

Think and Feel Like A Child:  
Subjectivity and Pleasure as Authority in Early Children's Consumer Culture

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Public and publicly directed discourses helped forge a childhood wherein playing with toys, engaging in a certain order of amusement, receiving allowance money, and having a stake in property relations did not, in themselves, constitute moral transgression. The fear of the middle class, rather, was bad taste—i.e., not only wanting and choosing the wrong things but also inhabiting an incorrect disposition toward possession. It is a fear borne of the facticity of malleability, that is, of the daily, evident uncertainty regarding which influences, infractions, or incursions would make an indelible imprint, thereby altering, perhaps permanently, the child's moral biography. This ever-present concern regarding influence was informed by and derived from the Protestant problem of salvation. Malleability acquired additional layers of significance and complication as mothers, educators, advice-givers, and others came to regard the child's experiences, perspectives and, as we would now say, subjectivity as legitimate sources of expression and thereby worthy of consideration. Positioned precariously, but nonetheless enduringly, at the intersection of external influence and child subjectivity, mothers and motherhood came to bear the brunt of steersmanship, of navigating appropriate passages through difficult straits.

This moral dynamic—the symbiosis at play between malleability, maternal responsibility or liability, and child voice and perspective—constitutes the “child” and is also a key element of the “child consumer.” These two figures differ neither in origin nor in cultural morphology. Distinguished by the focus on capital, commodities, and the materialities of the self, the “child consumer” arises in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries not as a being apart, a figure apart, or a category apart from the “child.”

Rather, the child consumer materializes as a systemic partial of a (particular and expanding) middle-class version of childhood. It is a figure forged in the discursive machinations about material practice and maternal practice, punishment and reward, property and money, simplicity and taste—all of which accepted (some embraced) the place of things in the making and unmaking of selves and of life trajectories. Indeed, the child and its consumption stood not simply for “child consumption” but represented a palpable embodiment of the interlacing of biographies and materialities and the moral perils thereof. In asserting the near isomorphism of “child” and “child consumer,” I do not intend to discount the powerful, pervasive weight of a churning capitalist system that was in the midst of distributing some of its momentum toward the consumption side of economic life. Likewise, it would not be useful to elide the differences in the varied notions of childhood in circulation at the turn of the century.

A key problem in this paper centers on how “child” and “consumer” came to be put into cultural conversation with one another in the 1900–1930 period—a conversation that comes to resemble a dance as much as anything else, a dance of value and of modes of valuation. In the process of articulating the place of commercial life in childhood, and of childhood in commercial life, the discourse of parents, teachers, advice-givers, social observers, economic actors, and institutions pursued measures of truth, of the correct and proper reciprocation between the material and moral.