

# The Insufferable Lot of the American Middle Class Child\*

SAMUEL TENENBAUM \*\*

**W** E IN America do not realize what a competitive, rivalrous, demanding society is this in which we live. Since the middle class represents the solid base, the synthesis of a culture, the lot of the American middle class child is particularly difficult, if not insufferable. J. M. Whiting and I. L. Child compared 47 societies studied by anthropologists as to the severity of parental demands placed on children. They concluded there were only two societies more severe with children than we are with our own middle class child.

As soon as the American middle class child is born, he becomes the object of solicitous care and concern. And what is the purpose of all this concern? It is to groom him so that he can outpace, outdistance, out-rival the neighbor's child and everyone else's child. Like a competing horse in a race, the child is critically and judgmentally watched for his potential. This surveillance starts almost from the day of his birth. An advertisement published by an insurance company shows a father holding a soft, cuddly infant, no more than a month or two old. Looking down at his child, the father says, "Thomas, I want to talk to you about college." Already little Thomas has begun to feel the duties and demands placed on him. For the middle class child, even the time he achieves toilet control, when he begins to walk and talk, become matters of invidious comparisons. "Look at that Milton there doing his business and look at you. . . ." The parent may think these thoughts or say them, but no matter what, the child feels them.

As soon as the child starts school, the middle class race becomes really serious. If their Thomas gets 90 percent, the parents always know a Milton who gets two, or three, or four 100 percents; so what is one 100 percent? If their Thomas gets into a college, the parents always know a Milton who got into a more prestigious college—on a scholarship, to boot. For it is no longer sufficient for an American middle class child to be a plain college graduate, he must be a graduate of a "prestige" college.

The whole idea behind this maneuvering is to create for their child a marketable package and for this the parents push, scheme, and manipulate; and this package involves graduation from a prestige college, prestige awards and scholarships, getting to know the right people so as to make the right contacts, so as to make the right friends, so as to make the right marriage, etc. Since a university degree is the minimum requirement—the union card—for any sort of upward mobility, of pushing ahead, the proportion of college students in America is probably larger than in any other society. Forty-five percent of our young people of college age are in colleges, compared with about eight percent in England and, perhaps, three to four percent in France.

No matter how good in character the child, if he does badly at school, he will be

\* Based on a paper presented in August 1969 before the Second International Congress of Social Psychiatry in London, England.

\*\* Samuel Tenenbaum, Professor, Long Island University, Brooklyn, New York

scorned and abused by his middle class parents. No matter how horrible in character the child, if he does brilliantly at school, if he is admitted to a prestige college and wins scholastic honors, his parents will be proud of him. Such a son can do almost anything and will be forgiven.

## The Frantic Parents

If not so tragic in import, it would be amusing to watch frantic middle class parents manage the academic careers of their tots, no older than five, six, and seven, as they scheme, manipulate, and use influence to gain their children's entrance into the right and proper private (public in England) schools. Since there has developed such competitive demand for these status schools, children at the age of six or seven may find themselves stamped as academic failures if they fail to pass examinations for these schools. It does not take much insight to understand how traumatic such failure can be for the small child—not quite comprehending what it is all about but desperately wanting to please his parents—as he is taken by his mother from school to school, only to learn that he has been rejected not once but several times because he has failed the devilish tests set for him. And it does not take much imagination to understand how his parents feel about the child and about their own sad lot when they discover that the children of their friends have passed these examinations and been admitted.

Middle class parents, I should add, are most ingenious in preventing their child from flunking out of his class. A prominent person of means had enough influence to have his son admitted to a prestige college, but the youth was expelled shortly thereafter. Said the father: "I found a hole of a college in the South where I doubt if the professors had learned how to read and, thank heavens, they gave him an A.B. And then I got my broker to give him a job." The father seemed pleased as he told the story, since he felt that he had now saved his son for middle class respectability.

Furthermore, middle class sex roles are

equally difficult, equally competitive. It is expected that the male child grow up tall, dark, and handsome. He should, like a troubadour of old, enchant women. When married he should play the role of a Don Juan to his wife, keep her perpetually entertained and above all happy; and, of course, he should be a generous provider. When he buys his resplendent home in the suburbs, he should also automatically take on added duties. After coming home from his city job, he should help his wife after supper with the dishes, help take care of the children, and see to the repair of his home. At the same time, he should be a leader of men—in the business world, in society, in the community. He should exemplify all virtues, but most important, he should always be big, big, and even bigger—successful, successful, and even more successful!

The role set for the woman is equally frightening. First of all, she should be very beautiful, with a beauty sufficient to inspire poetry and song. She should be smart, sophisticated, fashionable, chic, and, withal, be a glamorous career girl. Naturally, she should be a graduate of a prestige college. Her person should at all times be flawless, sanitized to the nth degree. Her home, equally sanitized, should reflect exquisite taste. When she entertains, she should be a charming hostess, witty, captivating, so that her husband's business associates and friends are enchanted. As a couple, they both should be popular and sought after for all purposes.

She should be a perfect mother, tender, maternal, gentle, know exactly what is the right and proper thing to do for her children under all circumstances. Although feminine, lacy, and frilly, she should be able to fight with the courage of a lion to protect her children from any jeopardy. To her husband her role is equally complex. She should be siren, mistress, wife, mother, companion, lover. And above all she should have intuition. By this is meant, I suppose, she should know what is exactly the right thing to do, the perfect solution for all problems that arise. If you heed at all American television, cinema, popular periodicals, you will know

that only woe and tragedy befall any male who is indifferent and, even worse, goes counter to a woman's intuition. So I suppose assigning to women this divine intuition has placed on her the burden of being all-knowing and all-wise.

## No Limit to Ambition

How hard it is in this competitive, rivalrous culture genuinely to share and to be happy over another's achievements! How easy it is to show concern and have genuine feeling of kinship and woe in the presence of ruin and death! Freud said that a funeral is a happy event for most people, since their competitor is gone from the scene and they are left behind as victors.

As Tennyson has so well said:

### Ambition

Is like the sea wave, which the more  
you drink

The more you thirst—yea—drink too  
much, as men

Have done on rafts of wreck—it  
drives you mad.

Our middle class society is obsessed by a desire to achieve and to outrank family and friends and to make friends and family feel inferior compared with one's own achievements. We have no compunction in consigning to ridicule and public scorn those who do not succeed. We have built up a whole vocabulary to describe such unfortunates. We call them lazy, stupid, incompetent, "good for nothing." They are even regarded with contempt by their own children and family. How many good, hard-working, conscientious, kindly souls have been broken and made into human debris by our society's insistence on success and more success! In the very nature of our competitive society—each trying to outachieve the other—there is inevitable failure.

"Hitch your wagon to a star," Emerson told us. And the misfortune is that so many fine and good people build their lives on such fanciful dreams. Some work ceaselessly to achieve this miracle, never giving up, no matter how unrealistic the goal; and at the

end all they have to show for their spent lives are failure and despair. They never stop trying to break the Empire State Building by banging their heads against it and wrecking their lives.

Even those who go through the motion of quitting this hopeless struggle do so with severe damage to their personalities, for there simmers within them a black stew of discontent, resentment, jealousy, and hate. There is no limit to ambition, only sleepless nights and a "lean and hungry look." Even those who are eminently successful in the struggle, those who have achieved mightily and have won the acclaim of their colleagues, continue to drive themselves to ever-greater effort and set their goals for ever-higher achievements.

## The Little Man

Since the emphasis in the American culture is on individualism, on going it alone and doing it alone, no one ever feels that his good is merged in a cooperative tribal sense. True enough, because of this, the person experiences triumphs and exaltations peculiarly of his own making. We are a society of many achievements, some indeed remarkable. We live with considerable ease and luxury; and for the most part our people have an abundance of food and good shelter. You probably know that the two major problems in the United States at present are finding parking places for our automobiles that clog our cities and keeping our waistlines in reasonable proportions because of overeating. In most other areas of the world, man's crucial problem is to find enough food so that he will not starve. Two-thirds of the human beings in this universe go to sleep at night hungry for lack of food. But I believe we are paying a terrible price in human values for the driving ambition, the competitiveness that has made these material goods possible.

Isolated, suffering, alone, the strongly competitive individual cannot resort even to his nearest kin for succor; for in his competitiveness, his living for success and achievement, we find all too often brother vying with

brother, friend with friend, family member with other family members, children with parents. In his travail, he cannot obtain what little comfort comes from acknowledging fear, guilt, weakness; for by the conventions he is expected to be strong and brave, so that often he hides behind a facade of fake bravado the small, suffering, little human being he is and we all are. And in truth one does not go in weakness to a rival for help.

His tragedy is further compounded in that the mighty things he creates and builds further alienate him from himself and from society. His mighty machines and his never-ceasing industry in the end dominate and enslave him. Our giant industries have become too big for man. His government, created to serve him, has in its vastness become so remote that he, the little man, is lost and engulfed. Even his social life has become complex, organized like a business, and—even worse—competitive.

### **An Empire of Things**

We have known millionaires who have died in big mansions in their massive beds, surrounded by five nurses and three doctors, but without a soul to touch their hand in human kindness. The struggle to achieve and to amass has created not human warmth, but an empire of things, remote and cold, and of no comfort in the deepest sense, outside of the ease of dying.

Man lives alone, he suffers alone, he dies alone. Many cannot cope with this sense

of being alone and many psychological problems result. Many break under the strain, unable to carry the load, especially when they cannot successfully compete; and their misfortunes seem to be much greater than their successes. The sense of being alone, of being unwanted, of being adrift on uncharted seas, of being weighed down with Job-like despair, is indigenous and inevitable in an individualistic and competitive culture. Psychiatrists and psychologists know the high price man has paid in broken and misspent lives for this pattern of conduct.

The existential reality is this: We—all of us—are on a sinking ship. Every day we are dying a little. Every day we are a step nearer to the cemetery. And Hobbes has warned us that the solitary life is "poor, nasty, brutish and short."

Because of these cultural pressures, our middle class, I believe, has become so driving, so ambitious, so competitive—obsessively and compulsively so—that its members are doing irreparable harm to themselves and their offspring. I ask: Is this, our competitive, achieving culture, destroying our capacity for good, warm, loving relationships—traits crucial to the good person? Are our ambitions devouring us? Are middle class parents with their insatiable demands for ever-higher achievement casting a blight on their offspring? Will these young people become driving and hard, not the soft and warm human beings so crucially essential if they are to become good husbands and wives and cooperating members of a society increasingly complex and difficult? □

---

# Instructor

☛ and Instructor Publication aids for the elementary teacher creating units of instruction . . . planning educational research in today's curricula . . . giving individualized or group instruction as practiced in today's school.

The Instructor Publications, Inc.

Dansville, N.Y. 14437

Copyright © 1969 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.