . .," a rural critic of education reform complained. The one-room schoolhouse withstood the progressive attack. Nevertheless, the campaigns for education had a clear impact. From 1900 to 1909, the enrollment rate for children aged 5 to 19 in all types of schools rose from 50.5 per 100 to 59.2; public secondary-school enrollments grew from 519,000 to 841,000; expenditures per pupil in public schools increased from \$14 to \$24; and the average public school term lengthened from 144.3 days in 1900 to 155.3 days in 1909.⁷¹

As Ross's remark about the colt suggests, an aura of compulsion and coercion hung over the many campaigns for education across the country. There were the compulsory attendance laws, passed mainly in the North, that compelled children to stay in school at least to age fourteen. There was the increased centralization of authority in the hands of teachers and, above all, school boards. There was the obvious intent to transform pupils into dutiful, hardworking, loyal citizens.

The coerciveness of education reform can be overemphasized. As Southern whites clearly realized, a little education for blacks was a dangerous, liberating thing. Certainly some progressives wanted to encourage children's independence and individuality. "The most precious moment in human development," Jane Addams contended, "is the young creature's assertion

that he is unlike any other human being, and has an individual contribution to make to the world." This point of view was especially apparent in the work of Addams's friend, philosopher John Dewey. From 1896 until 1904, Dewey ran an experimental "Laboratory" School at the University of Chicago. Through the school and such books as *School and Society* and *The Child and the Curriculum*, Dewey helped to launch what would be known as "progressive" education. Believing that children should become full, individual participants in a democratic society, he wanted school to be a true participatory community for students.⁷²

Given the progressives' condemnation of individualism, their support of the child's individuality seems paradoxical. But there were limits to that support. Dewey did not think students should develop just as they pleased; they had to be guided. He warned against "the danger of the 'new education' that it regard the child's present powers and interests as something finally significant in themselves." Moreover, the progressives supported the child's individuality because it served their interests in the struggle to change the values and behavior of other classes. When they endorsed "the young creature's assertion that he is unlike any other human being," they were encouraging the child to break free from his parents' way of life. Working to reform the education of wealthy students at Princeton, Woodrow Wilson expressed the progressives' intentions with particular candor. "Our problem is not merely to help the students to adjust themselves to world life," he told an audience. "Our problem is to make them as unlike their fathers as we can." Further, some progressives expected schools to teach values other than individualism. Arguing for educational opportunities for African-Americans, the reformer Edgar Gardner Murphy enumerated the four key "disciplines" of the Southern common school: "punctuality," "order," "silence," and, beloved of progressives, "association."⁷³

In addition to transforming children's education, progressives knew they needed to transform children's leisure. In the 1900s, reformers generally accepted what Addams termed "the insatiable desire for play." They realized that adventurous youth had to be diverted from dance halls, saloons, and brothels, from criminal and sexual experimentation. "To fail to provide for the recreation of youth, is not only to deprive all of them of their natural form of expression," Addams insisted, "but is certain to subject some of them to the overwhelming temptation of illicit and soul-destroying plea-

ures." This recognition led to the expansion of "girls' work" and, especially, "boys' work" in the 1900s. There were rural clubs, encouraged by county agents of the United States Department of Agriculture, for farm youth; Federated Boys' Clubs for the urban working-class; and the junior departments of the YMCA and then the Boy Scouts for the sons of the middle class. Developing since the 1880s, the movement for urban playgrounds surged forward, with settlement workers in the lead, in the 1900s. The Playground Association of America, with Jane Addams as a vice president, formed in 1906. By 1909, 267 municipalities were managing 1,537 playgrounds. Adults also encouraged organized sports, particularly baseball. In New York City, money from Rockefeller and J. P. Morgan helped to launch the Public Schools Athletic League in 1903. Churches and settlements also sponsored ball teams.⁷⁴

In all these endeavors, there was an emphasis on combining release and control, freedom and supervision. Children were encouraged to play—and to change in carefully guided ways. The playground movement stressed the importance of adult supervision; the progressives wanted professional playground supervisors who would schedule and regulate children's activity. Reformers wanted working-class youth to learn middle-class rules of deportment or, at least, just to keep out of trouble. A playground supervisor, according to a Chicago handbook, "should praise every tendency of a boy or girl to sacrifice himself or herself for the good of the team. Show them that this is the only way to succeed—by unity of action. If you can develop this spirit, you have laid the foundation of cooperation, politeness, and good morals." Marion Lawrence, an upper-class woman of Boston, maintained the North Bennet Street Boys' Club for "underprivileged," mainly Irish and Italian, adolescent boys; the club rules said that members "mustn't get excited, chew gum, spit, swear, cheat or talk Italian." Catering to middle-class youth, the YMCA and the Boy Scouts emphasized the drive for individual achievement but also the necessity of team play.⁷⁵

Finally, progressivism addressed the special problem of orphaned and delinquent children. Here, especially, reformers blended compassion with a desire to transform young people. Opposed to the longtime practice of keeping orphans cooped up in asylums, progressives preferred to allow the inmates of orphanages to leave these "barracks" during the day to go to school and to participate in YMCA and other extracurricular programs—that is, to enjoy the transforming experiences devised for other children. Similarly, homes for young, unwed mothers increasingly emphasized rehabilitation in the Progressive Era.