



THE NATURAL CHILD IN THE YOUNG REPUBLIC

The later 1700s brought new ideas of the naturally occurring growth of infants and toddlers. These ideas were part of a new interpretation of the world in which knowledge and truth came through observation of nature guided by reason, rather than through study of authoritative sources such as Aristotle or the Bible. In this system of belief, development proceeded according to observable and predictable stages.

For the first time, crawling was seen as a natural step toward walking instead of an animalistic trait to be avoided. Limbs were allowed to develop freely without the mass of confining swaddling bands. English political philosopher John Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, published a century earlier in 1693, became the standard authority for parents in the late 1700s. Locke cautioned that "Narrow breasts, short and stinking breath, ill lungs, and crookedness, are the natural and almost constant effects of hard bodice, and clothes that pinch." He argued that children were born good, a blank slate with infinite possibilities, ready to be nurtured and directed toward the path of reason and perfection.

Plymouth and other larger towns in the Old Colony began to build schools early in the 1700s. Plymouth's first school was built in 1705. By 1800 there were 11 free schools in the town. Writing in his journal in 1800 and 1801, William Thomas (b. 1788) of Plymouth tells of going to school morning, afternoon and evening, including part of the day on Saturdays. Sundays held the promise of morning and afternoon sessions at church, and William dutifully recorded the particular chapters and verses preached in his journal.

Belief in the natural strength of a child's constitution led to the idea that exposure to cold water and fresh air would develop children who were stronger than their parents' generation, who had been cosseted with hot baths and whose bodies were restricted by yards of swaddling, layer upon layer of caps, clothes and blankets. Cold baths, light bed covers, and thin clothing even in winter were prescribed to "toughen up" children, and to render them more resistant to disease and deformity.

Though special furniture for children continued to be rare until the 1850s, highchairs and children's chairs were relatively more available in the late 1700s and early 1800s. Modeled after dining chairs but equipped with longer legs and smaller seats, early high chairs usually offered no footrest, safety belt or tray.



Turned highchair, possibly Plymouth, 1700-1750, maple, oak or ash, paint, (h. 40 ¾ in., w. 16 in., d. 15 1/8 in.), Gift of William P. Church, 1911 (PHM 603).

Except for its size and splayed legs, this chair matches an adult-sized armchair in the collection (PHM 1397).

Although household chores and the development of a strong work ethic still played a large role in most children's lives, suitable play was acknowledged as a desirable activity for boys and girls during the second half of the 18th century. Child's play became a separate category from adult play, but often involved practicing for adulthood with dolls, doll cradles, miniature tea sets, or tiny wheelbarrows. Paintings of children often included dolls, toy horses, soldiers, or wagons, all associated with the appropriate gender. Boys' trousers allowed them more active play, and in the 1700s active games like jumping rope remained solely for boys. Fishing and hunting were prized pastimes for older boys. Needlework and other domestic or quiet activities were considered appropriate for girls' playtime.



Costumed shoulder-head doll, probably Germany, about 1840-1850, porcelain, various textiles, sawdust, paint, (h. 9 1/2 in., Private Collection).

This porcelain shoulder-head type dark-haired doll has a hand sewn, sawdust-filled textile body and glazed porcelain head, shoulders and limbs. The face, mid-19th century hairdo and flat shoes are painted. The doll's costume was predominately handmade but partially machine sewed.

Dolls in the 1700s were often either homemade rag dolls or expensive imported fashion dolls intended for adults and later handed down to children. As ideas changed about play for children, a market for manufactured dolls intended for child's play developed in Europe. By the 1840s, porcelain dolls representing adult women ("lady" dolls) began to be made in quantity. A number of German porcelain factories exported dolls to the United States. Laura Russell (1827-1904) of Plymouth remembers a similar doll with "painted wavy black hair...and sawdust stuffing" in the memoir of her own childhood (*Laura Russell Remembers*, published in 1970 with notes by M.L. Channing).