



# **Home-Along America: The Hidden Toll of Day Care, Behavioral Drugs, and Other Parent Substitutes**

*Mary Eberstadt*

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Why are there so many troubled kids these days, diagnosed with learning disabilities or behavioral problems? Why is child obesity out of control? Why are teenagers contracting herpes and other sexually transmitted diseases at unprecedented rates?

In *Home-Alone America*, scholar Mary Eberstadt offers an answer that's widely suspected but too politically incorrect to say out loud. A few decades ago, most children came home from school to a mother who monitored their diets, prevented sexual activity or delinquency by her mere presence, and provided a basic emotional safety net. Most children also lived with their biological father.

But today, most mothers work outside the home, and many fathers are divorced and living far away because society promotes adult fulfillment at the expense of our children. Too many kids now feel like just another chore to be juggled—dropped off at day care; handed over to a nanny; left in front of a television or a computer; and often simply home alone, with easy access to all kinds of trouble.

Eberstadt offers hard data proving that absent parents are the common denominator of many recent epidemics, including obesity, STDs, mental health problems of all kinds, and the increased use of psychiatric medication by even very young children. Drawing on a wide range of medical and social science literature as well as popular culture, she reopens the forbidden question of just how much children need their parents—especially their mothers.

*Home-Alone America* issues a radical challenge to the way America's kids are being raised. Like *The Bell Curve* or *The Nurture Assumption*, it's a controversial book that many will disagree with, but no one can ignore.

## Home-Alone America: The Hidden Toll of Day Care, Behavioral Drugs, and Other Parent Substitutes Details

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# **From Reader Review Home-Alone America: The Hidden Toll of Day Care, Behavioral Drugs, and Other Parent Substitutes for online ebook**

## **Ginny says**

Thirteen years ago, as a senior in college, I listened to one of my professors lecture on the nutritional consequences of having the mother work outside of the home, which, in a very truncated nutshell, was: the nutritional quality of meals tends to go down, way down, and affects children from birth on up. In the years since, as I've been raising my own children, I've often wondered why this important correlation never seems to be mentioned to the public. Instead there seems to be displaced rage at fast food chains or the video game industries or portions gone awry etc, etc, etc... as the causes of childhood obesity and the current downward trend in children's health. These obviously contribute to the "how" of the problem, but I noticed that nobody ever seems to address the "why" of the problem.

I had heard an author interview about this book and one thing she referred to was the nutrition problems just mentioned. The book's purpose details not only those but many more of the consequences children face because of the mass exodus of adults from their lives (working mothers, broken homes, absent fathers). The author acknowledges sensitively throughout the book that for some there is absolutely no other choice than out-of-home care or the "latchkey" solution but it is in the huge numbers of these that the vast problems have arisen "Home Alone America" addresses all the taboo child-related subjects, such as: day care, anger, the rise in childhood aggression, nutrition and child health problems, children's mental health issues (over diagnosing, over medicating, etc.) the rise parental abandonment/broken home lyrics in rap/hip hop/rock songs, the exploding STD epidemic, the rise in child sexual abuse, and large numbers of teens addicted to pornography, (the last three due to the mass numbers of unsupervised tweens and teens in empty houses), and the list goes on, and on, and on.

It is a polemic little book as one can only imagine, as it goes head-on against the current trend in separationist and feminist thought (a.k.a...those who encourage more and more time away from children arguing that no harm is done, and instead cheer for adult "liberation"). I resonated with this book not only as a mother, but I also saw the other side of things as a child facing some of these same issues. For that reason, I feel like I've seen both sides of the coin, so to speak, and I'd have to say that "Home Alone America" is informative, blatantly honest, and yet heartbreaking especially when one considers the vast numbers of children facing these same issues. It's definitely one I recommend since it's always good to be armed with knowledge, and this particular side of the story--the children's side, sadly, isn't the one that's always told.

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## **Barbara says**

In an effort to continue research for my parenting classes, I read this book for more insight into what factors are contributing to the current cultural outcome of raising children. A very well written and insightful book that takes an indepth look at how our adult decisions impact our children. A deep behind the scene look at the statistics regarding childhood behaviors that causes the reader to be much more intentional about parenting the next generations. A real call to make parenting a top priority and recognize the obligation we all have to raise our children well.

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## Sharon says

Occasionally the sentences are a little hard to follow, but a chilling read nonetheless.

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## Michael says

Yet another polemic that suffers from lies of omission. While the phenomena that author describes in this book--the rapidly increasing screwupeness of children in the country--is very, very real, she does a wonderful job of telling exactly half of the story. Much of what she says is true, in other words, but it is not *all* that's true. Talking about the impact of children being away from their parents, especially their mothers, and especially while they are very young, is not to going to make you many friends in this day and age. Fully 70% of all women with children work some or all of the time, and their kids are being watched by others, often times adults in daycare settings. Children in these circumstances are more likely to have certain issues related to health, behavior, etc. Incontrovertible, and very unpleasant to discuss. The author focuses almost exclusively on mothers who are putting their children into these situations for selfish reasons (according to her). "You can have it all" comes at a cost for children, and that cost is something we don't talk about in polite company. Welcome to the Mommy Wars.

Divorce is bad for kids, too. Not a popular statement, but one soundly backed by statistics.

What I find astonishing is how little time the author spends on the economic realities faced by families that require both parents to work. Women with MBAs from Yale may be choosing career over cradle, but in my experience the vast, overwhelming majority of women in the workforce are trying to pay mortgages, put food on the table, and cover their family's bills. Mrs. Eberstatdt's arguments seem to be leveled at the Manhattan elite and not the commoners who put their children in daycare so that these same children can have a decent roof over their heads at night. With wages near stagnant for the past three decades and the majority of economic growth going to a smaller and smaller slice of the population, can you really blame people for trying to get by as best they can? Perhaps if we had an economy where a man (or woman) could work a job with pay and benefits decent enough to afford some modicum of comfort and security for their family, we wouldn't have some many pairs of working parents.

While I found this book to be interesting, it didn't tell me much more than I already knew. It is also lacking in honest analysis about why so many women have entered into the workforce, which is certainly a massive social shift that has real and pervasive consequences for children. Mrs. Eberstadt is a conservative, and she falls prey to the same weakness that most ideologues on both sides of the political spectrum are tripped up by: she does not tell the whole story.

In my own personal life, my wife and I sacrificed a great deal to keep our two children at home with one of us for as much time as we possibly could. We did pretty well, but it was incredibly hard. I have always believed that children are best off with their parents or other family members, and I did what I could to make sure that was the case for my own kids. It was not easy. Maybe other people make different choices, or maybe they have fewer choices than I did. Despite the flaws in this book, the author's observations about the results of parent-child separation are correct: we are raising generations of children who have severe mental, emotional, social, and health problems.

No matter what the causes are, we need to be honest about what we are facing.

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### **Lisa Wuertz says**

I get her argument that institutional care in the place of parents is hurting our kids, but she does not make this argument very gracefully. Did not get far enough into it to figure out why her argument means that moms specifically need to stay home with their kids versus dad or having kids stay with another family member. Again, I have better things to do with my life than read boring books.

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### **Scott Kennedy says**

A fundamental change in the way children are raised has taken place in the last few decades. We have moved from a situation where most children came home from school to a Mum who was home, to a situation where children are farmed out to day care at ever decreasing ages. This family-child separation has coincided with a precipitous decline in youth health and behaviour statistics. While no-fault divorce and women in the work force might be better for adults, adult voices have continued to dominate discussion on these issues, and Eberstadt bravely argues that it is time we heard things from the children's perspective.

In her first chapter she looks at day care. She leaves aside the question of whether day care has any long term effects, and argues that institutional care is a bad idea if you have a choice, because it raises the immediate unhappiness of the child. She shows that children in day care tend to be sick more often than others, and those who are in day care since infancy are more likely to behave more aggressively toward others. Furthermore it tends to make adult advocates more callous and hardened towards the needs of young children.

In chapter 2 she shows that there is a correlation between adolescent abandonment and spectacular savagery. School shootings and serial killers tend to have this in common. She looks at the causal chain of home alone teens leading to alcohol and drug abuse leading to feral behaviour. Another interesting point raised is that the more hours parents are away from home after school in the evening, the more likely the child is to test in the bottom quartile.

In chapter 3 Eberhardt shows links between absent mothers and obesity. We already know that the more television watched, the greater the likelihood of fat children, and strangely enough, less adult supervision leads to greater screen intake. Another point she raises is the connection between breast feeding and lower likelihood of obesity. Once again, breastfeeding mums are more likely to be at home longer with their children. Outside play is less likely to occur when there is non-parental care after school, and this also correlates with obesity.

In chapter four, the mental health catastrophe is tackled. Here there are grim statistics. The number of children and teens diagnosed with mental disorders has exploded. Eberstadt argues that they have more to be anxious and depressed about. She quotes a lot of research in this chapter. One article she quotes has this gem, *"A chaotic home environment with parents who are physically or emotionally absent because of mental illness, substance abuse, behavioural or economic difficulties, or other problems is also a risk factor [for depression in children]."* She also spends some time showing how many of the disorders that have become so common are diagnosed exclusively on behavioural criteria. She notes that many of the criteria for

disorders such as ADHD and ODD are actually common to most children, and the rise in these disorders may be due to us *“defining deviancy up so that children who would have been considered normal a quarter of a century ago are now judged to have intrinsic brain problems.”* Why do we do this? Because adults who spend less time with children are less and less tolerant of childish behaviour. Another issue I think is extremely important is the fact that the diagnoses ignore environmental factors, and assume that anti-social behaviour stems from an underlying disorder. But research into the plasticity of the nervous system suggests that environmental factors can make genuine physical changes to the brain. We already know from case studies of Romanian orphans that extreme psychological and behavioural damage can be caused by extreme deprivation, and Eberstadt suggests that at least some of what is showing up in our mental health numbers is the fallout of the relative parental and familial deprivation experienced in today’s kids.

Chapter five looks into the wonder drugs of our age. Here Eberstadt points out the rise in children and teens being administered these drugs, and the risks of drugs like Ritalin to our teens. She points out that in teen mass-murders, the perpetrators are on psychotropic drugs, and one of the rare side-effects of these drugs is psychotic behaviour. She also notes that there is widespread abuse of drugs like Ritalin.

Teenage music is the subject of the sixth chapter. She notes that yesterday’s music was the music of abandon, and today’s is the music of abandonment. I do not listen to popular music, so I was not aware of the common theme of anger at divorce and fathers leaving in today’s music, but she looked at a number of top bands and artists and noted this.

In chapter seven, teenage sex is investigated. Here she argues that despite teen pregnancies being down and some celebrating this, STDs amongst our youth are at epidemic levels. One of the scary things is that many of the STDs are ‘silent’ in females meaning they can have them, but not know they have them for some time, all the while the STDs are wreaking havoc. And condoms, despite the safe sex mantra, do not protect from HPV, which is directly responsible for 99.7% of cervical cancer. What’s going on? Well surprise surprise, having parents at home means teens are less likely to have sex. Well there’s the obvious reason for that, then there are less obvious reasons which you’ll have to read the book to find out!

For me, chapter eight was the weakest chapter – about some specialty boarding schools for troubled teens.

Overall, I thought this book was fantastic. Will it change someone’s mind? Probably not. As Eberhardt says, *“the passionate desire to attribute today’s behavioural and mental problems to inanimate suspects such as vaccines despite serious evidence to the contrary shows us how reflexively our society fastens on to some explanation, any explanation that does not involve parents.”* But I’m with Eberhardt. It would be better for our children, and ultimately our society if more parents were with their kids more of the time. No it might not be possible for some, and yes it might mean a sacrifice of lifestyle for most of us, but these are our children we are talking about.

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## David Alexander says

Very illuminating journalism. She memorably points out multiple ways in which our society has become inhospitable to children. One chapter in particular I recall in which she analyzes trends in youth music and an underlying theme in a lot of music of rage and feeling betrayal from broken homes. This theme became very popular. She asks why it resonated like it did. The pain we paper over in our embrace of divorce, etc. In another chapter she points out a fascinating correlation between broken homes or estranged parents and serial

killers. Dahmer was left to live alone by his parents in a house during his teenage years during which time he says he began to develop evil thoughts. Ted Bundy's mother lived with him and his grandparents and pretended to be his sister. Etc.

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### **Caren says**

Not exactly eye-opening, but one of the best books I've read lately. I think because I've intuitively felt the importance of my role as mom, but I loved the research that supported it. Not that we all need to be stay at home moms necessarily, just that kids need parents around more. Loved the supporting research. Helped me see why parents are so important to all ages and stages of their kids' lives.

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### **Tripleguess says**

The book's message is unnecessarily complicated by too much verbiage, but it's really quite simple: kids need their parents. By and large, they aren't getting them. The author details widespread symptoms and increasingly common quick-fixes (Ritalin) to make her point.

The section I found most disturbing was the one on "specialty" schools for "problem" teens, as I was not formerly aware of their existence. I will definitely be reading Alexia Parks' book "American Gulag."

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### **Sara says**

I'm already biased on the side of "women should stay home with their kids if at all possible." So, I tried to read this insightful book with some objectivity. Eberstadt brings up powerful points on the absent-parent problem. If you don't have time to read the whole book, just read the intro. and conclusion. It really does make you stop and think.

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### **Paige says**

Wow, this book is certainly NOT politically correct, but VERY interesting! Mary Eberstadt is brave to make the correlations that she does, and it's unfortunate that more people aren't willing to listen to what she has to say. I especially like her point that we are too quick to look at long-term outcomes ("they graduated from college! they must be OK!"), and less likely to look at the immediate consequence to kids whose parents are not around.

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### **Rachel Indihar says**

This book offers very real, alarming evidence of how kids in America are NOT "all right." Unlike most scientific articles and news media, children's brains and bodies are not being blamed but the children's families. The evidence is in...a large amount of children with emotional, physical and psychological



problems come from chaotic homes and/or don't see their biological parents often enough because they are in day care all day or in after school programs. The author asks a very important question: just how much does parental absence affect children's lives? More than society would like to admit, it turns out. The author doesn't give a "one size fits all situations" answer to the problem but presents readers with facts and thoughts so that they can do what is best for their children.

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## **Lize says**

I'm always wary of people who propose very simple solutions to complex problems, and experience has taught me that I'm usually right to be wary. There's some good, thought-provoking stuff here, but it would have carried a lot more weight had she not tied it all up at the end in a neat bow--all we need to solve our many problems is if mothers stayed home with their kids. The End. If only it were that easy.

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## **Paul says**

Many books have been written recently telling women that they can Have It All; motherhood and a career. Few, if any, books look at the child's point of view.

Even the best day care centers are little better than germ factories. If one child is sick, which happens frequently, it is nearly guaranteed that all of the other children, and the day care provider, will also get sick. There is also a large increase in aggressive and violent behavior among 3 and 4-year-olds. Pro-day care groups, who the author calls separationists, think that this is a good thing. Getting sick now means they will get fewer illnesses as they grow up, and being an aggressive bully means that they will grow up to be the sort of person not afraid to fight for what they want. (Really?)

A major reason for the epidemic in childhood obesity is the lack of parental involvement. There are no adults around to keep an eye on children as they play in the backyard, or the local playground, so children are told to stay inside and lock the door. Children also go right for the junk food, skipping the fruit, because there are no adults around to teach them otherwise.

Symptoms of conditions like Attention Deficit Disorder include fidgeting, losing things, interrupting, squirming and ignoring adults. These seem to be very close to normal childhood and adolescent behavior. No doubt, there are some children with an actual disability who are really helped by drugs like Prozac and Ritalin. For everyone else, is there some disease or mutation sweeping America causing the "wiring" in millions of adolescent brains to be faulty, requiring such psychotropic drugs?

The teen pregnancy rate in America is going down, which is a good thing, but the rate of sexually transmitted disease is way up. The use of contraceptives does not always equal safe sex. Where do they do "it"? At home, or their partner's home, because their parents aren't around.

What is to be done? Every adult must look at their own situation. Many parents work full time out of total necessity. For the others, can you be one of the adults to keep an eye on children allowing them to actually play outside? Can you coach an after-school sport or be a tutor? Can you simply be an adult figure for a child, like a Big Brother or Big Sister?

This is a gem of a book that should be read, and talked about, by parents across America. It is highly recommended.

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### **James Carter says**

I've not been paying attention to the state of children the last 15 years because I assumed that they had more or less of a childhood as I did. It turns out that kids from divorced families, living with parents who work all the time and rarely seeing them, are more likely to have academic, mental, and behavior problems. That's Mary Eberstadt's thesis, and she has a point there.

The evidence to back it up are clearly outlined in *Home-Alone America* although the last part about kids being sent to specialty schools is a bit extreme to read about. Hence, I now have a better understanding of the problem, but what can we do really? It's the ultimate price of chasing the American Dream: living the good life.

However, I can't care less about the kids; they need to get over themselves, stop thinking that their problems are special or unique, and start fighting through adversity.

All in all, I've enjoyed reading *Home-Alone America*.

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