Somebody's Baby

By Barbara Kingsolver

As I walked out the street entrance to my newly rented apartment, a guy in maroon high-tops and a skateboard haircut approached, making kissing noises and saying, "Hi gorgeous." Three weeks earlier, I would have assessed the degree of malice and made ready to run or tell him to bug off, depending. But now, instead, I smiled, and so did my four-year-old daughter, because after dozens of similar encounters I understood he didn't mean me but her.

This was not the United States.

For most of the year my daughter was four we lived in Spain, in the warm southern province of the Canary Islands. I struggled with dinner at midnight and the subjunctive tense, but my only genuine culture shock reverberated from this earthquake of a fact: people here like kids. They don't just say so, they do. Widows in black, buttoned-down CEOs, purple-sneakered teenagers, the butcher, the baker, all would stop on the street to have little chats with my daughter. Routinely, taxi drivers leaned out the window to shout "Hola, guapa!" My daughter, who must have felt my conditioned flinch, would look up at me wide-eyed and explain patiently, "I like it that people think I'm pretty." With a mother's keen myopia I would tell you, absolutely, my daughter is beautiful enough to stop traffic. But in the city of Santa Cruz, I have to confess, so was every other person under the height of one meter. Not just those who conceded to be seen and not heard. Whenever Camille grew cranky in a restaurant (and really, what do you expect at midnight?) the waiters flirted and brought her little presents, and nearby diners looked on with that sweet, wistful gleam of eye that I'd thought diner reserved for the dessert tray. What I discovered in Spain was a culture that held children to be its meringues and eclairs. My own culture, it seemed to me in retrospect, tended to regard children as a sort of toxic waste product: a necessary evil, maybe, but if it's not our own we don't want to see it or hear it or, God help us, smell it.

If you don't have children, you think I'm exaggerating. But if you've changed a diaper in the last decade you know exactly the toxic-waste glare I mean. In the U.S. I have been told in restaurants: "We come here to get away from kids." (This for no infraction on my daughter's part that I could discern, other than being visible.) On an airplane I heard a man tell a beleaguered woman whose infant was bawling (as I would, to clear my aching ears, if I couldn't manage chewing gum): "If you can't keep that thing quiet, you should keep it at home."

Air travel, like natural disasters, throws strangers together in unnaturally intimate circumstances. (Think how well you can get to know the bald spot of the guy reclining in front of you.) Consequently airplanes can be a splendid cultural magnifying glass. On my family's voyage from New York to Madrid we weren't assigned seats together. I shamelessly begged my neighbor—a forty-something New Yorker traveling alone—if she would take my husband's aisle seat m another row so our air-weary and plainly miserable daughter could stretch out across

her parents' laps. My fellow traveler snapped, "No, I have to have the window seat, just like you had to have that baby."

As simply as that, a child with needs (and ears) became an inconvenient thing, for which I was entirely to blame. The remark left me stunned and, as always happens when someone speaks rudely to me, momentarily guilty: yes, she must be right, conceiving this child was a rash, lunatic moment of selfishness, and now I had better be prepared to pay the price.

In the U.S.A., where it's said that anyone can grow up to be President, we parents are left pretty much on our own when it comes to the Presidents-in-training. Our social programs for children are the hands-down worst in the industrialized world, but apparently that is just what we want as a nation. It took a move to another country to make me realize how thoroughly I had accepted my nation's creed of every family for itself. Whenever my daughter crash-landed in the playground, I was startled at first to see a sanguine, Spanish-speaking stranger pick her up and dust her off. And if a shrieking bundle landed at my feet, I'd furtively look around for the next of kin. But I quickly came to see this detachment as perverse when applied to children, and am wondering how it ever caught on in the first place.

My grandfathers on both sides lived in households that were called upon, after tragedy struck close to home, to take in orphaned children and raise them without a thought. In an era of shortage, this was commonplace. But one generation later that kind of semipermeable household had vanished, at least among the white middle class. It’s a horrifying thought, but predictable enough, that the worth of children in America is tied to their dollar value. Children used to be field hands, household help, even miners and factory workers-extensions of a family's productive potential and so, in a sense, the property of an extended family. But precious property, valued and coveted. Since the advent of child-labor laws, children have come to hold an increasingly negative position in the economy. They're spoken of as a responsibility, a legal liability, an encumbrance—or if their unwed mothers are on welfare, a mistake that should not be rewarded. The political shuffle seems to be about making sure they cost us as little as possible, and that their own parents foot the bill. Virtually every program that benefits children in this country, from Sesame Street to free school lunches, has been cut back in the last decade—in many cases, cut to nothing. If it takes a village to raise a child, our kids are knocking on a lot of doors where nobody seems to be home.

Taking parental responsibility to extremes, some policymakers in the U.S. have seriously debated the possibility of requiring a license for parenting. I'm dismayed by the notion of licensing an individual adult to raise an individual child, because it implies parenting is a private enterprise, like selling liquor or driving a cab (though less lucrative). I'm also dismayed by what it suggests about innate fitness or nonfitness to rear children. Who would devise such a test? And how could it harbor anything but deep class biases? Like driving, parenting is a skill you learn by doing. You keep an eye out for oncoming disasters, and know when to stop and ask for directions. The skills you have going into it are hardly the point.

The first time I tried for my driver's license, I flunked. I was sixteen and rigid with panic. I rolled backward precariously while starting on a hill; I misidentified in writing the shape of a railroad crossing sign; as a final disqualifying indignity, my VW beetle—borrowed from my brother and apparently as appalled as I—went blind in the left blinker and mute in the horn. But nowadays, when it's time for a renewal, I breeze through the driver's test without thinking, usually on my way to some other errand. That test I failed twenty years ago was no prediction of my ultimate competence as a driver, anymore than my doll-care practices (I liked tying them to the back of my bike, by the hair) were predictive of my parenting skills (heavens be praised). Who really understands what it takes to raise kids? That is, until after the diaper changes, the sibling rivalries, the stiches, the tantrums, the first day of school, the overpriced-sneakers standoff, the first date, the safe-sex lecture, and the senior prom have all been negotiated and put away in the scrapbook?

While there are better and worse circumstances from which to launch offspring onto the planet, it's impossible to anticipate just who will fail. One of the most committed, creative parents I know plunged into her role through the trapdoor of teen pregnancy; she has made her son the center of her life, constructed a large impromptu family of reliable friends and neighbors, and absorbed knowledge like a plant taking sun. Conversely, some of the most strained, inattentive parents I know are well-heeled professionals, self-sufficient but chronically pressed for time. Life takes surprising turns. The one sure thing is that no parent, ever, has turned out to be perfectly wise and exhaustively provident, 1,440 minutes a day, for 18 years. It takes help. Children are not commodities but an incipient world. They thrive best when their upbringing is the collective joy and responsibility of families, neighborhoods, communities, and nations.

It's not hard to figure out what's good for kids, but amid the noise of an increasingly antichild political climate, it can be hard to remember just to go ahead and do it: for example, to vote to raise your school district's budget, even though you'll pay higher taxes. (If you're earning enough to pay taxes at all, I promise, the school needs those few bucks more than you do.) To support legislators who care more about afterschool programs, affordable health care, and libraries than about military budgets and the Dow Jones industrial average. To volunteer time and skills at your neighborhood school and also the school across town. To decide to notice, rather than ignore it, when a neighbor is losing it with her kids, and offer to baby-sit twice a week. This is not interference. Getting between a ball player and a ball is interference. The ball is inanimate.

Presuming children to be their parents' sole property and responsibility other things, a handy way of declaring problem children to be someone else’s problem, or fault, or failure. It’s a dangerous remedy; it doesn't change the fact that somebody else's kids will ultimately be in your face demanding now with interest what they didn't get when they were smaller and had simpler needs. Maybe in-your-face means breaking and entering, or maybe it means a Savings and Loan scam. Children deprived—of love, money, attention, or moral guidance—grow up to have large and powerful needs.

Always there will be babies made in some quarters whose parents can't quite take care of them. Reproduction is the most invincible of all human goals; like every other species, we're only here because our ancestors spent millions of years refining their act as efficient, dedicated breeders. If we hope for only sane, thoughtful people to have children, we can wish while we're at it for an end to cavities and mildew. But unlike many other species we are social, insightful, and capable of anticipating our future. We can see, if we care to look, that the way we treat children—*all* of them not just our own, and especially those in great need—defines the shape of the world we'll wake up in tomorrow. The most remarkable feature of human culture is its capacity to reach beyond the self and encompass the collective good.

It's an inspiring thought. But in mortal fact, here in the U.S. we are blazing a bold downhill path from the high ground of "human collective," toward the tight little den of "self." The last time we voted on a school-budget override in Tucson, the newspaper printed scores of letters from readers incensed by the very possibility: "I don't have kids," a typical letter writer declared, "so why should I have to pay to educate other people's offspring?" The budget increase was voted down, the school district progressed from deficient to desperate, and I longed to ask that miserly non-father just whose offspring he expects to doctor the maladies of his old age.

If we intend to cleave like stubborn barnacles to our great American ethic of every nuclear family for itself, then each of us had better raise and educate offspring enough to give us each day, in our old age, our daily bread. If we don't wish to live by bread alone, we'll need not only a farmer and a cook in the family but also a home repair specialist, an auto mechanic, an accountant, an import-export broker, a forest ranger, a therapist, an engineer, a musician, a poet, a tailor, a doctor, and at least three shifts of nurses. If that seems impractical, then we can accept other people's kids into our lives, starting now.

It's not so difficult. Most of the rest of the world has got this in hand. Just about any country you can name spends a larger percentage of its assets on its kids than we do. Virtually all industrialized nations have better schools and child-care policies. And while the U.S. grabs headlines by saving the occasional baby with heroic medical experiments, world health reports (from UNESCO, USAID, and other sources) show that a great many other parts of the world have lower infant mortality rates than we do—not just the conspicuously prosperous nations like Japan and Germany, but others, like Greece, Cuba, Portugal, Slovenia—simply because they attend better to all their mothers and children. Cuba, running on a budget that would hardly keep New York City's lights on, has better immunization programs and a higher literacy rate. During the long, grim haul of a thirty-year economic blockade, during which the United States has managed to starve Cuba to a ghost of its hopes, that island's child-first priorities have never altered.

Here in the land of plenty a child dies from poverty every fifty-three minutes, and TV talk shows exhibit teenagers who pierce their flesh with safety pins and rip off their parents every way they know how. All these punks started out as somebody's baby. How on earth, we'd like to know, did they learn to be so isolated and selfish?

My second afternoon in Spain, standing in a crowded bus, as we ricocheted around a corner and my daughter reached starfish-wise for stability, a man in a black beret stood up and gently helped her into his seat. In his weightless bearing I caught sight of the decades-old child, treasured by the manifold mothers of his neighborhood, growing up the way leavened dough rises surely to the kindness of bread.

I thought then of the woman on the airplane, who was obviously within her rights to put her own comfort first, but whose withheld generosity gave my daughter what amounted to a sleepless, kicking, squirming, miserable journey. As always happens two days after someone has spoken to me rudely, I knew exactly what I should have said: Be careful what you give children, for sooner or later you are sure to get it back.

Notes from the Editor

Kingsolver's essay was written in 1992, so is it still accurate? Recent data strongly support Barbara Kingsolver's overall point: the U.S. underinvests in children relative to peer countries and suffers poorer outcomes as a result.

1. Public Investment in Early Childhood

- A 2024 OECD analysis shows that the U.S. invests just 0.3% of its GDP in early childhood education and care, compared with the OECD average of 0.7%, and Nordic countries often exceed 1% of GDP (Quartz).
- On a per-child basis, OECD countries spend around USD PPP 5,800 per child, while top countries like Sweden or Denmark exceed USD PPP 11,000 per child aged 0–5 (OECD Web Files).
- A U.S.-based review places national ECE public spending at approximately $34 billion (about 0.18% of GDP when excluding kindergarten), with parents covering significant additional cost out-of-pocket (cscce.berkeley.edu).

These figures align with Kingsolver's critique that social support for children in the U.S. is far weaker than in comparable wealthy countries.

2. Infant Mortality & Child Health Outcomes

- According to CDC data interpreted by analysts, the U.S. infant mortality rate was approximately 5.5–5.8 deaths per 1,000 live births in recent years; in 2024 it further declined to about 5.5 per 1,000 (AP News).
- The OECD average is about 3.4 per 1,000, meaning the U.S. rate is approximately 70% higher than the average of peer nations (Health System Tracker).
- Even after adjusting for reporting differences (e.g., very preterm births), the U.S. rate remains elevated—around 4.9 vs. 2.9 per 1,000 (Health System Tracker).

- A 2018 paper found that between 2000 and 2017, U.S. infant mortality fell only 16%, compared to a 26% decline in comparator countries (Health System Tracker).

These health data bolster Kingsolver's claim that children in the U.S. experience worse survival outcomes than those in many other nations.

3. 👶 Poverty & Systemic Family Support

- Over 20% of U.S. children live in poverty, one of the highest rates among wealthy nations—a key driver of poor health and educational outcomes (UNICEF DATA, TIME).
- U.S. childcare costs are burdensome, averaging nearly $1,000 per month per child, and often rising much higher depending on geography. Many families face debt or must leave work due to unaffordability (The Guardian).
- Current federal programs like Head Start and the CCDBG disproportionately target low-income families, leaving many middle-income families without access ≠ a universal system (Bipartisan Policy Center).

These facts support Kingsolver's broader assertion that American society treats child-rearing as a private burden rather than a shared civic responsibility.

☑ Conclusion

Kingsolver's central argument holds up under current scrutiny:

- The U.S. remains among the lowest public spenders on early childhood in the OECD.
- Our infant and child mortality rates lag significantly behind comparable nations.
- Child poverty is high, and the burden of childcare remains largely privatized.

Together, these reinforce her thesis: the U.S. systemically underinvests in the well-being of children, in contrast with many other industrialized countries.