



The Department of Human Development: **A Historical Perspective**



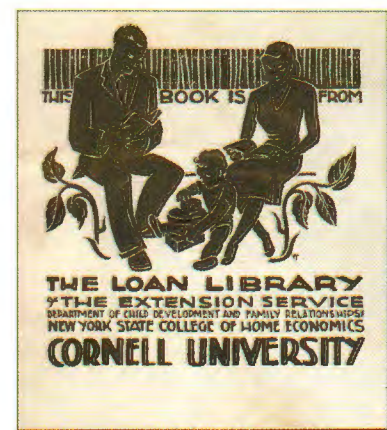
Cornell University
College of Human Ecology



The Origins of Human Development



The Department of Human Development at Cornell had its beginnings in the 1920s, at a moment when a new interest in child psychology and child training emerged. In that era, it was a national imperative to incorporate scientific principles into child rearing in order to enable American parents to raise healthy, well-adjusted, cooperative citizens. In 1922–23, the National Research Council appointed a subcommittee on child development that soon became the Committee on Child Development within the National Academy of Sciences. By 1927, more than 400 scientists were listed in the *Directory of Research in Child Development*, and that same year, they published the first volume of *Child Development Abstracts and Bibliography*.





Specialists in child development saw themselves as academic professionals, but they also identified mothers as important clients for their services. The duality of their work—as professionals serving the public but also as academic researchers producing knowledge in a scientific setting—made them unique in the academic community.

Psychological studies performed by child development specialists began to emphasize normative development and developmental stages, bringing new scientific optimism to the challenge of raising American children.



Early funding for the scientific study of the child came from the Laura Spellman Rockefeller Memorial (LSRM), a charitable trust established by John D. Rockefeller in 1918 in memory of his wife. The trust had the purpose of improving the welfare of children and also promoting research in the social sciences. LSRM resources were used to create a national network of child development research centers and parent education programs. In 1925, LSRM money made possible the creation of a Department of Family Life at Cornell.



Laura S. Rockefeller with grandsons, Laurance, John D. III, and Nelson, c. 1912.



If prosperity is to increase, if the efficiency of men and women is to be made better, it must be through better understanding of the needs of the child.

—Flora Rose, co-founder of the College of Home Economics



The purpose of descriptive investigations is to describe a situation as accurately and objectively as possible.

—Wm. A. McCall



Scientific Study of Child Behavior



The early bulletins developed in the program were straightforward and accessible, offering practical advice on teaching children about their roles on the farm, nutrition for the family, and how to improve the cultural tone of rural life.

Cornell already had a nascent “parent education” program that began in 1900 under the aegis of the New York State College of Agriculture. After 1925, however, the direction of child study at Cornell became decidedly more scientific, and there were many new additions to the faculty in the Department of Family Life, housed now in the New York State College of Home Economics.

LSRM provided support for the creation of a laboratory nursery school in which empirical research on the behavior of children took place. Ethel Waring, professor of family life, directed many studies that consisted of narrative records of direct observation of children’s behavior in the nursery school and at home. This data provided the basis for her widely acclaimed and broadly circulated extension bulletin, *Working Principles of Child Guidance* (1939).

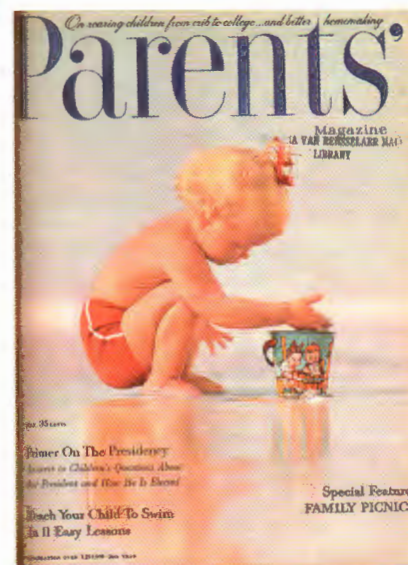
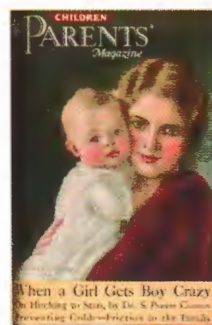
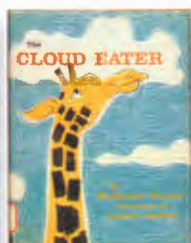
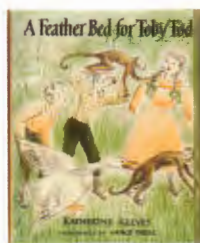


The department's expanding faculty reflected the new commitment to scientific training, research, and expertise in psychology, education, medicine, and nutrition. The new faculty members were generally women rather than men, and they were highly qualified. Nellie Perkins earned a Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Michigan; Helen Zilmer, a medical degree from Johns Hopkins University; and Lenoire Burnside, a Ph.D. in psychology from Johns Hopkins University. Katherine Reeves came to Cornell after teaching in the nursery school at Hull House in Chicago and publishing several popular children's books. All of these accomplished women were hired before 1930, and together they established the department's early reputation for excellence.

In addition to educating mothers in a successful statewide program of Cornell Study Clubs, faculty in the department taught a variety of

courses that addressed issues in child development and prepared thousands of Cornell women students for careers not only as mothers but as teachers, health care professionals, social workers, and dedicated community service volunteers. By concentrating on scientific investigation of the home, the family, and children—all of which were regarded as natural female activities—Child Development offered a special niche for Cornell women in the first half of the twentieth century.

Cornell's program in child development became widely known as the result of an active faculty presence on the national scene. Department faculty published in scholarly journals such as *Child Development* and the *American Journal of Psychology* but also *Parents' Magazine*, a popular periodical. (Both Livingston Farrand, president of Cornell, and Ethel Waring served as advisory editors for *Parents'*.)





Other faculty members, such as Kurt Lewin, a German Jewish refugee, achieved prominence for the development of “field theory”—the idea that human behavior is the function of both the person and the environment. Lewin came to Cornell as a result of the combined efforts of the Committee on Displaced Scholars and Ethel Waring, who was impressed by his film studies of children that she first saw when she visited the Psychological Institute in Berlin. Lewin continued his film studies in the Cornell nursery school.

CORNELL UNIVERSITY PHOTOGRAPHY



Personality is so complex a thing that every legitimate method must be employed in its study.

—G. W. Allport



“Guidance: The Case of Ronald” (Cornell Bulletin for Homemakers, Bulletin 418, September 1939, by Ethel B. Waring, Frances Markey Dwyer, and Elsie Junkin) describes a study about scientific child rearing in the nursery school at the then New York State College of Home Economics at Cornell University. The study was conducted by Dr. Kurt Lewin from the University of Berlin, who devoted two years to research in the nursery school. Ronald, aged two, and two little girls—all children attending the nursery school—were selected to eat their dinner in a room equipped for taking sound motion pictures. The resulting film details the young boy’s behavior and the guidance he received to modify some of his eating habits. The detailed records of Ronald’s eating, when considered as a whole, reveal something of his development over a period of about eight months.



Post-War Research

Although funds from LSRM disappeared in the early years of the Depression, the department began to attract both state and federal research funds in the 1940s and 1950s when it was renamed the Department of Child Development and Family Relationships. After World War II, most scientific research in universities was supported by government funding, and resources for Cornell studies on child development came from social science research grants and from the Public Health Service.



Edward Devereux

Before World War II, most research studies had been carried out in the department nursery school or with Cornell undergraduates. With the arrival of Urie Bronfenbrenner in 1948, the department moved in new and broader directions. In 1951, Bronfenbrenner and Edward Devereux spearheaded an intensive, multiyear investigation in a rural community approximately 20 miles from Ithaca. Bronfenbrenner, a co-designer of Head Start, also arranged the first cross-national research on children with the Soviet Union. Bronfenbrenner served as an integral link between human development and psychology and also among Cornell, the nation, and the world.



HEAD START



URIE BRONFENBRENNER, the Jacob Gould Schurman Professor Emeritus of Human Development and Psychology at Cornell, is widely regarded as one of the world's leading scholars in developmental psychology, child rearing, and human ecology—the interdisciplinary domain he created.

In 1979, Bronfenbrenner published his bioecological theory—a model of the ecology of human development that acknowledges that humans don't develop in isolation but in relation to their family and home, school, community, and society. The theory transformed how many social and behavioral scientists approach the study of human beings and their environments, leading to new directions in basic research and applications in the design of programs and policies affecting the well-being of children and families in the United States and around the world.

Making Human Beings Human: Bioecological Perspectives on Human Development (Sage Publications, 2004) is Bronfenbrenner's culminating work and a statement that he hopes will shape the future of his field.

the
Ecology
of Human
Development
EXPERIMENTS BY NATURE AND DESIGN
Urie Bronfenbrenner



In the 1960s and 1970s, the college and the department evolved in ways that reflected broad social changes. In 1968, the New York State College of Home Economics became the College of Human Ecology, a transition that captured the contemporary emphasis on improving the human condition through research in science and social



science. Within the department, coursework and research began to focus increasingly on development across the life span in addition to the traditional focus on infancy and childhood. More men joined the department as faculty members, and the number of male students also increased. Today, the Department of Human Development is the largest undergraduate major in the College of Human Ecology, and its heterogeneous student body pursues graduate training in medicine, law, psychology, education, the mental health professions, business, and journalism. Its faculty has advanced degrees in developmental psychology, sociology, and education, and they publish widely in the areas of cognitive psychology,



social and personality development, child abuse and neglect, and family functioning. In keeping with its early history, the department maintains a dual obligation to increase knowledge of human development through scholarly research and to disseminate that knowledge beyond the classroom to the public. This translational research makes Cornell's Department of Human Development unique in the Ivy League.



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Joan Jacobs Brumberg, Stephen H. Weiss Presidential Fellow and professor of history, human development, and gender studies, is the primary author of this history. Research was provided by the students in a research seminar taught in Kroch Library. Additional assistance was provided by Eileen Keating, university records manager in the Cornell University Library Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections.

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Produced by Publications and Marketing at Cornell University.

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