Southgate wrote to her parents in Maine: "to think that here I may drink freely of the fountain of knowledge... writing, reading, and ciphering... French and Dancing... Geometry... Geography." At the end of the eighteenth century an elderly congressman, Paine Wingate, expressed dismay at the changes in private life that had occurred as a result of the Revolution. He was displeased at seeing "parents & children... as familiar as brothers & sisters." "Fathers, mothers, sons & daughters, young & old, all mix together, & talk & joke alike so that you cannot discover any distinction made or any respect shown to one more than to another. I am not for keeping up a great distance between Parents & Children, but there is a difference between staring & stark mad." An older world of deference and patriarchal authority had truly been turned upside down.40

Inventing the Middle-Class Child

Today the passage through childhood and adolescence is highly predictable. Children enter preschool around the age of three or four, enroll in kindergarten at five and first grade at six, enter middle school around eleven or twelve, and graduate from high school at seventeen or eighteen. Two centuries ago the sequence was far less regularized or uniform. Unpredictability was the hallmark of growing up, even for the children of professionals and merchants. By the time Herman Melville had reached the age of twelve, his father, an importer of French dry goods, had gone bankrupt, become insane, and died. Forced to withdraw from school, the author of Moby-Dick worked in his uncle's bank, as a clerk in a hat store, as a teacher, a farm laborer, and a cabin boy on a whaling ship—all before the age of twenty. As for Ralph Waldo Emerson, before he was fifteen, he had experienced the death of his brother and his father and had entered Harvard College. And Harriet Beecher Stowe, one of eleven brothers and sisters, was just five years old when her mother died and twelve when she left home to live with an older sister.1

Idyllic images of childhood past, in which young people moved seamlessly toward adulthood, are invariably misleading, but for no period is this more mistaken than the early nineteenth century, when the pathways to adulthood were exceedingly uncertain. Especially in their teens, many young people underwent a protracted period of doubt, restlessness, and confusion. New opportunities for employment, schooling, and religious choice were opening up, and rates of geographic mobility were sharply rising, with growing numbers of teenage girls and boys leaving
rural farms and villages for larger towns and expanding cities. At few
times in American history was adolescence filled with greater uncertainty. It was, however, at this very moment that modern childhood was invented. Confined at first to the urban middle class, and initially limited to the years from birth to thirteen or fourteen, modern childhood was to be free from labor and devoted to schooling. Urban middle-class mothers assumed exclusive responsibility for childrearing, which they exercised with a growing self-consciousness and sense of responsibility. Middle-class parents sheltered their children from the workplace and economic struggles and kept them in school and the family home longer than in the past. As a result, the stages of middle-class childhood were more carefully delineated, and passage through these stages became more predictable.

This new ideal of a sheltered childhood drew upon several sources. These included the enlightened conception of a child as a blank slate waiting to be shaped by parental and environmental influences; the liberal Protestant ideal that granted children innocent souls and assigned parents the task of turning their redeemable, docile wills toward God; and the evangelical stress on childhood development as proceeding through a series of stages, much as religious conversion required passage through such stages as sanctification and justification. The newest and most influential conception of childhood was a Romantic vision, which viewed children as symbols of purity, spontaneity, and emotional expressiveness, who were free from adult inhibitions and thus required parents who would ensure that their innocence was not corrupted. At a moment when the pre-industrial social order was breaking down, Romantics idealized children as emblems of wholeness and intuitive thinking. Bronson Alcott described the child as “a Type of Divinity.” “Herein,” he wrote, “is our nature yet despoiled of none of its glory.” Rather than a condition to be passed through as rapidly as possible, childhood was a stage of life to be enjoyed and prolonged. Childhood became life's formative stage, a highly plastic period when character and habits were shaped for good or ill. In the poet William Wordsworth's famous line, “The child is father of the man.” Biographies and autobiographies gave expression to childhood's heightened significance. Instead of beginning with a genealogy, these volumes now began with an account of a subject's childhood.

The Romantic conception of childhood drew on many earlier sources, from such obscure seventeenth-century English writers as Henry Vaughan and John Earle, who had stressed children's spiritual insight; to John Locke's emphasis on children's malleability; and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's notion that children had not yet been corrupted by social artifice and should be encouraged to express their inner selves. The influence of the

Romantic conception of childhood was apparent in art and parental behavior. Stiffly posed portraits depicting children as miniature adults gave way to more romantic renderings emphasizing children's playfulness and innocence. A profusion of toys and books intended specifically for children highlighted the new focus on, and respect for, the child.

The Romantic vision of childhood encouraged the notion that children needed to be sheltered from adult realities, such as death, profanity, and sexuality, in order to preserve their childish innocence. Ironically, it contributed to a moral severity toward actual children who failed to live up to the Romantic ideal. The new stress on children's fragility, malleability, and corruptibility resulted in the establishment and construction of an array of institutions for children, from Sunday schools and public schools to orphanages, houses of refuge, reform schools, and children's hospitals. Mandatory school attendance laws and child labor restrictions were premised on the idea that children were fragile, innocent, and vulnerable creatures who needed adults' paternalistic protection. Overall, childhood dependency was prolonged, childrearing became a more intensive and self-conscious activity, and schooling was extended. Instead of moving back and forth from their parental home and work experiences outside the home, children resided continuously under the family roof into their late teens or early twenties.

A sharp reduction in the birthrate provided the essential foundation for a new kind of upbringing. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the typical American mother bore seven to ten children. She had her first child in her early twenties, and gave birth every two years or so until menopause. At the end of the eighteenth century the Quakers became the first group to deliberately limit births, and by 1810 the impulse to control births spread to all parts of the country. Relying primarily upon abstinence, coitus interruptus, and the rhythm method, supplemented by abortion (usually chemically induced or a result of trauma to the uterus), parents dramatically reduced the birthrate. The average number of births fell to five per family in 1850 and to just three in 1900. At first mothers increased the spacing between births, but by midcentury parents concentrated childbirths in the early years of marriage. Women who married in the 1820s and 1830s had their last child three or four years earlier than those who wed in the 1780s and 1790s.

In part, the reduced birthrate was a matter of economics, as middle-class parents regarded their children not as sources of labor but as "social capital" requiring substantial investments of time and resources. As a result of rapid changes in manufacturing, transport, and marketing, adults could no longer rely on passing on their farms or shops or imparting their
skills to their children, who increasingly needed formal education. No longer economic assets who could be put productively to work, children required expensive investments in the form of education. But the drop in the birthrate also reflected new cultural ideas, including a rejection of the view that women were chattels who should devote their adult lives to an endless cycle of pregnancy and childbirth, and the belief that children needed more care and attention than in the past.

The reduction in the birthrate was not a response to falling death rates. Despite the introduction of smallpox inoculations, which virtually eliminated this disease among the middle and upper classes by the 1820s, infant and child death rates remained high. In urban areas mortality rates actually rose as a result of crowded conditions, poor sanitation, and polluted drinking water. The declining birthrate drastically altered family relations. The colonial family had encompassed a wide age range, with the oldest children two decades older than their youngest siblings. But with fewer children in the family, siblings were closer in age. More than in the past, families were clearly divided into two generations.7

Nowhere was the Romantic conception of childhood more starkly evident than in infancy. Artistic renderings of colonial infants had been anything but childlike. With their rigid posture and elongated bodies, infants appeared stiff and doll-like. In part, this reflected the artists’ desire to see in infants such adultlike characteristics as an upright posture and a mature bearing. But these images also reflected the way that infants were dressed. Infant girls wore corsets (made of quilted or corded cloth rather than bones) or had a rod along their spine, giving them a firmer, more mature posture. In the early nineteenth century, in line with a new association of children with sexless innocence, infant girls and boys were dressed identically in loose muslin frocks and gowns, usually white in color, and wore similar androgynous hairstyles.8

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*Letitia Grace McCurdy*, by Joshua Johnson, ca. 1800–1802. The four- or five-year-old girl depicted in this painting wears an unadorned gown, which the postrevolutionary generation associated with republican ideals of simplicity, liberty, and a classless society. Courtesy of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

*The Westwood Children*, by Joshua Johnson, ca. 1807. These boys were the sons of a Baltimore stagecoach builder. Despite differences in their age and size, their dress and hairstyles are identical, reflecting the view that children share the same distinctive nature. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
In contrast to seventeenth-century Puritans, who had regarded young children as dangerously uniformed, even animalistic, in their inability to speak and their impulse to crawl, the postrevolutionary generation viewed childhood in much more positive terms. Even orthodox Calvinists and evangelical Protestants came to consider early childhood a stage of life valuable in itself. Childish behavior was increasingly accepted and even admired. Almira Phelps, an educator of girls, wrote in her journal in 1835 that she had not intended to allow her son “to learn to creep.” But when her child was between six and nine months, she changed her mind after deciding that crawling was “nature’s way.” Meanwhile, novels began to include examples of baby talk and treated it as enduring.9

The growing appreciation of young children as special beings with their own distinct needs and nature was readily apparent in the appearance of separate nurseries in middle-class homes. Loose, naturally fitting garments replaced the heavy clothing intended to restrict children’s movement, especially thumb-sucking. Furniture specifically designed for children, painted in pastel colors and decorated with pictures of animals or figures from nursery rhymes, began to be widely produced. In colonial America, young children had been left by themselves or held on a lap during meals, but in the early nineteenth century high chairs allowed children to sit in a position of prominence at the family dinner table.

Following the War of 1812, pious mothers in the Northeast formed maternal associations to discuss such topics as the most effective methods for taming children’s willfulness. At the same time, the nation’s first extensive body of advice literature on childrearing appeared, built around the theme of shaping children’s character. A growing sense of cultural nationalism convinced Americans that they needed advice that addressed distinctly American problems. Written by ministers, physicians, educators, and other moralists from the Northeast, this literature taught that children were infinitely plastic creatures who needed to be shaped into responsible citizens. A key theme in its writings was that the success of America’s republican experiment depended on the ability of parents to implant checks and balances in the moral character of future generations. Instead of regarding children as inherently vicious, the advice literature taught that young children were as pliable as fresh clay and that their well-being depended on developing strong moral character, regular habits, and a capacity for self-control during the first five or six years of life. In a journal in which she recorded her children’s early lives, Elizabeth Ellery Sedgwick, the wife of a New York attorney, gave pointed expression to this new view: “At this period, which seems at first glance a blank, impressions are received which are the germs of future character.”10

As the birthrate fell and such domestic tasks as fabricating cloth, making soap, and brewing beer moved outside the household, middle-class mothers gave their children more concentrated and exclusive care. Intensive mothering became an essential part of middle-class women’s self-image and altered the preferred methods of discipline. A paternal emphasis on physical punishment gave way to a new stress on the efficacy of maternal tenderness, patience, and love. Nevertheless, middle-class childrearing practices spanned a wide spectrum closely linked to theological beliefs. At one pole were religious liberals, who embraced the Romantic emphasis on children’s innocence and promise. Lydia Maria Child, a Boston Unitarian, gave pointed expression to this view when she wrote in her Mother’s Book that children “come to us from heaven with their souls full of innocence and peace . . . under the influence of angels.” The liberal style of childrearing emphasized the power of maternal influence—“methods silent and imperceptible,” involving moral suasion, tenderness, and guilt. Liberal mothers rejected corporal punishment in favor of psychological techniques intended to cultivate a child’s capacity for self-control. These techniques—which included confining children in their room, revoking their privileges, and threatening to withdraw love from them—were intended to strengthen a child’s conscience.11

At the spectrum’s other end were orthodox Calvinists and evangelicals, who stressed the importance of breaking a child’s sinful will and instilling respect for divinely instituted authority. Evangelical households emphasized early piety, early discipline, and eliciting an early conversion experience. Religious instruction began in infancy. Martha Laurens Ramsey, a member of a wealthy and influential Charleston, South Carolina, family, taught her children from an early age about “their miserable and corrupted state by nature; that they were born into a world of sin and misery—surrounded with temptations—without the possibility of salvation, but by the grace of God.” Around the age of eight or nine, evangelical children were expected to enter a stage of religious anxiety, lying awake at night, pondering salvation and death. A contributor to the Mother’s Magazine stressed the importance of submission to parental and divine authority: “Every mother is solemnly bound to form in her children the habit of unconditional and instant submission to her authority, as a means of leading them to exercise the same disposition in view of the authority and law of God.” In order to instill obedience, evangelical parents were much more willing to use physical punishment than were theological liberals. However, by the 1830s a belief in children’s sinful nature had eroded, and even evangelical families emphasized moral suasion by appealing to children’s affections rather than to their intellect or to fear.12
For all their differences, evangelicals and nonevangelicals shared a conviction that the primary purpose of childrearing was to instill habits of regularity and self-control through techniques emphasizing tenderness, love, and patience. The ability to regulate and channel aggressive impulses, including the ability to apply oneself steadily to a task and follow a regular routine, was regarded as an essential ingredient for future success. Parents reinforced childrearing lessons through a highly moralistic children’s literature. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, books created specifically for children were limited to primers, catechisms, grammar books, and ballads, folded sheets of stiff paper containing letters and simple phonics lessons. In 1856 Samuel Goodrich, who wrote and edited 157 books for children, observed: “It is difficult now . . . to conceive of the poverty of books suited to children” during his youth, “except for the New England Primer . . . and some rhymes, embellished with hideous [wood]cuts of Adam’s Fall, in which ‘we sinned all.’”

Throughout the postrevolutionary era, most children’s reading material was intended for their moral or intellectual edification. These included didactic, cautionary tales distributed by the American Sunday School Union; Noah Webster’s Grammatical Institute of the English Language (known as the “Blue-backed Speller” because of its blue cover); Samuel Goodrich’s Peter Parley stories (featuring an elderly man who tells moral tales to children, and who served as the prototype for Uncle Remus); and Jacob Abbott’s Rollo tales, “intended to explain and illustrate, in a simple manner, the principles of Christian duty.” William McGuffey’s six Readers, published between 1836 and 1857, epitomized the didacticism and heavy-handed moralism that dominated books for children. They contained such simple moral lessons as “Good boys do not play in a rude way, but take care not to hurt anyone” and “Bad boys lie, and swear, and steal.” Postrevolutionary authorities were highly critical of fairy tales and fantasy literature, such as ghost stories, with the exception of those that “impress upon” children’s “minds the great truth, that disobedience and deception are very wicked and very dangerous.” The perceived brevity of mothers’ hold on children encouraged a determination to use children’s literature to shape character and deliver moral messages to the young.

A host of gender-specific assumptions about behavior, attitudes, emotional sensibilities, and aspirations pervaded the middle-class home. Gender determined the kind of games children played and the chores they performed, and shaped expectations about their education and likely future. Although boys and girls increasingly attended the same schools, the cultures of boyhood and girlhood were defined in opposition to each other. Boys and girls were assumed to differ in their constitution, stature, temperament, and behavior. Femininity was defined in terms of self-sacrifice and service; masculinity, in terms of aggressiveness and daring.

In sharp contrast to the works of Charles Dickens, which depicted both boys and girls as fragile, vulnerable creatures in need of adult protection, nineteenth-century American boys were considered adventurous, resourceful, and self-reliant. Like Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, the popular image of boyhood was of someone who was independent, fun-loving, and noble-hearted. In the late nineteenth century, a rash of books portrayed pre–Civil War American boyhood as a period of unmatched freedom and independence. An early nineteenth-century British visitor, Frederick Marryat, recounted an incident that summed up the antebellum attitude toward boyhood. After a young boy disobeyed his father’s command, the man called the boy “a sturdy republican,” while “smiling at the boy’s resolute disobedience.”

Boyhood was defined in opposition to the confinement, dependence, and restraint of the domestic realm. Boys were freer to roam than girls, and their chores, such as tending animals or running errands, took place free from adult oversight. Boys’ games—such as races, fistfights, sledding and skating, swimming, or ball games—invariably took place outside the home and emphasized physical play, self-assertion, physical prowess, stoicism, and competition. Boys’ culture simultaneously challenged the dictates of respectable adulthood and prepared boys for it. It was a world of physicality, dirt, and violence, but also a world in which boys learned to channel aggression and to function in groups. Boyhood stressed aggressiveness, which was expressed through the playing of pranks, the torture of small animals, and competition with friends and rivals. Pranks played on adult authority figures, girls, and each other were an essential element in boys’ culture; they provided a way for boys to assert their independence and avenge insults. Loyalty and group activities were important values for boys. Boys, much more than girls or their colonial male counterparts, formed clubs and teams. Various hazing rituals and forms of ridicule, such as name-calling and teasing, helped maintain these groups’ boundaries.

Compared with their rural counterparts, urban boys enjoyed more free time, more contact with peers, and greater freedom from adult supervision. Freed from farm chores, boys played in streets or fields. By midcentury, boys were also spending much more time with peers in schools. In contrast to the colonial era, when entry into apprenticeship or work experiences away from home marked the end of childhood and entry into youth, boyhood ended more gradually in the mid-nineteenth century, and the lines of separation between boyhood and youth were defined in psychological rather than social terms. As one youth put it, “Suddenly
marbles became a childish game which made knuckles grimy and chapped.  

In the early nineteenth century the word *girlhood* acquired a new meaning. It came to refer to a period of relative freedom before entrance into the responsibilities of mature womanhood and motherhood. One of the first figures to use the word in this sense was the French traveler Alexis de Tocqueville, whose classic *Democracy in America* drew a sharp contrast between the American girl and her French counterpart. Whereas French girls were subordinated within their homes and achieved a degree of independence only after marriage, in America a carefree girlhood was followed by a staid motherhood. A young Philadelphia woman's diary captured the abruptness of this transition. It ends with the words: "And now these pages must come to a close, for the romance ends when the heroine marries."  

Girlhood in the early nineteenth-century North was filled with paradoxes. On the one hand, young women received unprecedented opportunities for education, work outside the home, and participation in religious, charitable, and reform activities. In the late eighteenth century, sewing, weaving, and clothmaking had occupied enormous amounts of time for teenage women, but the mechanization of textile production abruptly altered young women's work patterns. By the early 1830s making cloth by hand was replaced by factory production. Instead of performing handiwork at home, young women in their teens sought paid employment outside the home, as seamstresses, factory operatives, or school teachers. At the same time, the removal of clothmaking outside of households freed many middle-class girls to continue their education into their teens.  

On the other hand, a much more rigid ideology of gender roles also emerged, which drew a sharp distinction between girls and boys in temperament, aptitudes, and abilities. For middle-class girls, lessons in femininity began early. From the age of six or seven, farm girls were initiated into certain gender-specific tasks. They worked alongside their mothers and older sisters, sewing, cooking, washing, and tending the dairy. In towns, too, where middle-class girls were relieved from onerous farm chores, there was a clear-cut sexual division of labor, with girls responsible for making beds and caring for younger brothers and sisters. Even in wealthier families, parents sought to foster proper feminine behavior by encouraging their daughters to knit, sew, and perform fancy needlework. Girls' responsibilities for childcare, sewing, and housework left them much less likely than boys to have time to themselves. Although many young girls engaged in active games, such as jumping rope, previously a boy's game, girls' play, much more than boys', involved assuming adult roles. The toys that girls received from their parents, such as needlebooks and dolls fashioned out of wax and decorated with human hair, were intended to foster femininity and nurturing skills as well as to encourage quiet, solitary play. Whereas portraits show boys with swords, guns, bugles, drums, cannons, tin soldiers, hobbyhorses, and wheelbarrows, girls are pictured with miniature china sets, wax dolls, music boxes, or books.  

Adults exhibited an ambiguous attitude toward tomboyish (or what was called "hoyden") behavior. While antebellum literature contained memorable images of silent, sickly girls with limited energy, there were also many images of active, playful, and high-spirited girls who preferred boyish games to domestic chores. Long before Henry James's Daisy Miller, a popular literary image of American girlhood was fearless, innocent, bold, and without guile. Many popular advice writers spoke about girls' need to develop a spirit of independence and self-sufficiency. In 1839 Catharine Maria Sedgwick advised girls to "be sure to be so educated that you can have an independent pursuit, something to occupy your time and interest your affections; then marriage will not be essential to your usefulness, respectability, or happiness." Sentiments like Sedgwick's were echoed by girls themselves. In 1838 thirteen-year-old Ednah Dow Littlehale wrote a friend: "What do I mean by the rights of women! I mean, I mean what I say—we have as good a right to rule men as they have to rule us."  

Yet as they grew older, girls were supposed to curb their passionate spirits and channel their energies into more genteel pursuits, such as piano playing. A girl was to divest herself "of the light and airy habiliments of girlhood" and assume "the more staid and dignified mantle of womanhood." Catharine Sedgwick advised girls to refrain from "rowdism," and William Alcott declared that a girl should not run after she achieved physical maturity. "She must not," he wrote, "after she is old enough to need a brassiere, indulge in 'any form of motion more rapid than walking,' for fear of betraying somewhere below the neck some 'portion of the general system which gives to women her... distinctive character.'" In contrast to Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, who remain eternal boys, girls were expected to grow up and reject childish ways. A teenage girl was to put up her hair and lower her skirt—two key symbols of proper deportment. Frances Willard, the future leader of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the largest late nineteenth-century women's organization, vividly recorded the day in 1856 that she grew up: "Mother insists that at last I must have my hair 'done up woman-fashion.' She says she can hardly forgive herself for letting me 'run wild' so long. We've had a great
time over it all... My 'back' hair is twisted up like a corkscrew: I carry eighteen hair-pins; my head aches miserably; my feet are entangled in the skirt of my hateful new gown. I can never jump over a fence again, so long as I live."

Since the essence of femininity was perceived to be purity, it is not surprising that many young women were kept in appalling sexual ignorance. Lydia Maria Child regretted the "want of confidence between mothers and daughters on delicate subjects" and suggested that mothers explain the facts of life to daughters around the age of twelve to "set her mind at rest." The mid-nineteenth-century ideal of a sheltered girlhood stifled many girls' abilities and restricted their opportunities. In 1856 a Boston physician named Harriet K. Hunt linked the roots of hysteria to the restrictions that girls lived under. As she diagnosed one patient's problems: "Mind had been uncultivated—intelligence smothered—aspirations quenched. The result was physical suffering."

Throughout American history the experience of each successive generation of girls has been less continuous than the experience of boys. Rarely was the mother-daughter gap greater than during the early nineteenth century, when young women between the ages of fourteen and twenty-five received wholly new opportunities to attend school and work temporarily outside a home as school teachers or mill workers. For the first time in American history, large numbers of young women experienced a period before marriage when they were not subordinated to a father or husband. The significance of this period of life can be seen vividly in the diary of seventeen-year-old Rachel Van Dyke, the daughter of a prosperous New Brunswick, New Jersey, storekeeper and farmer, who railed against young women who talked of nothing "but dress, amusements, the beaux, and such like nonsense." This period of relative freedom from male authority carried profound psychological implications. Many young women came to view marriage in a new light, as a closing off of freedoms and options enjoyed in girlhood. This led many young women to experience a traumatic "marriage crisis" as they decided whether or not to marry.

Nineteenth-century middle-class culture idealized the bond between sisters and brothers as purer and more innocent than any other social relationships, untouched by sexuality and selfishness. To a society deeply troubled by industrialization and urbanization, the sibling bond, based on a common heritage, signified loyalty, connection, intimacy, selfishness, and continuity over time. As birthrates declined and children remained home longer and more continuously, sibling relationships grew far more emotionally intense than they had been or than they are today. In the early twenty-first century, half of all children do not have a sibling; but in the

nineteenth century, same-sex siblings often slept in the same room, frequently in the same bed, and younger children often visited or helped out older children for prolonged periods. Many parents consciously fostered intense sibling bonds, reminding siblings that they had an obligation to look out for one another. Further contributing to the intensity of sibling ties was the relative weakness of institutions that might intrude on such relationships. Middle-class families encouraged children to play with each other or with cousins, and mid-nineteenth-century schools made few efforts to foster peer group identities. The emotional and psychological intensity of sibling ties, however, often produced conflicted relationships. One of Freud's greatest insights was his discovery that Victorian sentimentality about the purity and innocence of the sibling bond masked intense rivalries and inequalities.

The invention of modern childhood represented an effort to contain the precocity and uncertainties that had characterized the process of growing up in the early nineteenth century. In the century's early years, childhood dependence had been brief and ended abruptly. In 1834 Alexis de Tocqueville announced that "in America there is, in truth, no adolescence. At the close of boyhood [the young American] is a man and begins to trace out his own path." At the beginning of the century childhood dependence had been followed by a lengthy, nebulous period of youth, in which young men and women moved back and forth between domestic responsibilities, schooling, and work responsibilities outside the home. Behavior that we would consider precocious was commonplace. When Abraham Lincoln was seven and his family moved across the Ohio River from Kentucky to frontier Indiana, the future president helped build a primitive log cabin and cut down trees so that a crop could be planted. Before he reached the age of sixteen and enrolled at Yale College, Eli Whitney had already opened a nail factory. Francis Lieber, a German-born scholar who taught at a South Carolina college in 1835 and 1836, recorded the details of one young man's life. By the age of twenty-two he had been expelled from college for participating in a duel, shot his adversary in the streets of Charleston, studied law, married and had a child, practiced law, and been elected to the state legislature.

The path to adulthood was far less clearly delineated and much more irregular, haphazard, and episodic than it subsequently became. Many farm children, male and female, worked on their parents' homestead until their twenties; others sought employment away from home during the winter (as clerks or laborers) but returned home during the spring and summer months. Still others served a series of short-term apprenticeships, shifting back and forth between their parents' household and work experiences.
improvement and self-education, which prepared young men for adulthood. These organizations allowed young men to participate in the public sphere, trained them in leadership skills, and taught them how to function in organizations. Many societies were inspired by a conviction that the young had a historic responsibility to fulfill the founders' ideals. Indeed, these young men expressed an impulse to match and even surpass the founding generation. "To us belong . . . far higher responsibilities than rested upon our fathers," announced one young man. During the 1830s and 1840s middle-class youths constituted much of the rank and file in Bible associations and temperance and antislavery societies, while their working-class counterparts joined volunteer fire companies, military companies, and the nation's first urban youth gangs (which first appeared in the 1770s).  

African-American young men formed their own organizations. George T. Downing founded a literary society in New York when he was fourteen years old. This society refused to celebrate the Fourth of July because "the declaration of Independence was to the colored in America, 'a perfect mockery.'" An editorial in the New York Colored American in 1837 declared that "history is replete with evidence" that young men "are important and efficient agents for "moral reformations or political revolutions."  

In stark contrast to young black and white men, young women did not form separate organizations based on age. Although there were a few "Young Ladies" societies, in general young women participated in organizations that encompassed women irrespective of age, including church societies, reform societies, and a wide range of philanthropic endeavors. For the most part, age-based antebellum organizations were male-only.  

After the Civil War, the broadly inclusive young men's associations faded away. Somewhat older men continued to join lodges, fraternal orders, and secret societies, and college students established fraternities. But youth groups formed and run by the young themselves were replaced by adult-organized institutions that adopted the name "Young Men's Associations" or "Mechanics' Institutes." The earliest adult-managed organization for youth, the Young Men's Christian Association, modeled on an identically named English organization, appeared in Boston in 1849. It served as the precursor for other adult-organized institutions, such as the Boy Scouts, which were intended to ease the transition to adulthood but which actually intensified the dependence of teenage boys by encouraging them to defer to the leadership and direction of adults.  

Early nineteenth-century foreign travelers and home-grown moralists roundly condemned the precocity of American children, whom they con-
sidered filthy, ill-mannered, and disrespectful. European visitors universally agreed that American children were less disciplined than Old World children and had a greater voice in family affairs. The explanation for early nineteenth-century parents’ permissiveness was at once cultural and economic. American culture not only had a weaker sense of hierarchy, but in labor-short America, parents were highly dependent on their children’s labor, a circumstance that encouraged mild discipline and even parental indulgence. After 1830, however, there were growing efforts to impose order on children, especially urban middle-class children between the ages of seven and thirteen. Tolerance of precocious behavior declined, and there was a growing concern with ensuring children’s proper chronological development. Perhaps the most dramatic development was greater systematization of a haphazard system of education.

The emergence of Sunday schools represented one of the first attempts to rein in young people’s lives. The first Sunday schools, founded in the 1790s, were targeted at the children of the poor, but by the 1820s these institutions had shifted their attention to middle-class children as antebellum churches increasingly envisioned young people’s conversion as a gradual development rather than a sudden emotional experience. Convinced that during childhood a person’s “character usually becomes fixed for life, and for the most part for eternity,” their founders assigned Sunday schools the weighty responsibility of ensuring that young people developed the strength of character to resist the “flattering allurements” of a world bent on “seducing [ing] them to ruin,” as the American Sunday School Magazine phrased it in 1825.

Far more important than Sunday schools in structuring young people’s lives were public schools, which had the effect of extending childhood dependency into early adolescence. Before the advent of public education in the early 1830s, formal schooling was sporadic and unsystematic. Apprenticeship was a major form of education, supplemented by charity schools for the poor, church schools, informal dame schools in which women took children into their own homes, district schools in smaller towns and villages, Latin schools in larger cities, and private academies for the affluent. A typical classroom could contain as many as eighty students, from “infants but just out of their cradles” to “men who had been enrolled . . . in the militia.” Opportunity to attend school was circumscribed, and attendance was erratic. Even free schools required payment of tuition, and many required entering students to be literate, barring youngsters whose parents had not taught them to read.

Few textbooks were available, and learning amounted to monotonous repetition of facts. Students memorized and recited the alphabet, the definition and spelling of words, the rules of grammar, the facts of arithmetic, and lengthy prose passages, often long before they understood them. School buildings were often unpainted and overcrowded and lacked blackboards, maps, desks, playgrounds, and even outhouses. Teachers maintained order primarily through “the liberal application of birch and ferule,” in Horace Greeley’s words, supplemented by such forms of shaming as requiring unruly pupils to wear a dunce’s cap or sit on a fool’s stool, which had only one leg. As might be expected, students responded to displays of arbitrary authority and humiliation with frequent mutinies.

The campaign for public schools began in earnest in the 1820s, when religiously motivated reformers, inspired by the school systems in Prussia and the Netherlands, advocated public education as a way to promote opportunity, prevent a hardening of class lines, shape children’s character, create a unified civic culture, and instill the values and skills necessary in a rapidly changing society: basic literacy, punctuality, obedience, and self-discipline. Convinced that education would take place most effectively in a homogeneous environment, educators concentrated on children between the ages of six and fourteen, which was considered the optimal time to form young people’s character and help them to internalize moral restraints. Meanwhile, fearful that premature intellectual stress damaged young children’s minds and bodies, reformers argued that three-, four-, and five-year-olds would be better educated at home than in formal classrooms.

To trim costs, a number of cities, including New York and Philadelphia, experimented with a system devised by Joseph Lancaster, an English Quaker, in which a teacher trained student monitors who conducted classes on their own. The Lancaster system allowed a single teacher to teach a thousand students. But localities quickly discovered that they could expand schooling without a proportionate increase in spending by relying on female teachers, who received half or a third the wages of male schoolteachers. At first many local school boards worried that female teachers could not discipline rowdy schoolchildren, but they came to believe that women, relying on the techniques of moral suasion emphasized in childrearing manuals, were actually more effective in disciplining children. As a woman who taught during the 1840s observed, a male student “who would be constantly plotting mischief against a schoolmaster . . . becomes mild and gentle, considerate and well behaved towards a little woman, simply because she is a little woman, whose gentle voice and lady-like manners have fascinated him.” In fact, however, many older boys expressed their disdain for the feminization of education by dropping out of school.
Mid-nineteenth-century public schools followed highly regimented schedules. Individual classrooms contained as many as fifty or sixty students, and despite calls for improved teaching methods that would tap students’ imaginations and draw out their potentialities, teachers relied on rote memorization, recitation, and strict discipline. A New York City mayor described a typical school day: “During several daily recitation periods, each of which is from twenty to twenty-five minutes in duration, the children are obliged to stand on the line, perfectly motionless, their bodies erect, their knees and feet together, the tips of their shoes touching the edge of the board in the floor.” Innovations in pedagogy were left to private schools.48

By the eve of the Civil War, educational reformers in New England, the Middle Atlantic states, and the older parts of the Midwest had succeeded in systematizing the system of education. They persuaded legislatures in Massachusetts and New York to pass the first mandatory school attendance laws. Attendance was expected to be a full-time activity, in which the student adjusted to the school’s schedule, not vice versa. As a result, schools tended to prolong middle-class children’s dependency by forestalling youths’ entry into the world of work.49

In the early nineteenth century a fundamental tension emerged between idealizing children and regulating their lives. It is a striking irony that the very period that most intensely celebrated children’s innocence and playfulness also witnessed unprecedented efforts to systematize and rationalize children’s upbringing. Those who waxed most eloquently about childhood purity, such as the educational reformer Horace Mann and the childrearing expert Lydia Maria Child, were also the strongest proponents of improved methods of childrearing and expanded education. Among the goals of the inventors of modern middle-class childhood were to shape children’s character and implant habits of self-control through self-conscious maternal nurture; to shelter children from corruption by keeping them home for longer periods; and to enroll them in age-graded schools with a curriculum emphasizing lessons in industry, regularity, and restraint. Precoity was attacked, and order was imposed on young people’s lives.49

But there was an even more troubling historical irony at work. The very period that freed middle-class children from work and allowed them to devote their childhood years to education also made the labor of poorer children more essential to their families’ well-being than in the past, and greatly increased the exploitation that these children suffered. As we shall see, the growth of industry, the commercialization of agriculture, and the expansion of a market economy widened the gulf between middle-class and laboring children and generated new kinds of child labor that differed radically from the household-based activities that young people had performed in the past. Ultimately, however, it was the Romantic ideal of a sheltered childhood that would inspire reformers to embark on efforts to save dependent, destitute, and working children. The sentimentalization of childhood—the assertion of childhood’s importance and its vulnerability to mistreatment—would provide a crucial vantage point for criticizing the abuse of children.