

Can Parents Love too Much? Adolf Matthias's Advice Manual "Wie erziehen wir unsern Sohn Benjamin" (1897)

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"That our Benjamin learns to be strong for his own happiness, to this our little advice book should contribute; it should strengthen in our Benjamin the force of pure feelings and sensing, firm will and regular accomplishing, so that he will be happy."^[1] Benjamin's happiness was the aim of Adolf Matthias's advice manual *Wie erziehen wir unsern Sohn Benjamin?* ("How Do We Educate our Son Benjamin?"). This manual offered parents advice for the education of their children, starting from day one and covering a wider range of topics: the child's temperament, intelligence, religiosity and even proper punishment for bad deeds and suitable rewards for good ones. The final chapter of the book was devoted to Benjamin's happiness. However, such happiness was not easily attained: the boy needed to be *strong enough*. This objective of childrearing – to be hardened for happiness – pointed to a powerful tendency in twentieth-century debates about children and emotion. The alternative path was clearly identified in the book as well. It was described as *Affenliebe* (literal: "monkey love") or "doting affection."^[2] Doting parents loved too much.

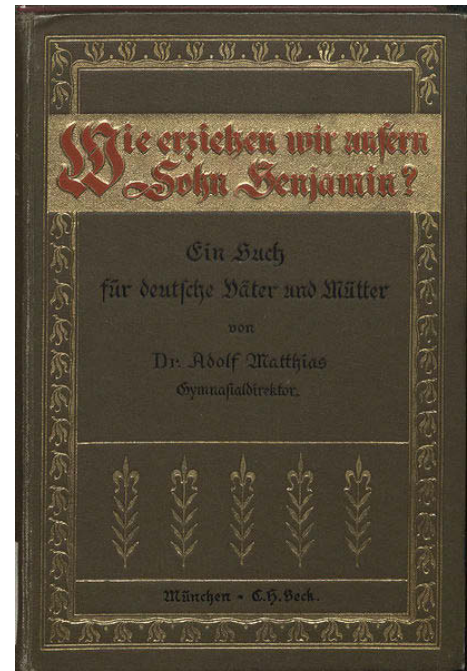
"*Affenliebe* cannot be hard, cannot refuse, cannot say No for the true well-being of the child [...]. *Affenliebe* lacks any clear consciousness in relation to the aim of education; she is shortsighted; she wants to treat the child well, but she chooses the wrong means; she gives in to momentary impulses instead of being guided by calm prudence and reason."^[3]

Seemingly, their unrestrained affection was directed at their child, but actually this was only the surface: "*Affenliebe* is in essence nothing else than self-love, which is not capable of any self-denial for the better of the child [...]."^[4] These parents were not really prepared to educate their child, but only wanted their own comfort and pleasure.

The German teacher Adolf Matthias published his advice book *Wie erziehen wir unsern Sohn Benjamin?* in 1897. It remained in print until 1922, with altogether 14 editions. The subject of the book, Benjamin, was not Matthias' actual son, but a generic figure, although Matthias certainly used some of his practical experiences as a father and teacher. This result was a typical manual for the bourgeois middle-class like many others in the nineteenth century. The book in its design and language clearly addressed a middle-class audience. Moreover, its author constantly invoked the value system of the bourgeoisie by stressing the importance of decency, thrift, prudishness and a certain form of bourgeois piety. The text also appealed to the gender order of the middle-class. The book stated its intended readership explicitly in the subtitle: *A Book for German Fathers and Mothers*. In light of the subsequent advice literature, it was certainly significant that Matthias addressed fathers directly. However, the text unmistakably identified different gender roles with different emotional tasks: the fathers served as the role-model for ratio, virility and toughness, while the mothers represented feeling, love and care.^[5]

Unsurprisingly, the problem of *Affenliebe* was also gendered in Matthias' account. Emotional excess existed only when a father was too weak to avert the influence of the overly caring mother. The figure of the 'monkey mother' had already appeared as a source of anxiety in the pedagogical debates about parenthood and childcare since the Enlightenment. These worries further intensified after the turn to the twentieth century. Interestingly, Matthias referred to Alfred Brehm's zoological and anthropological insights in which the doting quality had been observed as an (alleged) element of the breeding practices among monkeys. While Matthias clearly wanted parents to rely on their own common sense when dealing with their child, too much natural instinct seemed to be a problem as well. How much love should a child get? Could parents love too much? Could their emotions prevent parents from educating their children?

It followed logically from Matthias' descriptions that it was necessary to distrust the parents' (and especially mothers') emotions and to undermine their educative authority. Somehow, parents were always in danger of loving their children more than they should. They would always be disinclined to *make them strong enough for happiness*, to harden them. Conveniently, this helped to establish advice literature as the effective authority that would not just provide parents with useful knowledge, but that would teach parents to distrust their natural inclinations. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, a hardening approach towards childrearing existed side-by-side with an alternative that placed love at the center of the child-parent relationship – and that was criticized by Matthias in his account of *Affenliebe*. Already in 1835, Victorian writer Elizabeth Gaskell had tried to base the education of her firstborn girl on the principles of love and care. She meticulously noted the baby's development and her own involvement and reactions in a baby diary. But the downside of this approach was also anxiety. Her constant observations made her worried about every little



detail in her child's behavior. Thus, "the love which passeth every earthly love", as Gaskell described the emotion herself, also created an "extreme anxiety in the formation of her little daughter's character".[6]

This regiment of love continued to exist as the other major part of childrearing and became especially pronounced in the middle of the twentieth century. Particularly noteworthy in this context is Benjamin Spock's *Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* (1946), one of the most successful books ever: It has sold more than 50 million copies in over 40 languages and is still in print today.[7] Now, the relational significance of emotions, and especially love, trust, sympathy etc. for children and parents became the alternative to *Affenliebe* – an alternative that created new problems and blind spots. These two distinct models – Matthias' hardening and Spock's love approach – manifested themselves in different advice for problems which parents had to deal with in the raising of a child: Should you punish your child corporally, if need be? Should you comfort your child in a case of distress? Should you force your child to follow your daily rhythm or should you adjust it to the needs of your child? Should the mother breast-feed her child under all circumstances? And for how long should she do so?

Children's emotions were always a prominent topic in psychological, psychiatric, pedagogical and advice literature since their emergence in the mid-nineteenth century. During this process, various scientific disciplines, writers of fiction and of advice literature, a fascinated public and, especially, parents formed a complex and interactive system in which knowledge about children and their emotions was produced and circulated. Advice literature played an important role in this circulation of knowledge. Apart from scholars from the pedagogical, psychological or psychiatric disciplines who also published advice manuals in a surprising frequency, many different professions were actually engaged in the production of this literature, in particular theologians, teachers, government officials, physicians, etc. The knowledge about children, which was produced in these complex circulations, entailed much information about the emotions, which children were supposed to have at various stages in their development. At the same time, this knowledge also helped to organize emotions in often very intricate ways, especially on the part of parents. When the founder of behaviorist psychology, John B. Watson, published his advice book for young mothers – *Psychological Care of Infant and Child* (1928) –, it was his intention to "help the serious mother to solve the problem of bringing up a happy child." [8] In his view, "the modern mother" had only just begun to understand "that the rearing of children is the most difficult of all professions." [9] Thus, Watson's book revealed the central mechanism of the advice literature for parents: to make parenthood seem unfamiliar, to instill insecurity and to promise improvement through advice. The "Century of the Child," as Ellen Key announced it in 1900, produced, therefore, anxiety about the development of children on an unprecedented scale. [10]

For the history of emotions, advice manuals thus serve an important purpose: They offer us indication on what kinds of emotions were considered important in the education of children in different historical periods and countries. Certainly, there exists no simple relation from the assumptions in this literature on how parents should treat their children to the actual treatment in real families. But historians of emotions can use this literature to deduce the normative frame for the emotional education of children, something that has been called "emotionology." At the same time, the advice manuals offer something more: Reading them has an effect beyond the treatment of children; it affects parents and their own emotions. At this level, this literature is more than just a normative frame; it regulates emotions in a certain way.

Further Reading

- Michaela Fuchs, *"Wie sollen wir unsere Kinder erziehen?" Bürgerliche Kindererziehung im Spiegel der populärpädagogischen Erziehungsratgeber des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Wien: Ed. Praesens, 1997).
- Julia Grant, *Raising Baby by the Book. The Education of American Mothers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).
- Markus Höffer-Mehlmer, *Elternratgeber. Zur Geschichte eines Genres* (Baltmannsweiler: Schneider Verlag, 2003).
- Ann Hulbert, *Raising America. Experts, Parents, and a Century of Advice About Children* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003).
- Carolyn Kay, "How Should We Raise Our Son Benjamin? Advice Literature for Mothers in Early Twentieth-Century Germany," *Raising Citizens in the "Century of the Child". The United States and German Central Europe in Comparative Perspective*, Dirk Schumann (ed.) (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010) 105-121.
- Till Kössler, "Die Ordnung der Gefühle. Frühe Kinderpsychologie und das Problem kindlicher Emotionen (1880-1930)," *Rationalisierungen des Gefühls. Zum Verhältnis von Wissenschaft und Emotionen 1880-1930*, Uffa Jensen und Daniel Morat (Hrsg.) (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2008), 189-210.
- Sally Shuttleworth, *The Mind of the Child. Child Development in Literature, Science, and Medicine, 1840-1900* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- Peter N. Stearns and Carol Z. Stearns, "Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards," *American Historical Review* 90 (1985): 813-836.

[1] "Daß unser Benjamin das lerne, daß er stark werde zu seinem Glück, dazu sollte unser

Erziehungsbüchlein beitragen; es sollte die Kraft reinen Fühlens und Empfindens, festen Wollens und häufigen Vollbringens stärken in unserm Benjamin, damit er glücklich werde." Adolf Matthias, *Wie erziehen wir unsern Sohn Benjamin? Ein Buch für deutsche Väter und Mütter*, Munich: C.H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1897), 235.

[2] Ibid., 178-186.

[3] "Die Affenliebe kann nicht hart sein, nicht verwehren, nicht neinsagen für das wahre Glück des Kindes [...]. Die Affenliebe ermangelt jeden klaren Bewußtseins in Beziehung auf das Erziehungsziel; sie ist kurzsichtig; sie will dem Kinde wohl thun, aber sie wählt die falschen Mittel; sie läßt sich von augenblicklichen Empfindungen verleiten, anstatt sich von ruhiger Besonnenheit und Überlegung leiten zu lassen." Ibid., 184.

[4] "Affenliebe ist im Grunde nichts weiter als Selbstliebe, die keine Selbstverleugnung zum Besten des Kindes üben kann [...]" Ibid.

[5] Ibid., 9.

[6] J. A. V. Capple and Anita Wilson, ed., *Private Voices: The Diaries of Elizabeth Gaskell and Sophia Holland* (Keele: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 50.

[7] Benjamin Spock, *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1946).

[8] John B. Watson and Rosalie Watson, *The Psychological Care of the Infant and Child* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1928), 14.

[9] Ibid., 16.

[10] Ellen Key, *Das Jahrhundert des Kindes*, trans. Marie Franzos (Berlin: S. Fischer Verlag, 1902).

Citation

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