

A CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF CHILDREN  
AND PARENTING AS PORTRAYED IN  
HOLLYWOOD FILMS OF THE 1990'S

KATHERINE E. WAHLBERG

**A Cultural Analysis of Children and Parenting  
As Portrayed in Hollywood Films of the 1990's**

**by**

**Katherine E. Wahlberg**

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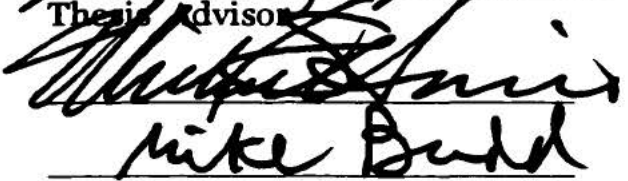
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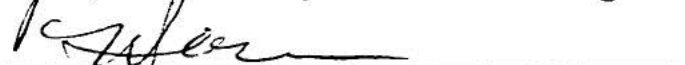
**SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:**

  
Thesis Advisor

  
Mike Budd

  
Chairman, Department of Anthropology

  
Dean, The Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters

  
Vice Provost

11 29 01  
Date

## **ABSTRACT**

**Author:** Katherine E. Wahlberg  
**Title:** A Cultural Analysis of Children and Parenting  
As Portrayed in Hollywood Films of the 1990's  
**Institution:** Florida Atlantic University  
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Because the film genre categorized as “family” has become a larger segment of the film industry in the last decade, family films have become an abundant source of cultural information about children and family structure. This study examines from a cognitive perspective how preadolescent children and their parents are portrayed in mainstream Hollywood films during the 1990's, how these film narratives reflect the durability of core cultural models, and elements of negotiation and change. The portrayal of family relationships and the conceptualization of a child are affected by cultural models surrounding nurturance, self-reliance, success, nostalgia and the future orientation of our culture. Salient issues include the perceived disintegration of the family and the nature of the relationship between fathers and their children. A significant number of films focus on the family from the father's perspective, emphasizing his need to enrich his life beyond the workplace and develop close familial relationships.

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## ***Chapter 1: Introduction***

The objective of this research project is to identify and evaluate cultural models relating to preadolescent children and their parents, as revealed in films produced in the United States during the period from 1990 through 2000. Along with the proliferation of film in general, the film genre categorized as "family" has become a much larger segment of the film industry in the last decade. As a result, family films have become a more abundant source of cultural information about children and family structure. Film is an excellent medium to utilize in the assessment of cultural models because it is cognitive in nature. Film is a created reality that acts as a repository of cultural understandings and as a medium for negotiation and change. The scope of this study is an examination from a cognitive perspective of how children and their parents are portrayed in films, how these film narratives reflect the durability of some core cultural models, and what elements of change and negotiation in cultural models regarding family are found in contemporary films.

The "created reality" found in these films is very different from that found in adult-oriented films; the "family" genre is unique in its focus on cultural models surrounding children and the family. Powdermaker (1950:40) comments that an attribute of all mass production is the uniformity of the manufactured product. Hollywood attempts to ensure success through the use of formulas, which has created a number of

genres. While Powdermaker found most genres to possess a great deal of variability, like old-style "Westerns, " "Family" dramas show less variation.

When children are the primary focus in these films, their actions are embedded within a framework of cultural models surrounding parenting. Family structure, including how a mother and father should act becomes as important as how children should act. Because films are produced by adults, they reflect an adult view of children and parenting. When children act as primary characters, they often act somewhat differently from real children. Adults define the characteristics of a child or childhood, projecting their models of childhood and parenthood onto the roles played by children. In film, adults employ children to portray cultural models about adult issues, including parenting as well as desires, dreams and aspirations.

Film narratives call for children and adults to act in unrealistic ways to satisfy purposes of the commercial product. In producing films about children, the goal of the filmmaker is usually to entertain. Some of the characteristics shown by child characters would not be found acceptable to parents if their own children acted in the same manner. Film children may make jokes at their parents expense, act far too adult for their age, and actually injure adults. Adults in these films, most often fathers, act extremely silly and inept. They often embody powerlessness, while their children are effective in solving problems. This provides many opportunities for humor, but has deeper cultural implications which will be discussed later. The choice of situations and actions satisfies the conventions of comedy but must still be accepted by the audience as

amusing. An example can be found in the idea that "fathers act inept when faced with running a household." An unacceptable situation could be found in "mother gets killed by child's rocket.<sup>1</sup>" A film is a work of art which is comprised of many features that are determined by the director's conception of the project, but much of the content is still dependent upon the acceptance of the viewers.

Mass culture can be viewed as a circuit, originating solely from neither the producer nor the receiver. The refinement of cultural models is continuous and film, as a major component of mass culture, is deeply involved in the process. A complex amalgamation of factors surrounds not only the making and showing of a particular film, but also which films are viewed by the public at any given time. It is significant that the filmmaker, as a member of his culture, is trying to convey public social messages as well as presenting a work of art. The filmmaker may be acting upon a variety of motivational forces including political or social issues, sensationalistic features which shock, personal issues or Hollywood political dictates. The filmmaker may, to a certain degree hold a special place as an expert in culture, but it is the individual members of the culture who appropriate specific elements, within the context of either widely shared cultural experiences or more narrowly held beliefs.

Much of the historically based core of knowledge on which people draw in order to act developed with the emergence of the United States as a country and remains a forceful basis of action today. Some of the broad-based cultural models that exhibit a great degree of durability and continue to be important to self-definition are equality, progress, success

and individualism (Luedtke 1992:19). Success and individualism rely on the development of self-reliance, a characteristic of extreme importance to Americans. Self-reliance is a highly valued model that is transmitted to children from a very early age, resulting in a widely generalized application in later experiences (Strauss and Quinn 1997:90).

Cultural models surrounding success and self-reliance are essential in child-rearing in the United States due to the emphasis put on future orientation (Dundes 1980:71). There is a strong desire to impart self-reliance to children in order to assure their future success. Ideas about progress and the possibility for success of anyone who is given the right education link child-rearing practices with the success of the child, the family, and the nation. Parents perceive that success can be obtained through their children; as a result children act as a repository of their dreams. The young are the primary focus of success, so self-reliance gains importance as a model for children.

Due to factors which have developed since the advent of the industrial era, nurturance has become an essential broad-based cultural model that is fundamental to child-rearing practices in the United States. Changes in family life that occurred during the industrial era established nurturance as a more significant aspect of child-rearing. As a cult of domesticity and the glorification of motherhood developed along with the newly emerging middle class, children began to be treated as objects of nurturance and childhood as a separate stage of life.

However, it is the new ideology of increased nurturance that began to spread after World War II, especially prevalent during the 1950's

(LeVine and Norman 2001:99), which has provided a focal point for the nostalgic view of the family. There is much concern about the disruption of the traditional nuclear family and the social practices surrounding the family unit. The complex network of cultural models surrounding childhood in the United States of today is articulated through this reinvented traditional family of the past. The contemporary family is judged against the standard of this idealized nuclear family.

The heightened importance of the cultural model of nurturance in child-rearing practices has created a more intense contradiction between nurturance and the existing model for self-reliance. The models for self-reliance and nurturance are both intensely significant in child-rearing practices and exhibit a great deal of durability. Attempts to ease the conflict between these models are expressed in a wide variety of ways. The most significant is found in the gendered aspects of nurturance and self-reliance. The mother is an agent of nurturance in the home, while the father is an agent of self-reliance in the sphere of the workplace (Strauss and Quinn 1997:108). The contradictions between nurturance and self-reliance have become more convoluted in the years since the 1950's introduced a new intensity for nurturance. Modern conceptions of gender which have rejected traditional interpretations, but durable models remain. An examination of contemporary films confirms that cultural models regarding child-rearing have shown great durability, even as conflicting models are being negotiated and reinterpreted continually. Modern parents struggle with gender identities which accompany parenthood, and these are some of the models being negotiated in films

about children.

Aspects of parenthood that were salient in the 1980's provide a basis and contrast to changes which have occurred in the last decade. Traube (1992:125) found that the dominant cultural constructions of gender found in films of the 1980's tend to recreate parents in a manner which split gender characteristics along traditional lines, in spite of the presentation of mothers and fathers in new ways that challenge such views. The trend in films produced during the 1980's was to illustrate the conflict for young women between a new ideology which values the self-reliance found in the workplace, and her traditional sphere of the home. In addition, Hollywood has created a nontraditional form of fatherhood as a modern solution for the preservation of the family. The sensitive caring man of the 1950's films, who devoted time to his wife and children, is expanded in the 1980's and 1990's.

The focus of family films produced during the 1990's has shifted almost entirely to the father, while the mother is reestablished in her traditional role. The foremost characteristic of family films produced in the 1990's is a preoccupation with the father's relationship with his children. Films of the 1990's stress the importance of the father's place as a nurturer in the home, supporting the message that fathers can be nurturing caretakers, whether they are single, widowed, divorced or part of a nuclear family. The father should place his personal relationship with his children above career needs even when the mother is present. The most intense model for a nurturing father is found in the requirement for a single divorced man to become a nurturer equal to that of the traditional

mother, giving the child a nurturer in both homes.

The focus on fathers in films of the 1990's extends further than goals of gender equality sought by sharing of the role of nurturer. The father as an agent of self-reliance is also an agent of success. In these films, success is reinterpreted to mean not only success in the workplace but as a nurturer as well. Self-fulfillment through the achievement of success in a technologically complex workplace which results in the disruption of the nuclear family is placed in opposition to the self-fulfillment found within the nurturance of one's family and one's self. In the process of successfully nurturing his child, the father is nurturing himself.

The use of nurturance as a means of gauging male success legitimizes a focus on self-examination within the family model. Due to the redefinition self that occurs in the transition to parenthood (Harkness, Super and Keefer 1992:172), fathers naturally examine personal issues including their childhoods and their parents. The emerging emphasis on the need for fathers to learn how to develop warm interpersonal relationships with their children is the cultural model which drives the self-examination found in family films. This model creates tension for the father when he compares the model for warm, caring relationships with the type of relationship sustained between himself and his own father during childhood. Typically, the father must resolve new models with former models for success that discouraged the development of close interpersonal relationships. In the past boys were often encouraged to compete and be tough rather than be warm and giving, and fathers were more remote agents of self-reliance and success.

The self-examination that baby boomers have focused on in the last decade has revolved around the popular concept of the "inner child." This is a reflection of a generation that does not wish to relinquish their youth and continues to claim its characteristics for themselves. Baby boomers are attempting to reclaim the wonder of childhood and its attributes which include creativity, sensitivity, self-expression, self-fulfillment, a sense of fun, and an adventurous spirit. This process of self-examination is commonly utilized in family films to provide conflict and resolution in the plot. Children sometimes even portray the psyche for adults, as the child may be equated with the inner child, or self.

The way in which children act in films also reflects the future orientation of the United States. In the family genre, children are centrally placed in the plot, and portrayed more favorably than parents. The child acts as a representative of the successful, self-reliant individual of the future. Film children possess as much self-reliance as many adults. They are more forward-thinking, smarter, more aware, and more effective than adults. This suggests that the designation of the child as an agent of the future is more intense in contemporary films than ever before. In the "family" genre, children solve problems, save adults, come up with creative solutions, and manipulate parents into decisions and relationships which benefit the entire family.

Nurturance and self-reliance are extremely durable cultural models which affect parenting objectives. In family films, parents are most often agents of nurturance, while the young embody self-reliance. A life-plan model can be identified as important in the application of nurturance and

self-reliance. The nurturance of very young children has increased in modern society, and a number of methods of teaching self-reliance to infants, such as sleeping alone, are utilized less by many parents (LeVine and Norman 2001:99). In films, the greatest tension between the models for nurturance and self-reliance is exhibited during the years between seven and eleven years of age. As children gain autonomy, the conflict lessens. Coming-of-age is a time when self-reliance becomes more important than nurturing, and the young adult should be completely self-reliant in order to insure success. Success should be achieved before having children, so that the parents can then focus on their children, ensuring the success of the next generation. Due to the future orientation of our culture, once an individual becomes a parent, the children become the center of the household and the recipient of parental resources.

A shift in the focus of attention to the father's relationship with his children has facilitated the examination of issues which have gained salience in the 1990's. The particular experiences and contemporary concerns of the parents to whom the films are marketed affect the content of the films. The result is that the role of sensitive male has been enlarged to embrace fatherhood in a new way by negotiating certain aspects of personal success for men. However, the durability of cultural models surrounding nurturance and self-reliance and future orientation remains fundamental in the roles of parents and children. New interpretations affect how these models are applied to parenting roles as a result of a desire to negotiate models in order to accommodate contemporary concerns.

## ***Chapter 2: Literature Review***

### ***Film***

Film, as an integral part of the cultural milieu of the United States, acts as a repository of our cultural understandings, as well as a medium for cultural negotiation. Strauss and Quinn (1997:115) assert that cultural understandings can be expressed and preserved outside of the mind, a process that creates a public forum that preserves ideas and can become an effective vehicle for change. Film offers such a public medium which embodies knowledge and articulates cultural models for the individual. Belton (1996:2) maintains that films assist audiences in negotiating major changes in identity, providing a means to carry them across difficult periods of cultural transition, allowing a “national identity” comprised of shifting beliefs to remain at the center of mass culture.

American film exists within a cultural context. Film affects culture, not only by popularizing certain aspects of culture, but also by utilizing already popular elements. Film has always had the function of questioning, of allowing, or sometimes forcing, its audiences to look at situations differently. Filmmakers reinterpret history, cultures and attitudes. They may conform to, confirm or deny dominant ideology (Fuery 2000:93). The producer must draw upon social experience for raw material, reworking and incorporating models into the product, while the

viewer in turn utilizes the product as raw material, integrating it into his individually lived culture (Traube 1987:4).

Viewers are an important part of the complex network of factors influencing the film industry. The viewer always operates at a unique and individual level, within the larger context in which the film is viewed (Fuery 2000:113). Margaret Mead noted (1953:14) that an individual's perception of new input is in part a function of what is already known. Perceptions about the meaning of a film depend on a detailed awareness of many models already existing in our culture. In his comprehension of a film, the viewer utilizes at will the social order within the film, the wider social environment, and their own social order (Fuery 2000:109). Many aspects of a film influence the individual viewer's assessment, including special effects, amount of sex or violence, trends in the marketplace and likeability and reputation of the star (Powdermaker 1950:23-25), as well as the intentions of the filmmaker. An audience is an unstructured group that exists as a group only for a short time. However, the filmmaker must target an audience in order to create a desire for viewing his particular film. Thus, his work is tailored to a certain extent by his hypothetical audience (Jarvie 1970:89-90).

The reactions of viewers are felt in the success or failure of films, but a great deal of the decisions surrounding these factors are influenced by Hollywood leaders. The cinematic gaze establishes a narrow view of reality, which defines central personal experiences, especially those anchored in race, class and gender. Genre creates a mythic space that allows the viewer to place what is seen within a framework that includes a

representation of social and historical reality that provides an interpretation (Slotkin 1984:424). The core American values of "individualism, freedom, the frontier, love, hard work, family, wealth and companionship" have been valorized by the cinematic view, (Denzin 1995:33-34) and family films participate fully in this representation. American cinema became an integral part of American society in the space of thirty years, from 1900 to 1930, creating a new public communal space heavily under the influence of Hollywood (Denzin 1995:13-14). Powers, Rothman and Rothman (1996:1-5) have noted that a group of Hollywood elite, who share a particular set of political and cultural assumptions that it views as natural, have not only influence within the film industry, but have gained an increased influence in American society since World War II.

However, the making of a film is a highly collaborative enterprise, involving writers, directors, actors, and camera personnel as well as businessmen. Until recently, it was not even possible for one person to make a film (Jarvie:1970:25). As early as 1950, Powdermaker noted that the social organization of Hollywood has allowed the businessman to take over the functions of artists and substitute his values for theirs (Powdermaker 1950:316). However, as Powdermaker (1950:26-29) points out, every filmmaker, as an artist, is trying to interpret a segment of experience that he has either known or observed, which he wishes to communicate to others. Gledhill (1988:67) defines this process of negotiation as a "struggle between competing frames of reference, motivation, and experience." For a film audience in the United States,

these frames of reference are as diverse as the multi-ethnic, multi-class population, and popular films are involved in culture far beyond their initial theater runs or reruns through elements such as merchandising, stars, genres, and key phrases that are incorporated into culture.

Film is a social practice for both makers and audiences, whose narratives and meanings give evidence of the ways in which people make sense of culture. Wolfenstein (1953:267) maintained that recurrent themes of films are related to variables of dynamic psychology, thus providing a basis for the characterization of groups of films within a given culture, as well as comparison with other cultures. She found that film plots are related to older literary and art forms that have a historical basis for analysis developed from several trends of thought. These include philosophical theories of differences in art styles of different epochs, the interpretation of folklore as a culture trait, the identification of universal psychological motifs as sources of recurrent mythological themes and the study of individual artist's works in relation to their life histories. In grouping works of art, analysis must be selective from a point of view of cultural relevance. This selectivity is expressed in terms of grouping, paying attention to likeness and variation (Wolfenstein 1953:267-269).

While the place of film in an individual culture or between cultures varies in the degree and manner in which it is integrated into people's lives, filmmakers still have similar goals based on factors such as commercial success, art, innovation, convention, and political, moral or personal concerns. Dickey (1993:3) examined the extent to which film participates in everyday life in South India. She found one of the highest

film watching rates in the world, with highly organized viewing by film clubs on a daily basis. The success of films produced in South India depends on their production as highly stylized fantasy that repeats popular themes and utilizes popular music. These films are very different from mainstream Hollywood productions; the formula utilizes a star, six songs, three dances and includes a mandatory romance, while a story is not necessary (Dickey 1993:58). Yet, Dickey notes that the relationship between Tamil cinema's consumers and producers is much the same as it is elsewhere: the producers generally find it necessary to respond to the desires, both conscious and unconscious, of their paying audience (Dickey 1993:57). In the United States, the cultural milieu surrounding the viewing of films is much different, but the cultural phenomena that dictate convention and have affective value are, in the same manner, indicators of our culture.

There is significance in the types of roles assigned to representatives of different social groups in texts of films. The kinds of roles and actions assigned to groups such as women, children, the old, the young, or members of ethnic groups reflect the cultural models associated with each category (Berger 1998:101). The casting of characters by physical characteristics, and the characters' actions or words, all support models about how certain people should and do act. Berger (1998:117-118) notes the importance of physical, social and emotional characteristics in the casting of types such as heroes or villains. For example, a possible love interest in a film is usually chosen to fit into models that define acceptable attributes. A character's social position is one important aspect that is

defined through assessments of factors such as occupation, education, religion, socioeconomic class and ethnic background. Meanwhile, physical characteristics such as hair and eye color, age, weight, height, race, and body structure must fit into models about what level of beauty is acceptable for the character. Specific emotional natures make up a complex character, but certain characteristics are assigned by factors such as gender, age, or socioeconomic status. For example, women are more likely to be dependent while men are more likely to be authoritarian.

The interpretation of film content relies on the evaluation of a set of concepts and propositions from dynamic psychology that are expressed in identifiable themes (Wolfenstein 1953:269). A theme is the way in which a particular variable is repeated in the productions of a particular culture. The interconnections between the themes observed in the films of a particular culture forms a grouping around a particular variable such as the father-child relationship, revealing distinctive attributes (Wolfenstein 1953:270-271). Within any one film, themes are likely to be repeated (Wolfenstein 1953:272). The focus on particular themes varies between types of films produced, depending on factors such as the targeted audience and the artistic aim of the filmmaker. Mead (1953:10) observed that researchers must use their own perceptions as a method of evaluating systematic relationships that reveal the ways in which members of a culture organize their experience.

One of the ways in which one can discriminate between types of narratives in films is through genres. Turner (1999:97) defines genre as "...a system of codes, conventions, and visual styles which enables an

audience to determine rapidly and with some complexity the kind of narrative they are viewing." Many aspects of films indicate their genre to the audience, such as music style, visual style, or even a recognizable set moral values. The function of genre is to make films comprehensible and familiar to the viewer. People watch any one film through the context of other films which they have viewed or heard about. This "intertextuality" informs the viewer as to what to expect, but may also induce expectations that are deliberately not met (Turner 1999:97). Genres depend upon the audience's competency with the familiar, and the audience finds pleasure in the familiar, in repetition and restatement. However, there is innovation and originality in genre films and a balance between the two is important to the success of a film.

Films embed social concerns within the repetition of familiar narrative patterns. Particular cinematic tendencies can be connected to wider social currents. Noriega (1992) recognized the importance of genre in his examination of the representation of Chicanos in Hollywood and Mexican cinema. Noriega examined the content of feature films to extract the cinematic image of Chicanos. He found that the repetition of abusive stereotypes in Westerns imparts negative images of Chicanos. Films can teach or reinforce a lot about a myriad of topics including race, ethnicity, gender, culture and nationality, and individual genres utilize specific conventions that involve stereotypes. "Family" genre films utilize both positive and negative stereotypes concerning characters revolving around children. Some of these roles include mothers, fathers, single men, single women, and working women. The relevance of genre in imparting

stereotypical and other social messages can be seen in the impact of film on public perception.

Genres are dynamic, changing over time as different elements become adopted. Genres are the product of at least three forces: the practices of the film industry, the expectations and competency of the audience and the contribution of the text to the genre as a whole (Turner 1999:100). Slotkin (1984:413) points out that the audience does not choose what films are produced, but only reacts to what is available. However, the emergence and continuity of particular genres in film is the result of a process of selection between filmmaker and audience. Producers of films respond to consumer choices, reproducing more of the appealing formulas. The result is a group of formulas, or genres, that are successful in the marketplace. The negotiation between audience and producer which maintains and changes a genre can be likened to the negotiation in the interpretation of cultural models by members of a culture. In fact, the negotiation of cultural models is one dynamic aspect of genres.

Changes in the American film industry have caused the split of the mass market of films into smaller markets, resulting in the development of sub-genres that appeal to specific markets. Rarely can any one film please the whole family. Since the popularization of television following World War II, film audiences have been declining and changing in character. The family market has given way to a predominantly youth market, the 14-24 age group who still attends regularly (Turner 1999:25-26). From Cinerama, introduced in 1952, to the successful blockbusters of the present, special effects have been presented as a means of increasing

audiences (Turner 1999:21,24).

With advances in technology, alternate methods of film distribution have changed the dynamics of film viewing. By the end of the 1980's, revenue from video rentals was double the amount of box office receipts (Turner 1999:30). The availability of video rentals has affected the family film market heavily because children watch the same film many times, motivating parents to make purchases. This new market has resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of films produced for family viewing which include children as primary characters.

This genre, which is specifically aimed at a market comprised of children and related adults, is loosely categorized as family drama or family drama/comedy by the film industry. Turner (1999:26) refers to these films as a "kidult," genre because they are aimed at two separate markets, the "kids" and their nostalgic parents. The content and set of moral values found in these films is a defining factor in their placement in the "family" genre. The focus of family films is generally on relationships within the family. Family films primarily present cultural models that are widely shared among members of the middle class in the United States, mostly ignoring ethnic and class differences. The set of moral values found in these films is strong, traditional, and simplistic and can be recognized by the public.

Family films exemplify the durability and motivational force of cultural models about children. These ideas are remarkably resistant to change, as we continue to recreate patterns from previous generations. As noted by Strauss and Quinn (1997:112), the environment structures

each succeeding generation's cultural models, with each generation reproducing familiar, available, seemingly natural behaviors. Film and other forms of media are important sources of these ideas. An examination of films of the last decade will demonstrate the durability of cultural models regarding children in our culture; while reinterpretations abound, core models remain firmly in place.

While underlying cultural understandings are congruent throughout the medium, film also offers a medium for change or negotiation, offering solutions to cultural contradictions through reinterpretations. In some instances, the incorporation of old ideas into new situations, a useful device in creating a screenplay, results in a reinterpretation in which the cultural models show little change. However, some reinterpretations do create a source of change or lessening of conflict between contradicting models. Strauss and Quinn (1997:116) speak of the significance of labeling as a method of articulation, in order to effect change. In film, hazy and unspoken ideas are sometimes articulated for the public, providing schema that are motivational for the individual, resulting in widespread acceptance of the new schema. There are varied sources of cultural change and reinterpretation of cultural models, and many are presented in the medium of film.

### *Cultural models*

Film is an excellent medium to utilize in an assessment of cultural understandings about children in the United States from a cognitive perspective. The relationship between film and culture is cognitive in

nature: a film is a "created" reality, a conception of society interpreted by everyone involved in its making and viewing. Cognitive theory views culture as shared knowledge, and a very large proportion of what we know and believe is derived from these cultural models that define what is in the world and how it works (Quinn and Holland 1992:3). In order to understand why people act in the ways in which they do, it is necessary to examine their goals and interpretive system. Cultural models provide information that guides action, providing goals (D'Andrade 1992:30-31). Cultural models are not universally shared within a culture; there is a lot of conflict, contradiction, ambiguity. Change is a continual process as cultural understandings are "negotiated" and "contested" (Strauss 1992:1). The presentation of societal issues as individual problems in films is a method of articulating existing cultural models as well as providing a forum for the negotiation of changing models.

Cultural knowledge appears to be systematic, and within each culture a unique pattern of fundamental themes that reflect world view can be distinguished. Every culture possesses a unique body of knowledge from which members draw for everyday action and thought. People master an immense amount of cultural knowledge that is utilized on a daily basis. This knowledge plays an essential role in each individual's understanding of the world and provides directive force for behavior. These understandings, or cultural models, provide interpretations and inferences about an experience, and goals that motivate action. Much of what we know and believe is derived from these shared cultural models that specify what is in the world and how it works. Cultural models act to

fill in knowledge, are shaped by the learner's specific life experiences, are sensitive to activity in a particular context and can vary and change, even though they are often similar person to person or from one time to another (Strauss and Quinn 1997:49-51).

Complex cultural models provide the organizational tool for utilizing large amounts of cultural knowledge. Strauss and Quinn (1997:49) define schemas, or cultural models, as "collections of elements that work together to process information at any given time." Cultural models shape social behavior and provide a framework for thinking in everyday contexts (Quinn and Holland 1987:22). These culturally based propositions, rarely explicit or well specified, are embodied in natural language and often are taken to be "fact." People cannot give an exact account of a cultural model, yet they can give judgments about the kinds of events and conditions that are acceptable within a model. This variation around a mode is indicative of the "natural" quality and inexact fit of cultural models (D'Andrade 1992:34).

Some cultural models are widely shared within a given culture, while others may be idiosyncratic. Models can be motivating for some, while unmotivating for others. They can be contextually limited, or shared by relatively few individuals (Strauss and Quinn 1997:85). Because this kind of information is learned through informal guided discovery, what is learned may be different from what is taught. People tend to be be very good at learning by this method but are inadequate at learning this type of knowledge entirely on their own. This combination of self-initiated yet other dependent learning yields properties of flexibility

and sharedness that help account for cultural variation. Flexibility allows the participant to exercise a selectivity based on the unique circumstance of his life. This flexibility also provides a capacity for the addition of new aspects into a culture (D'Andrade 1981:188). Each individual in a culture possesses a combination of socially sanctioned and idiosyncratic schemas derived from life experiences that lie somewhere within cultural norms, yet provides potential sources of conflict.

Models also exhibit differing amounts of durability both for the individual and historically in a culture. Culture shows a great deal of historical durability; much of it is reproduced from one generation to the next. The public world is recreated by the reenactment of models, often through deliberate attempts to transmit values. Elements such as books, films, television and the behavior of friends all tend to recreate cultural models of the past generation. As a result, the next generation tends to favor models that reproduce patterns of familiar, available behaviors enacted by the adults around them which appear natural. Children's models are shaped by the existing culture within their environment (Strauss and Quinn 1997:111-112).

The durability of cultural models for the individual has an impact on their historical durability. One group of cultural understandings which help make cultural models durable is social evaluations, or understandings about goodness and badness in relationship to behavior. They are most often cast in terms of what is "natural," or "moral" (Strauss and Quinn 1997:94). The interpretation of a cultural model by an individual in any given situation depends upon the context within which

it is embedded. Because cultural models are interpreted within the context of an event, people display a great deal of situational variability in behavior. The context of an event often has an immense effect on how it is interpreted (D'Andrade 1992:33). Context is linked with motivation; situational variations in behavior can be explained through goals or motivation (Strauss 1992:3).

The relationship between culture and action can be clarified through an examination of motivation. Why do people do what they do, focusing on some actions while ignoring other possibilities? D'Andrade (1992:23-24) defines motivation as a desire or wish, which is followed by a feeling of satisfaction or frustration, depending on whether the wish is fulfilled or not. Human behavior is motivated, and motivation can be distinguished in terms of the goals which are sought. Cultural models have the potential to instigate action, so they can function as goals (D'Andrade 1992:29). In order to understand why people act as they do, one needs to understand their goals, and to understand their goals, one must understand their interpretive system, or cultural models. It often takes considerable insight and intimate knowledge of an individual in order to distinguish this type of connection, as a particular goal is interconnected with many cultural models in a complex fashion (D'Andrade 1992:31).

The need for comprehensive situational knowledge in order to identify cultural models is one reason why films provide such an excellent source of cultural information. Filmmakers create a complex character placed in the context of cultural models surrounding a particular

situation, providing an individualized interpretation which confirms or negotiates cultural models in innumerable ways. Film is rich in visual, vocal and emotional cues which provide contextual information. The audience is usually presented with all the subtleties of interplaying cultural models and situational exigencies needed to explain the character's motivation for action. For humans or film characters, appropriate action in a particular situation depends on role and setting contexts which require elaborate cognitive interpretation before action (D'Andrade 1992:33). Films are written in terms of character motivation, goals and action. When viewing films, specific motivations of characters can easily be identified and organized by the recognition of underlying cultural models.

The study of human development allows us to examine the process by which cultural knowledge is inculcated in those newly born into a culture. Children are just learning cultural models in a simplified form; subtleties are incorporated in later stages as the child becomes more proficient in cultural knowledge (Holland and Quinn 1987:25). For example, an infant might have an innate sense of simple schemas such as the sensation of fear, which provokes fear in response to circumstances such as loud noise or the sensation of falling. Over time, these integrate to form a more complex model of fear of harm to self. Eventually, very abstract forms of 'danger to the self' such as financial ruin will arouse fear. These cultural definitions of kinds of danger, shape what is defined as a threat. Likewise, culture defines many other categories that affect the appraisal system such as kinds of reward or kinds of loss (D'Andrade

1995:222-223). As children acquire knowledge of their cultural heritage they develop a world view similar to others in their culture (Harkness 1992:102).

Cultural models learned early in life show great durability due to thematicity. Strauss and Quinn (1997:118) identify thematicity as the tendency for some cultural models to be evoked in a wide variety of contexts. Growing up in a particularly shaped cultural environment imparts a distinctive template of cultural experiences accompanied by neural patterns, which are more durable when established early in life (Strauss and Quinn 1997:90). Strauss and Quinn (1997:119) identify some of the cultural models that show great durability due to their inculcation early in life in American culture. Some cultural models which they found to have impact include self-reliance and a set of understandings around accomplishment and success. D'Andrade (1992:39) identifies several other cultural models that are motivationally powerful due to early learning, including nurturance, dependency, and autonomy. The following section examines some of these durable models which are important to the socialization of American children and their parents and the historical context within which they exist.

### *The family: cultural models and their historical basis*

Before proceeding to assess family-oriented cultural models portrayed in film, a review of the historical basis of the knowledge from which people draw in order to act is essential in the evaluation of cultural models surrounding childhood in the United States. The American family

is a "culturally shared mental construct" which has its own social roles and behavioral norms (D'Andrade (1995:132). An historical basis for cultural models surrounding the family, including children and parents, can be identified as early as the formative stage of our nation. Prior to the eighteenth century, colonists perceived themselves as an extension of British and European Empires (Luedtke 1992:7). However, as our country emerged, a sense of a separate distinctive society determined to be free arose, bringing new conceptions of the nation. Many of the ideals established during our country's process of self-definition continue to be a forceful basis for action today. Some of the most pervasive values were about equality, progress, success, and individualism.<sup>2</sup> As Luedtke (1992:20) points out, schemas surrounding these values contain a number of contradictions and tensions.

An important concept developed in the Colonialist era is the great American icon of *equality*. The notion that new Americans were created all alike with a new manner of thinking implies that only dominant ideals represent the "true" American. Thus the white Northern European-descended colonizer came to represent the "American," ignoring factors such as ethnic differences or economic status (Frankenburg 1993:16). J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur captured the essence of the early American definition of self, in his *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) when he states, "Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men..." (Luedtke 1992:3). This unrealized belief in the inclusion of all cultures to make an inherently better one has been an icon since the inception of our nation.

In actuality, blatant inequality was being imposed on most non-Northern Europeans in many different forms. For example, many immigrants such as the Irish were treated as "savages" in America and forced into the lowest ranks of employment (Takaki:1993:148). Many factors influenced the mistreatment of different groups of people. For instance, when borders were expanded, Mexicans were treated like foreigners in the land of their birth (Takaki:1993:177). Because the model of equality was idealistic, and not realized for much of the population, it remains a source of tension and contradiction associated with the assumption of equality where it does not exist. Equality remains salient today as a basis of cultural understanding, and is important in the assessment of films about children primarily because films about children reflect middle class values, ignoring differences.

Ideas about progress and success were established early in the Colonial era. The Protestant ethic of work and individual achievement set its imprint on American life long before the doctrine of equality was articulated in the revolutionary period. When these two ideals intertwined to be mutually supportive, this gave rise to the idea that equal opportunity exists for success. Thus, the maxim arose that success should be the goal of all. From these historical roots arose the paradigm of individualism, often refined to rugged individualism (Luedtke 1992:23-24). This focus on individual effort, or self-reliance, is of major importance in the socialization of children in the United States. With the need to pursue success individually and a focus on progress came the rejection of the father-land, Europe. Immigrants now wished for their children to

grow up with different values and traditions from their own. Gorer (1964:70-71) presents the image of this "all-American child," who is born innocent and can go further than his parents, achieving anything, if only he is given the proper rearing. The old ways and habits came to be scorned as new generations grew up in new traditions. This future-oriented break between the first American immigrants and their children of the second generation is important in the development of the modern American character (Gorer 1964:26).

Because America is a future-focused culture, the child has become an important part of our self-definition. Dundes (1980:71,75), in his examination of folklore, found that Americans place a great deal of emphasis on the future, manifest in their interest in success and progress. The future orientation tends to focus on the "new" and on youth, resulting in a focus on children. This is reflected in the emphasis put on the family you make rather than the family you come from (Wolfenstein and Leites 1977:101). With the separation of the spheres of men and women in the industrial era, the public world of men came to be characterized as ugly, chaotic and sinful, while women embodied the private world which was its antithesis. Children, imbued with all the positive characteristics of the home, were sentimentalized. This had a marked effect on family structure, education and the definition of the child. The child became a carrier of political progressivism and reform. People felt that children were the saviors of the nation, that if children were raised correctly, they would create a better society (Kessen 1979:818).

When compared to European cognates, American traditions can be

recognized as future-oriented. For example, in the United States, Halloween is celebrated as a holiday for children rather than by visits to the graves of deceased ancestors (Dundes 1980:80). Dundes further relates that the past or future orientation of a culture can be identified by the setting of myths. In a future-oriented culture such as America, myths of the past diminish in force while there is a tendency to portray families in a science-fiction based future (Dundes 1980:85). A brief consideration of science-fiction films confirms that children are utilized to represent the future. Well known science-fiction films utilizing children include the major blockbusters, *E.T.: The Extra-terrestrial* (1982) and *Close Encounter of the Third Kind* (1977), as well as *2001, A Space Odyssey* (1963), which presents a human fetus as a symbol of the future.

The future orientation of our culture is primarily manifest in films about children in a more generally applied model. Our model of the "American child" is integrated into our model of self, individually and as a group; thus, the child represents for us our potential as well as our beliefs. Quart and Auster (1984:134) maintain that the child-like innocence which pervaded *E.T.: The Extra-terrestrial*, was a significant factor in its success. In this film, a young boy bonds with an alien, and triumphs over the adults. The choice of a lone child to represent humankind's first contact with aliens is significant. American future orientation is aligned with individualism; one must work to achieve a successful future, sacrificing the past and present. This supports a presumption which affects family dynamics: that the past and the present should be sacrificed to the future and because the child represents the future, parents should

live through their children, transferring their own bygone aspirations to their offspring.

The advent of industrialization brought changes in family life in the United States. A prevailing myth about American family life of the past is the assumption that industrialization broke up traditional kinship ties and destroyed the relationship between the family and the community (Hareven:310). However, an examination of families during industrialization shows that family ties continued to be important as people moved to cities, often utilizing these ties as a means of integrating into a new environment. Changes in ideology during the industrial era affected roles within the family, as the household transformed from a center of commerce and social interaction to a private family dwelling. The role of husbands became more separate from that of wives and children. The emergence of a cult of domesticity and of full-time motherhood directly impacted the average number of children a woman had and changed attitudes about childhood. Housework lost its economic and productive value, and family relationships began to change; as nurturing gained importance, comforting, sweetness, tenderness, and gentleness emerged as valued aspects of family interactions (Hareven 2000:313).

The change in emotional content of familial relationships was a primary factor in the development of the urban middle-class family unit as a private, domestic, child-centered retreat from the workplace (Hareven 2000:313). For the first time, in urban middle-class families, childhood was seen as a separate stage of life. The result was that children

began to be treated as dependent objects of nurturance, needful of protection, rather than as productive members of the family economic unit. This established the model of the domestic middle-class family, with the enshrinement of motherhood, and the child as the center of the family (Hareven 1992:315).

Nostalgia plays a central role in our definition of the American family and subsequently our understanding of the American child. Harkness, Super and Keefer (1992:172-175) report that the past is vital to how people construct contemporary family life. A reconsideration and restructuring of elements from the past into the context of the present is central to the redefinition of the self as a parent. Americans hold the belief that a "lost golden age" existed during which families were intimate and close knit, single parent families were rare and as many as three generations often lived in the same household. Much of our concern today is for the disruption of the "traditional" family (Hareven p. 308). Folklore purports that large extended families were the norm in the past. However, an examination of the historical changes and continuity found in American family structure reveals this to be myth. The early American family structure was simple, most often nuclear, consisting of parents and their children; seldom did three generations live together in a single household. The way in which colonial families did differ from modern families was that they often included unrelated individuals such as boarders, lodgers, apprentices, or servants. While the household today is seen as a private retreat, in the preindustrial era, it was a site of a broad array of functions and activities which surpassed the intimate circle of the

nuclear family. The household was a place of production, and served as a home for servants, apprentices and unrelated dependent members of the community. Thus, the most significant change in the family has come not from the breakup of the extended family, but from the removal of non-related persons from the household (Hareven :309-310).

The complex network of cultural models surrounding childhood in the United States of today is articulated through what might be called a "reinvented tradition," originating in changes in the industrial era which established the mother as the center of the household, and childhood as a separate stage of life that required nurturance of the child. Strauss and Quinn (1997:25) note this type of reorganization of cultural information when they assert that "...groups do negotiate, exploit, reinterpret, borrow, and create cultural forms; they can also invent traditions." This modern model of the family, though rooted in earlier patterns, focuses on a perception that there existed a "Golden Moment of the 1950's" when the perfect family existed in this country and beyond which everything else is ancient history. However, it was the middle class domestic life of the industrial era that set the stage for this "perfect" family of the 1950's which includes a father who worked outside the home, a mother who stayed at home, and either two or three children. There is a nebulous Grandma and Grandpa who live somewhere nearby, or perhaps one of them might live with the nuclear family.

Gorer<sup>3</sup> (1964:94-95) found the prototypical American family around 1950 consisted of two children, an elder daughter and a younger son. This is the typical composition which he found in illustrations,

advertisements and frequently in films and popular fiction. Often a third child, a younger son, was added in narratives for dramatic effect. The small number of children which is considered the ideal is very different from the large families of preindustrial days, reflecting the need to have fewer children so that one can give each child larger amounts of time. Gorer's (1964) account of the American family provides an excellent basis for the ideal American child of 1950's, a time that we idealize as the last decade before our culture began to radically change. The schema of the composition of an ideal family has changed very little even today; it is this idealized family life of the 1950's which is perceived to be slipping away, necessitating efforts to preserve it. Strauss and Quinn (1997:113-114) note the propensity for people to attempt to preserve valued practices learned while growing up when faced with a changing world. The waning of specific practices like the sit-down dinner become representative of the loss of that ideal way of life for the family.

World War II significantly affected the film industry, which can be seen in the changes in films of the 1940's prior to, during and after the war period from 1942 to 1946. War films were often celebratory, and even prior to the entry in the war of the United States, were preparatory messages of war as a protector of democracy (Cameron 1997:72). The primary message found in films of the era was a forward look toward peace (Cameron 1997:82). During the war, filmmakers tended to repeat successes, ignoring changes in American society as war swept away many of the conventions which Hollywood thought of as permanent (Cameron 1997:97).

The need for women's labor in war supportive jobs during World War II and the need of returning soldiers for those same jobs after the war played a significant role in the establishment of the "Golden 1950's." Traube (1992:124) noted that, though the long term trend during the twentieth century has been women moving out of the home sphere and into the workplace, this trend was interrupted in the 1950's. At the beginning of World War II, women were encouraged to leave their place at home and enter the workplace. Film and newsreels were used to promote patriotism, influencing people to comply with the needs of the war effort. A well-known newsreel heroine called "Rosie the Riveter" set an example for the country when she took a traditionally male factory job, which was vacant due to the loss of men to the war effort, thus keeping the soldiers supplied with war needs. Filmmakers produced films supporting war ideology such as the benefit of an alliance with Soviet Union (Cameron 1997:83) and short newsreel clips that promoted a variety of other needs such as recycling, conservation, and supporting soldiers on their way to war. A conscious effort to create change in cultural models about the proper place for a woman's production of labor had the desired result; many women took the jobs left vacant by men at war.

After World War II, large numbers of men came home from war to need a job, so women were urged to leave these jobs and take their proper place in the home. Newsreels now declared that it was a woman's patriotic duty to give a soldier a job, in spite of the fact that she might enjoy her profession and have made a place in the work force for herself. Many women were not given a choice about whether to resign or to continue

working; they lost their jobs as business and industry made room for returning soldiers. However, the war had legitimized working outside the home for American women and many wished to continue working (Jackson:1986:89-90).

As men returned home there was a large marriage boom, followed by a baby boom which grew out of a thriving economy and a reaffirmation of traditional roles and family values (Jackson 1986:90). Large numbers of women were attracted back to full time work in the home by the goal of raising perfect children (Veroff, Douvan and Kulka 1981:14). Dr. Benjamin Spock (1945:460), when he wrote of "The Working Mother," emphasized that children need a steady loving person to care for them, concluding that the extra money a mother might receive from an outside job was not important enough to sacrifice her child's welfare. Due to the movement of women back into the home, motherhood gained a new level of virtue and the knowledge assumed to be inherent to mothers took on more significance for the family.

A new ideology of increased nurturance, described by LeVine and Norman (2001:99) as "affectionate and emotionally responsive infant care" began to spread after World War II, and especially during the 1950's. The new ideology was an impetus for changes in child-rearing practices. Earlier behaviorist methods, practiced in the 1920's and 1930's, regarded babies as presocial savages who needed to be tamed. The objectives during this era were to foster independence and individualism. Too much attention and love by the mother was considered a threat to the child's success. By the 1950's, the primary goal of child-rearing had changed

from individualism to nurturance. Dr. Benjamin Spock (1945) and Arnold Gesell (1952), child experts of the day, preached that babies were essentially good and that their whims should be nurtured rather than curbed (Biskind 1983:291).

With the new status of the mother came the need to have unassailable knowledge on correct child-rearing practices. The cultural model of progress gained salience in the fifties and is associated with the need to practice new up-to-date methods of child-rearing. With the rejection of the past which originated with immigrants who no longer wanted to do things in the way of the "old country," mothers no longer had a base of past generations' experience to rely on. Thus the mother is left in an anxious state of uncertainty (Gorer 1964:84). This conflict gained significance in the 1950's, and child experts such as Dr. Benjamin Spock and Arnold Gesell became important to mothers. Harkness, Super and Keefer (1992:175) report that the dependence on "expert" knowledge continues to be an important factor for American middle-class parents. The redefinition of self that occurs in the transition to parenthood depends on the development of new child-centered networks. These networks provide a means of informal knowledge exchange and social and emotional support, as well as access to "expert" knowledge (Harkness Super and Keefer 1992:171-175).

The orientation towards nurturance continues to create conflict because of existing schemas for individualism and success. Self-reliance is essential to the cultural model of success in the United States; in order to achieve success, individualism through self-reliance must be promoted.

The desire for self-reliance is so strong in the United States that we are widely characterized in this manner by others. Prior to the 1950's, the conflict between self-reliance and nurturance was less intense and leaned in the opposite direction. Robert LeVine and Karin Norman (2001:98-99) report that earlier childrearing practices in the United States, between 1920 and 1950, promoted self-reliance and too much supervision was thought to be detrimental to the child. They found that American mothers believed that infant schedules were all-important, one should not respond too quickly to a baby's cry, and that a baby would be "spoiled" unless taught to "play alone and control themselves as early as possible."

However, self-reliance continued to be important in the 1950's. The value of the mother rested heavily on the performance of her child, especially in the areas of individualism and leadership. Gorer (1964:83-84) found that the mother's self esteem relies on how her child performs in competition with peers; the child's success is proof of good parenting. Mead (2000:25-26) noted that parenthood in America in the 1950's was no longer characterized as a means of giving the child a final status or place in the social structure, but as a period of training with the goal of preparing the child for an adult "race" that he will run alone. This enhanced the desire among mothers to be perfect, and to create a perfect child in order to ensure his success.

Self-reliance continues to be an important goal for the mother to impart to her child despite the new model of increased nurturance. Strauss and Quinn (1997:106) note that values like self reliance, which bear a high degree of significance for parents, are inculcated in children at

a very young age by designing an environment and structuring parental behavior within it to provide experiences that will motivate these values. The cultural model for self-reliance proves to be very widely generalized, which provides a major source of tension and contradiction in the enactment of contemporary nurturing child-rearing schemas. The contradictions between nurturance and self-reliance have remained salient in the years since the 1950's. Fewer women stay at home to nurture children, yet nurturance is highly valued and in general children lead more highly supervised lives. An examination of films of the last decade confirms that nurturance, self-reliance and success have shown great durability, although these conflicting models are continually being negotiated and reinterpreted.

The conflict between self-reliance and nurturance can be seen to be incorporated into the motivational force behind the roles of mother and father, and gender dependent qualities are inherent to family relationships that reproduce these values. The mother is an agent of nurturance while the father performs outside the home as an agent of self-reliance. The gendered aspects of parenthood are reflected in the characteristics attributed to each parent: freedom is epitomized in the father, while a devalued nurturance is attributed to the mother. Americans retain an image of a liberating, exciting father and a nurturing, holding mother (Strauss and Quinn 1997:108). Gorer (1964:86) reported that American children are continually being pushed towards greater independence, activity and initiative, noting that the child is praised for acts exhibiting these qualities and reproved for acts

that show him in the opposite fashion. However, even for children, the degree to which self-reliance or nurturance is enacted is differential.

Upon the advice of child raising experts, women of the fifties sought to shape children's attitudes and motives to a new degree. Prior to this era, parents sought obedience and compliance from their children but were not attempting to influence their inner psychological world. For the first time, parents aimed to create the attitudes and motives that would cause the child to behave in a particular manner due to his or her own desire. The parents perceived the child to possess potential, and the goal of socialization was to realize that potential. The value of the family was realized through the ability to accomplish these goals. The change toward a psychological orientation in our culture led to a shift for the younger generation away from loyalties to societal institutions, toward a significant focus on individuals and feelings (Veroff, Douvan, and Kulka 1981:14-15).

The shift in the meanings of family roles that forms a basis for contemporary family life took place over a relatively short time period. At the end of the 1940's and during the 1950's, men and women established families which reinforced traditional roles. During the late 1960's and 1970's these traditional roles were challenged. Power and authority were no longer inherent in the positions of mother and father, and children began to expect rationalized decisions and a chance to participate in decision making. As family roles have been transformed, they have become arenas for fulfillment of goals related to interpersonal relationships. Closeness, love and warmth have become primary goals in

the socialization of children. This is especially relevant for fathers, because the waning of gratifications generated by being an authority figure left men with no new patterns or skills to rely on in their relationships with their children (Veroff, Douvan, and Kulka 1981:14-15).

The contemporary ideal of a warm, sharing, expressive father demands skills from men which many have not had the opportunity to acquire. The environment in which most men grew up in the past is characterized by manliness, toughness and competitive achievement. The stress on competition encourages men to perceive others as a threat, or objects to be used, which necessitates a withholding of warm feelings. These pressures inhibit the development of warm, expressive relationships between fathers and their children (Veroff, Douvan, and Kulka 1981:22-23). Fulfillment for fathers relies on the development of warm, close relationships, which are elusive due to cultural models established in his childhood.

Gender issues are intricately involved in the familial structure surrounding the care of children. In an examination of the 1980's, Traube (1992:125) found that mainstream Hollywood films tended to portray parents in a manner that split gender characteristics along traditional lines, in spite of the presentation of mothers and fathers in new ways that challenge such views. However, Traube (1992:129) characterizes the primary attribute valued by young women in the decade of the 1980's as self-reliance. There exists a conflict for young women between a new ideology which values self-reliance, a traditionally male characteristic found in the sphere outside the home, and a natural tendency to retain the

comfort found in their traditional cultural model as nurturer within the home sphere.

In Traube's (1992:147) opinion, Hollywood reacted to the cultural anxiety over women's abandonment of their traditional role in the home with the creation of a nontraditional form of fatherhood. She maintains that the sensitive caring man of the 1950's films, who devoted time to his wife and children, is brought back in the 1980's as a solution. These films call on men to become more involved in parenting, although it does not come naturally to them. Traube (1992:147) further suggests that films of the 1980's characterize mothers as selfishly abandoning their children to pursue their own interests in the workplace. In films of the 1980's, feminine ambition is shown to be a threat to the nuclear family. Traube (1992:165) concludes that film plots of the 1980's construct a positively nurturing man as a substitute for a negatively independent woman.

This characterization of the 1980's as an era during which films recreate mothers and fathers in nontraditional roles that support the status quo, provides an opportunity to examine change through a historical perspective from one decade to the next, as well as assess the durability of core cultural models. Traube's (1992) findings suggest that women's ambitions in the workplace prompted pressure to restore her in the traditional model of motherhood. This supports the evidence of the durability of the model of mother as primary nurturer. However, the father's lack of ability as a nurturer supports Veroff, Douvan and Kulka's (1981:23) assessment that the root problem is due to the lack of training in warm personal relationships that men receive as children, rather than

an attempt to compensate for the forays of women in the workplace.

The American family and the relationships contained within it is the primary focus of a particular formula or genre of film which is presented as "family" entertainment. The representation of private matters in public forms such as books or films provides an arena for the reproduction of culture (Strauss and Quinn 1997:111). Films participate by deliberately teaching existing models, as well as acting to unconsciously reproduce the past. Due to changes in our society, specific issues are salient in the 1990's and the underlying models are supported or negotiated by film narratives which address these problems. The representation of societal problems as individual problems is an important way in which commercial mainstream films mediate and change what is happening in the real world during the process of representing it. When concerns are addressed, change and reinterpretation offer solutions to the public. The subject of concern may be perceived threats to valued durable models or a negative image of the traditional to which change is offered. Portrayals of families in films offered to the public by Hollywood reflect the arena of competing models found in contemporary culture.

### ***Chapter 3. Analysis***

In this study, I have assessed films of the 1990's for the presence of cultural models related to children and parenting as an indication of their significance in our culture today. Many of the cultural models surrounding childhood are important components of our changing culture. Film narratives participate in the processes that effect change in existing cultural models in our society by providing a means of articulating contemporary concerns. Concurrently, other underlying durable models are supported regardless of elements of change. Traube (1992:13) notes that a Hollywood film should be viewed from the particular historical moment within which it created specific ideological conflicts for men and women. The decade of the 1990's exhibited distinctive characteristics particular to the unique circumstances of the times because of the diverse cultural processes at work in our society within a historical context. I have evaluated these films with the purpose of determining the predominant cultural models and the nature of their use in the narratives.

Adult concepts regarding parenting and childhood are fundamental in the portrayal of the American child in film. In this study, the social construct of the child is examined within the context of the family, as well as a representative of the future for adults. Children are always found within the context of their family or other adults acting as guardians, so

cultural models are not only about what it means to be an American child, but what it means to be the parent of this child. Children develop within a network of surrounding and dynamic cultural models; culture creates a reality for them that shifts with the times. William Kessen (1979:815) asserted that:

*"...the child is essentially and eternally a cultural invention...American children (are) shaped and marked by the larger cultural forces of political maneuverings, practical economics and implicit ideological commitments."*

The narratives that comprise films about children can be seen to function on levels encompassing elements with which both adult and child can identify. On the surface they are narratives to entertain children. As such, they must fit into adult guidelines for appropriate actions and language for the targeted audience. However, children are not the sole targeted audience; these are films for the entire family. Berger (1997:69) notes that narratives especially interest audiences when they are similar to their own lives, providing a means for the audience to derive comfort through the resolutions found within which are not found in their own daily lives. In the same way, narratives which are different function to distract them from their own lives, providing a respite from cares and worries. Themes of family films most often deal with family issues from an adult point of view. The goals of the film family most often revolve around loving family relationships. These films focus on particular issues as well, presenting societal problems as individual problems; solutions are offered in a deliberate attempt to teach the public, negotiate models and ease

change. Other films use children, a child-friendly plot and set of morals to talk about and negotiate individual adult psychological concerns from an allegorical perspective. Films which are more symbolic in nature rely on surface models as a framework; while additional issues are layered on top, family values are still inherent to the plot.

In this study, I have analyzed films from the perspective of their inclusion in the family genre. In America, films for children have evolved into the family film, including those rated G, PG, and PG-13. Although the film industry has targeted children as an audience as early as 1936, when the film commission debated the commercial feasibility of producing films for children, it is only recently that economic factors have spurred the growth of this market. More and more film executives are coming to realize that films aimed at children are financially lucrative (Wojcik-Andrews 2000:17). The large proliferation of films produced specifically for children is recent and the role of family genre films in American culture is increasing rapidly. For the first time, with the advent of video, films are being viewed by children repeatedly, so they have a significant impact on their view of the world, and parents choose films which they judge to be appropriate. The "family" genre relies heavily on a specific set of morals which is recognizable by the audience. The thematic nature of the cultural models present is one of the primary factors that allows the public to identify these films as "family" films.

In the family genre, the primary audience targeted by filmmakers consists of children and their parents. Turner (1999:26) recognized this, and as a result labeled the genre "kidult." This categorization works well in

many ways, and reflects the perspective of filmmakers, who realize that seven-, eight- and nine-year-old children are seeing more and more films rated PG-13 (Wojcik-Andrews 2000:17). However, some of these films which fall into the "kidult" category, such as *Jurassic Park* and *Jumanji*, while they include children, are not really appropriate for viewing by young children and do not focus on family relationships. They have violence, thrills and special effects that are aimed more towards teens and adults. Many blockbuster "kidult" films often have conventions that make this label problematic. This type of film does not focus on family relationships, and utilizes children primarily as vulnerable beings who must be protected by adults. Because many of these films are not appropriate for children, a particular film may or may not be categorized as a children's film in various listings. As a result, the debate about how one can define a children's film is an ongoing issue in Hollywood (Wojcik-Andrews 2000:16),

Other films, whether they can be labeled as blockbuster or not, can be easily recognized to fit into the family genre. This may be due to conventions of the genre, which include traditional images and mainstream values (Wojcik-Andrews 2000:43). These films, such as *Hook* (1991) or *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993) fit better into the viewing patterns of families, as well as having appeal for both children and adults. The casting of Robin Williams, a popular comedian, as the father in both these films increased their appeal for adults and may have influenced the popularity of films with similarly themed leading roles. However, the majority of the films in this genre appeal primarily to families and have

little appeal to teens and young, single adults. This study is restricted to these films that focus on family relationships, are generally appropriate for younger children, are rated G, PG, or PG-13. They are commonly referred to as family films, so this term will be applied.

Family films reveal a number of important cultural models surrounding children and parents which will be examined in the following sections. Section I examines the extremely durable cultural models about childhood that revolve around nurturance. Section II looks at the models surrounding self-reliance. This is followed, in Section III, by a look at the conflicts between nurturance and self-reliance and an in-depth examination of the film, *Matilda*, a tale that provides a resolution of tensions between these two complex cultural models. Section IV examines models relating to success, and the relationship between fathers and their children. Section V addresses nostalgia and the role of the future orientation of our culture in the portrayal of the child in film.

## ***I. Nurturance***

### ***Childhood: a separate stage of life***

Childhood as a separate stage of life, during which children should be nourished, taught, played with and protected from the realities of life, is probably the most defining element of what is perceived to be an "American child." The significance of the concept of childhood as separate stage is basic to an understanding of the adult perception of a child. In general, the age of the child places him or her in this category, but, behavior can be as important as physical age. In film the cultural model of a child is not entirely dependent on age classification; the dividing line between childhood and adolescence is indistinct and, in some circumstances, physical age can be discarded completely. Meaningful film roles can appropriate the cultural model of "child" for characters that are defined by actions rather than by age.

The character which we define as a "child" will exhibit behavior that falls into meaningful cultural models in spite of variations in specific attributes. The "child" could be a mentally deficient adult or even an adult playing a child's role, ignoring the physical characteristic of his adult body. It is the underlying cultural models that make the character acceptable to the audience. The models about children are still within the guidelines of how a child would behave, given the situation, much in the same way that in science fiction films, characters must adhere to models

regarding how a person of our culture would behave if in this fantastic situation. Occasionally we find the use of this as a film device, such as in the film, *Clifford*, which was released in 1992. In this film, Martin Short, who is unmistakably an adult, plays a ten-year-old child. In spite of his actual age, he acts in a manner that the audience accepts as childlike. As a result, cultural models involving childhood are apparent as Clifford terrorizes his uncle (the villain), who is powerless against childish tyranny due to his responsibility to nurture the child.

The establishment of childhood as a separate stage of life has far reaching effects on cultural models delineating proper child rearing. Many aspects of childhood draw from this complex model, but one of the most pervading is the delineation of the child as an object of nurturance rather than as a part of the economic group of the family. With the focus of attention on the child, the needs of the child become more important than those of the parents or the family as a unit. This results in the establishment of childhood as a magical time, when a child should be played with, not forced to face reality. There is a proper time to make children face reality, but it should never be done before the "coming of age," some time around puberty. This magical stage of life embodies the characteristics of creativity, imagination, an adventurous nature and a natural innocence.

The cultural model underlying the magic quality of childhood is very prevalent in films of the 1990's. The film, *Harriet the Spy* (1996) provides an excellent example of the the magic quality of childhood as well as the contrast between "childhood" and "growing up." The first segment of

this film presents a nostalgic view of childhood, vividly portraying its wondrous qualities. The final segment is about the painful loss of that childhood. The contrast is noticeable in that each section has distinct qualities. This film is interesting because it presents both childhood and coming of age separately within the same narrative. While this study does not focus on coming of age, the contrast between the period of "childhood" and the period of "growing up" highlights the unique qualities of life that are valued for children but not considered appropriate for adolescents.

In the first section of the film, Harriet is a little girl who sees life and the people around her as an enchanting adventure in a world of exotic people and places. Her very creative nanny educates Harriet with fine literature and stimulates her creativity with visits to unusual places. She encourages Harriet to write imaginatively about everything in her journal. This nanny gives all of her time to Harriet, creating a nourishing, imaginative world in which Harriet exists. All the quirks of the world are romanticized in Harriet's journal, as she "spies" upon humanity. The conflict in this plot comes through the fact that Harriet's nanny is a substitute mother, taking the place of her parents who have for years been too busy with business socializing to pay any attention to their child. Her mother becomes jealous of the bond between child and nanny, and decides that Harriet is too grown up to need a nanny. This decision has a marked effect as the remainder of the film moves into Harriet's "coming of age" and the resultant loss of childhood.

Without the magic of her childhood friend, everything Harriet has written about in her journal loses its magic and is seen by Harriet and

others through the eyes of reality. Whimsical statements which Harriet had written about her friends hurt their feelings when exposed to the cold light of reality. The colorful neighborhood families which she had seen through an old world aura lose their enchantment as Harriet begins to perceive them as families struggling with monetary difficulty or conflicts between generations. The second half of this movie is not about childhood, but about the loss of childhood which arrives with "coming of age;" a transformation that we perceive to be appropriate at puberty. In this film, the viewer may feel that this "coming of age" was forced upon Harriet a bit too early, so Harriet must work through it with great difficulty, which has near disastrous results. The nanny returns to help Harriet adjust, and Harriet is taught to lie "...just a little white lie..." in order to soothe the hurt feelings of the people about whom she had written true, but hurtful facts. Though painful, in the end Harriet comes to a new understanding of responsibilities of life, and with it we see a loss of innocence. The portrayal of the period of childhood as a time of wonder, full of creativity, imagination and fearless adventures is a common feature of the plot in family films. The cultural understanding is that a child has a right to this carefree, unspoiled period and that it is wrong to disillusion a child before the appropriate time.

*Imagination should be encouraged in children*

Cultural models about the nurturing of a child include the notion that imagination must be encouraged in very young children. Imagination is grounded within the auspices of the magical quality of

childhood in film, but is found most often surrounding younger children, especially four- to six-year-olds. For example in the movie, *Paulie* (1998), an unsympathetic father does not believe in letting his five-year-old child, Marie, harbor magical notions. Marie, who has a speech impediment, cherishes her pet bird Paulie. Marie and Paulie communicate on an intimate level as Paulie provides magical thoughts and a successful method to help Marie stop stuttering. Her close and fanciful relationship with her pet spurs the father to anger. He states, "I don't think she can tell the difference between fantasy and reality. We should consider getting rid of the bird." When an accident nearly occurs, the father blames Paulie, and gets rid of him, in spite of the fact that this friendship is helping Marie to overcome her stutter. The rest of the movie concerns Paulie's attempts to find Marie and to return to her. It is made clear that the father has done a great wrong by separating girl from bird, thus forcing her to face reality. When Paulie is finally reunited with Marie, she is an adult with her own small daughter, with whom Paulie begins a fanciful relationship, with the full approval of Marie, whom we perceive to be a good mother.

Imagination, although an undisputed goal for the very young, may provide a source of conflict for our culture when found in older children. Imagination was also of primary importance in the film, *Harriet the Spy*, during the childhood portion of Harriet's life even though she was an older child. This is perhaps due to the filmmaker's decision to provide a sharp contrast between the magical childhood segment and the reality segment of Harriet's life. The contrast was made greater due to the presentation of Harriet as classically childlike followed by an immediate,

abrupt change to a very adult view of life. However, it was Harriett's extraordinary imagination that got her into trouble. The contradiction can be found in the encouragement of imagination as opposed to the encouragement of good behavior. Imaginative acts often do not conform to expected behavior, which is determined by the norm. Perhaps this is why the encouragement of imagination is largely focused on preschool aged children. Once children enter first grade (kindergartners are forgiven their unruly behavior since they are just beginning to be socialized as students) they are expected to conform to behavior that fits into expected guidelines. For example, an imaginative display of abstract art instead of the expected drawing of Columbus is not valued by most teachers. However, imagination is valued in a general nature by Americans as a quality that leads to success.

*A mother should be with her child/Mother wisdom*

The cultural model that presupposes the need of children for nurturance by their mother has shown great cultural endurance. With the glorification of full-time motherhood and the ideology of domesticity comes the requirement of the mother's presence in the home. The consequence is the assumption that the work of a mother outside the home would be harmful to both family and society (Hareven 2000:313). Models surrounding how a child should be parented become more intense when applied to a mother, as she bears the responsibility for the outcome of her child's rearing. The most important consideration is the tenet that a mother is a better nurturer than any other person. The correlating notion

is that a proper mother is one who chooses to nurture her child over anything else. Since a mother is clearly superior as a caretaker, it is she who should be at home caring for her child.

The traditional stay-at-home mother is still valued in our culture. Unlike the trend to focus on situations involving working mothers noted by Traube (1992:165) in films from the eighties, film mothers of the nineties tend to be homemakers more often. Out of the fifty-six films from the 1990's considered, twenty-four had non-working mothers, while only fourteen had working mothers. Most often, the absence of the mother is a useful plot device in order to have the mother absent during the day, but this is simply presented as a fact rather than providing a focus for the plot. Furthermore, working mothers in films usually have only older children.

The superiority of nurturance as a method of child-rearing is reflected in the refusal of many film parents to use discipline as a solution. The superiority of a nurturing mother over a disciplinary figure found in the film *Beethoven* (1992) illustrates the model that children can be led to act in the proper manner through nurturance. After a mishap, the negligent sitter defends herself by stating, "What these children need is a little discipline." The mother replies, "What these children need is their mother!" Films may be about good mothers, bad mothers or absent mothers, but underlying all situations is the implication that the natural situation is the presence of a nurturing, attentive mother. Family films reinforce this cultural model, in spite of other elements present. Occasionally, a film plot utilizes the transformation of a bad mother into a good mother, resulting in a contrast between the behavior of each. This

can be found in the film, *Gordy* (1995), when a neglectful fashion-conscious stepmother is transformed into a good old-fashioned country wife who cares deeply for her child.

Ideas associated with "Mother wisdom" are common in films of the 1990's. This model relies on the premise that a mother knows what is best for her child. She cares for her child in a way no other person can because she possesses an instinctual level of caring and attention. She will put in more effort to make sure that only the best results occur for her child. She runs the household efficiently and intuitively. Conversely, in children's films, the father usually is and remains inept at parenting, unless the plot revolves around his learning experience when he is called to replace the mother.

The film *Beethoven* (1992) provides a classic example of mother wisdom in a family setting. This film is about a family with three children who get a Saint Bernard (Beethoven) in spite of the father's dislike of dogs. The father is unsympathetic to his children's wishes, and is the butt of circumstances as the filmmakers pit his wishes against a seemingly cohesive unit consisting of the mother and children. When the father wants the mother to come to work in his business to help out financially, she is unsure if she should leave her children to the care of a sitter. And indeed, on her first day of work, the sitter is negligent and her five-year-old daughter almost drowns in the pool. The viewer gets the message that no one is as careful with a child's safety as mother. In the next scene, the father says that they should not give up because they had a bad babysitter. He suggests that they get a new, good babysitter. To this, the

mother replies, "Over my dead body!" This mother is determined to stay with her children because she knows their wellbeing depends upon her attention and care.

The importance of the mother's place with her children is reinforced in the next private conversation between the parents, just after Beethoven has disrupted a business deal. The father restates, "I really don't like our dog!" The mother's answer is, "I really don't like those people. If I had been at home instead of trying to impress those people, Emily wouldn't have fallen into the pool...I'm not going back into the work force." She tells him that he's going to have to do it on his own, that he will be successful, making his millions and that she and the children will be tucked away in the shadows, supporting him.

Even in the film, *Home Alone* (1990), in which we find neglectful parents, the mother possesses characteristics of mother wisdom. In a large family traveling to Paris for Christmas, we find Kevin to be a forgotten child, who can do nothing right in the eyes of his extended family. As they travel, it is the mother who has an instinctual feeling that something is wrong, and worries over this feeling until she realizes that Kevin is missing. Subsequently, she must redeem herself as a mother by her willingness to do anything to reach her son, who was left at home. She undergoes many tribulations on her lengthy trek home, finally to arrive merely minutes before the rest of the family, who simply waited for a flight at a later date. Yet her level of caring is established by the hardships she was willing to face and those few minutes gained when she successfully arrived before the rest of the family act to redeem her as a mother.

*A mother substitute must be found for a motherless child*

Although the mother is the best choice as caretaker of child, a variety of cultural models exist that revolve around the different caretaker roles played by individuals with specific relationships to children. Some of these roles include mother, father, aunt, uncle, grandmother, grandfather and siblings. Primarily, the mother and sometimes the father are responsible for nurturing their child, but others may play that role in specific situations. Films may explore the variations in whom is available to take on the role of primary nurturer of a child, or which of the available caretakers is most suitable to assume this role.

The most important consideration in a choice of caretaker appears to be a perception of what constitutes the needs of the child. This reflects the aspect of nurturance which demands that the family be child-centered. A good example of factors which affect the proper choice of a guardian is found in the film, *Big Daddy* (1999). In this film, thirty-two-year-old "Sonny" takes on the care of five-year-old Julian, the son of his roommate, who has just left for an extended business trip to China. When Julian's mother learns she is dying, she sends her son to his natural father. However, since Julian's father is not available, Sonny pretends to be the father and takes Julian in for his own selfish reasons. Sonny is not attentive to the child, but self-centered and provides little in the way of nurturance. This results in a number of comedic situations which form the bulk of the film. As Sonny learns how to care for a child, he grows into a caring man who puts the child's needs before his own, earning the designation of "good parent" in the eyes of the audience.

However, cultural models regarding the appropriateness of different caretakers are addressed at the end of the film. The Social Services Office eventually discovers that Sonny is not the child's father. Faced with the decision of who is the proper person to have custody of Julian, a judge refuses to award him custody despite his passionate defense of his rightfulness as guardian due to changes in his character. At this point, the real father steps in and accepts responsibility for his child, marries and provides a mother for his child. Sonny also marries and has his own baby boy, but maintains a special relationship with Julian. This film informs us that a single man such as Sonny is not the right choice for a child, even if he is willing to provide the nurturing relationship that the child needs (He was going to let his girlfriend, a lawyer, provide monetary support). We are left with the suggestion that Sonny could have been the right choice. However, this unspoken challenge of the traditional is not realized in the plot; Sonny only earns the position of parent when he gives up his bachelor lifestyle. Biological, married parents in a traditional relationship are seen to be the best choice.

*The household should be child-centered*

The child-centered household commonly found in films of the 1990's is based on the model that situations should be adapted to the child rather than to adapt the child to the situations normally found in society (Rogoff 1990:123). This cultural model relies on the premise that parents are responsible for their children's learning and happiness. A good mother spends "quality" time with her children and puts the needs of the children

above her own. Since play is educationally useful and mothers should play with their children, this can be assessed as "quality" time.

Traditionally, this model was focused primarily on the mother, although the father may have had responsibility for some boys activities as they grew older. In the mother-centered household of the industrial era, the mother assumed responsibility for most children's activities.

In contemporary society, it is still deemed proper for children to be the center of the household. In children's films of the nineties, this model is simplified to the point that the parents are often shown almost entirely in the context of their relationships with their children. The family functions as a structure that supports the needs of the children, and good parents are portrayed as those who place the children first. The expansion of this model of nurturer to include both mother and father is discussed at a later time. Families that focus on the needs of the children abound in children's films of the nineties. In this genre, most families are struggling to become child-centered; this creates a tension that is thereby resolved imparting the message that the family should be child-centered. A number of contemporary situations, which will be addressed in subsequent sections, present a threat which then must be resolved in order to preserve the family as a child-centered unit. Among these are working mothers, absent fathers, absent mothers, and fathers who do not know how to parent. An example is found in the film, *Dunston Checks In* (1996), when a widowed father focuses on his job rather than his children. However, by the end of the film, his children become the center of his life, while his career fits in around their needs.

The expression of nurturance may be expressed in a different context in contemporary society, but the intensity of emotions still attached to motherhood demonstrates the fundamental nature of the role of the mother as primary nurturer. The mother is ultimately held responsible for her child's actions and her child's future. She must ensure that her child reaches his full potential, and her skill as a nurturer is confirmed through her child's success. The traditional model which demands nurturance by the mother remains essential, providing a foundation for other cultural understandings such as how a father nurtures, and the myriad of ways in which children are nurtured. In opposition to nurturance is the model for self-reliance, although teaching self-reliance is a component of nurturance.

## ***II. Self-reliance***

The cultural model of self-reliance provides a source of tension and contradiction when it is applied along with nurturance. Tension is present because a mother must promote independence in her children, while at the same time nurturing, or caring for all of their needs. Self-reliance is a durable, widely generalized model which is applied to many aspects of American culture. It is fundamental to the concept of individualism, a model of immense importance to self-definition in American culture. With the increased nurturance practiced in our society since World War II, the simultaneous application of self-reliance and nurturance in child-rearing manifests an increased need for resolution. Children's films deal with this conflict in a variety of ways.

Self-reliance is often offered to the film audience as a separate subject, as if there were no conflict, even though the plot may provide a resolution of conflicting feelings. An example of this can be seen in the film *Baby's Day Out* (1994). This is a story about a very independent, self-reliant baby that recreates a story from a 1940's book about a child's day in the city with nanny in the form of a story of a baby alone in the city. The story is a vaudeville style romp in which the baby safely transverses many dangerous places, while the adult would-be kidnappers are foiled. Baby Bink takes independent action to gain his desires throughout the film. He confidently heads for all the spots he recognizes from his book,

grabs another child's bottle when thirsty, and helps himself to donuts when hungry, among a great variety of other autonomous acts. Meanwhile the mother is learning her lessons about what is truly important in life, which is to be a nurturing, child-centered mother.

However, one of the scenes offers a comment that eases the tension relating to an adventurous self-reliant child abroad without a caretaker. In the pursuit of her child, the rich mother meets a poor mother with five children who confesses that her children are all she has. Though we see that the poor mother is actually the richer because she has her children, whom she spends all her time nurturing, she offers comfort with words to ease a mother's fears when her child is out in the world alone. She tells the police officer, "Sir, I believe in my heart that someone, somewhere watches over the babies." And indeed, this baby is serendipitously protected as he traverses streets, construction sites, and even encounters a gorilla who actively defends him from the kidnappers. In this film, self-reliance is presented as the main focus of the film, while small lessons in nurturance are presented separately, solely focused on the mother.

Most children in films show a great deal more autonomy than American adults would allow their children in contemporary society. For example, at age five, Dennis (*Dennis the Menace* 1993) rides his tricycle around the neighborhood and explores the woods. Self-reliance is attributed to all children found in films to differential degrees, but certain children are credited with more than others. Generally, each age category carries an increased ability to solve problems through self-reliance. An example of this can be found in the film, *Mrs. Doubtfire*

(1993). The youngest child is a very dependent five-year-old girl. The middle child who shows greater independence is an active boy who is in the eight-to-eleven-year-old range. It is the older sister, who is around thirteen years old, who shows wisdom by coming to see the situation from a more adult perspective, yet trying to keep the situation under control.

Although film children tend to show more self-reliance as they get older, self-reliance has differential results which depend on a relationship between the age and gender of the child. Young children, generally those seven years old and younger, who act independently often create difficulties for themselves which then must be solved by older siblings. Children between eight and eleven years old, especially boys, are involved in the same types of problem-creating actions, but they often eventually provide a solution for themselves. Older siblings just entering the teen years, almost always thirteen years old, are a frequent source of the solutions for younger siblings. However, boys are generally attributed with more self-reliance at an earlier age, especially in the eight-to-eleven-year-old category. In family films, the typical eight-to-eleven-year-old is a boy who solves problems through action and creativity, while the typical thirteen-year-old is a girl who solves problems through the use of common sense.

The casting of children and the writer's choice of age and gender reflect the models utilized in the process of creating child film characters. The data in *Table 1*, below, provides insight into the ways in which family structure is portrayed. As can be seen, boys are far more often cast as child characters, especially eight to eleven-year-olds. This age/gender

category outstrips any other found in films of the decade, with forty boys between the ages of eight and eleven. These boys are almost always cast in roles that exhibit a great deal of self-reliance. Boys in the eight-to-ten-year-old range act with independence at an earlier age than girls. Girls (usually cast as older sisters) are more often portrayed as independent when coming-of-age at around thirteen years old. Almost all older coming-of-age siblings are cast as girls. Young children from four to seven years old and babies from birth to age four are represented more equally in films, but the narratives still reflect ideas of appropriate gender-related behavior. Boys in the five-to-seven-year-old range are more often portrayed as independent only children, while the girls are more often younger, dependent siblings.

*Table 1: Age & Gender of Primary Child Characters in Family Films of the 1990's.*

<u>Age in Years</u>	<u>Boys</u>	<u>Girls</u>
0-4	6	5
5-7	17	11
8-11	40	5
12-13	3	15
<u>Total</u>	<u>65</u>	<u>34</u>

Some child characters provide exceptions to typical models utilized to portray age and gender. While most plots attribute child characters with an unrealistic degree of autonomy, a few plots appropriate an

impossible degree of self-reliance for the child. For example, *Matilda* (1996) is an unusual girl who must be independent from birth because of neglectful parents and gains total autonomy by age six. This technique is also commonly utilized for comedic effect in films about babies, imparting a symbolic nature to the narrative. These independent babies, usually one to three years old are most often cast as boys. Films in which baby boys are imbued with an adult-like degree of self-reliance include *Look Who's Talking, Too* (1990) *Baby's Day Out* (1994), and *Baby Geniuses* (1999). However, baby girls, such as in presented in *Baby Geniuses* (1999), and *Look Who's Talking, Too* (1990), are usually cast as dependent younger sisters. In addition, the baby girl in *Three Men and a Little Lady* (1990) was portrayed primarily from the perspective of the caregiver, as one who needed love and care.

The typical family can be found in *Beethoven* (1992); the family consists of the parents, a thirteen-year-old daughter, an eight-year-old son, and a five-year-old daughter. The actions of the children reflect their abilities to act self-reliantly. Emily, who is five years old, tries to get her ball out of the pool by herself, but falls in. Todd, the middle child, tries to solve his problems with bullies rather unsuccessfully (Beethoven intervenes) but it is he who drives the car into the building to rescue his father from the thieves. Ryce, the thirteen-year-old daughter, uses common sense when she acts in a self-reliant manner during a confrontation with the babysitter. When Emily almost drowns in the pool, she calmly insists that she be allowed to call her mother, refusing to let the babysitter remain in charge.

Self-reliance is an important quality for the individual to achieve in order to be considered grown up in our society. It is important to teach self-reliance from birth, but during the teen years this model gains intensity and attains primary importance during coming-of-age. Not quite a coming-of age film, *Richie Rich* (1994) provides a good example of the way in which a child must learn self-reliance. Richie is not yet a teen, so his acquisition of self-reliance earns him friends rather than a more adult status. Richie, in spite of the fact that he has every material desire one can dream of fulfilled, is envious of the "normal" children who play baseball and have friends over to visit. These children envy his possessions (he has his own McDonald's), and reject his overtures. The parents have to pay them to visit Richie. By the end of the film, Richie has gained the respect of the other children through his bravery and self-reliance. He takes on the criminals alone, and knows enough about technology and running a business empire to save his parents. Richie now has friends and his father comments, "I must say, Regina, now our son really is the richest boy in the world." She replies, "Now he has friends." Richie must learn self-reliance in order to be respected enough to earn friends. This places self-reliance as a prerequisite for a level of success in relationships within one's peer group. The overt message of this film is that money is not important, although much of the film is a showcase of what money can buy as Richie attempts to win friends. However, Richie's wish for friends acts as a motivation for change on his part as the main character. The resultant change is Richie's shift of focus from money to self-reliance and leadership (learned from his community of friends) as a solution to his

problems.

*Pets: Surrogate nurturers who teach self reliance*

The tension between self-reliance and nurturance is mediated in film by the need of children for a pet, especially a dog. This has developed into something far different from the pets presented in films of the past. For example, in the film, *The Human Comedy* (1943) which was made during World War II, a dog follows the children around and is part of their life, but is never an agent of change or integral to the plot. Yet in a film about the same era, *My Dog Skip* (2000), the focus of the film is on the boy's relationship with his dog. There is a greater focus on pets in children's films of the nineties, and animal characters most often have a great impact on the plot. These animals often function to provide a safety net and help the children resolve their problems when away from their parents. Beethoven, the Saint Bernard in all three films, *Beethoven* (1992), *Beethoven's 2nd* (1993), and *Beethoven's 3rd* (2000), acts to protect the children while providing an opportunity for personal growth and responsibility. For example, in the film *Beethoven*, the dog scares away bullies from the eight-year-old Todd, and gains the interest of a boy whom Ryce, the thirteen-year-old, wants to attract. Beethoven also saves Emily, the five-year-old, from drowning. The children become responsible and self-reliant in many ways in response to Beethoven's presence. They stop bickering, share the bathroom nicely and train and care for the dog. In *Beethoven's 2nd*, Beethoven protects the children from criminals in the same manner.

The relationship between pet and child is almost magical, which fits in with the model of childhood as a magical separate stage. In films of the 1990's, the pet often becomes a confidant to the child, as seen in the relationship between Paulie (*Paulie* 1998) and Marie discussed above. In *Dennis the Menace* (1993), Dennis has a very special relationship with his dog Ruff, who once again, protects him from a criminal. Ruff follows Dennis around in the same way Beethoven follows his children. *Dennis The Menace* is a nostalgic interpretation of a comic strip that first appeared in the 1950's, a time in which nurturance came to be more significant in child care. Even in *Baby's Day Out* (1994), Baby Bink forms a special, unspoken bond with the gorilla who protects him. This type of special bond between children and wild animals is the subject of a number of films, such as *Andre* (1994), a story about a seal. The relationship which the child forms with the wild animal always changes his life in a positive way that reflects a growth in self-reliance.

An idea often put forth in films is that children and animals, wild or domesticated, not only share a bond, but also have a natural ability to discern between good and bad people. This innate ability is lost by the time one gains adulthood, but it is never clear exactly when it is lost. This notion can be found in many films, including *Dunston Checks In* (1996), in which a boy about ten years old forms a relationship with a chimp who steals for his master. The child is the only one who can sense that the owner of the chimp is evil. Since the father has no time to supervise, the child is on his own, depending on the chimp to protect him as he falls afoul of the criminal alone in the bowels of the hotel. The chimp also knows that

his owner is evil, and he eventually outwits him and escapes his control. This frequently repeated formula relies on this special bond between an animal and a child, as a means to provide protection to the child as he acts in a self-reliant manner. Since the child has the protection of his pet, being alone without the care of his parent is not so dangerous. This eases the tension between the conflicting cultural models for nurturance and self-reliance.

### ***III. The resolution of self-reliance and nurturance***

#### ***Gender***

The conflict between nurturance and self-reliance is mediated in film families in the same way it is played out in gender differences in society. As noted earlier, Strauss and Quinn (1997:108) find this conflict between self-reliance and nurturance to be incorporated into the motivational force behind the roles of mother and father. The mother, in the home, is an agent of nurturance while the father, who must perform outside the home, is an agent of self-reliance. The film *Beethoven*, (1992) provides an excellent example of this. The father of the family wants the children to be tough, get up on time, and keep to a schedule, even on Saturday morning when there is no need to rise early. His focus is on the types of activities and training that provide lessons in self-reliance and success. The mother is the perfect agent of nurturance. She not only wants to give all her attention to her children, she opposes the father's rules because they are not nurturing in nature, though she halfheartedly supports him in his decisions. For example, when the children protest, asking if they really have to get up early on Saturday, she sighs and says, "Yes, you know your father's rules." She tries to consider her husband's needs, but decides that the children's needs are far more important.

Nurturance is valued more than self-reliance in this film, even though the way in which the father achieves his goals is through actions

taken as an agent of self-reliance. The father, through his endeavor to form close relationships with his children, is the character who undergoes change. The pivotal point comes when he is making the decision to have the dog put down. He remembers hating his father for the same action and decides that he does not want to be like his own father. He becomes a hero to his family through actions which support his children, by listening to his daughter's claim that the veterinarian is lying about Beethoven being vicious and by defending his family by hitting the vet. The father becomes more nurturing in his approach and gains a closer relationship with his children.

The use of gender alliances of father with self-reliance and mother with nurturance is common in children's films of the nineties, but it is nurturance that sets the stage for more complex issues relating to interpersonal relationships. The cultural model for self-reliance is essential to the model for success and all the means through which success is measured, such as money, career goals, job prestige, and mastery of information and technology. The model for success requires that parents teach self-reliance to children, as this is basic to providing them with the tools necessary to gain their own success. However, family films of the nineties are more concerned with the father's perspective, which revolves around learning nurturance and achieving close relationships with their children.

#### *Gender reinterpreted: remakes*

Several modern films such as *Dennis the Menace* (1993) and *Leave it*

to *Beaver* (1997) reinterpret characters from the 1950's, but modern influences have changed the characters involved in significant ways. Superficially, these films appear to be true to the ideals of earlier days, but a closer examination reveals that filmmakers have presented modern perspectives of dated models. The children continue to be agents of self-reliance, but the mothers exhibit a convoluted mixture of actions that support both models for nurturance and self-reliance, creating tension that is never resolved in the film. Fathers are portrayed in a very patriarchal manner. Although remakes portray many of the traditional family models, these views of the past are distinguished from the majority view of the past as a golden age, differing in tone due to a feminine perspective influenced by the contemporary equal rights movement. In some ways, these films are parodies, making judgments about children and families that are slanted by modern perceptions of the past rather than the era in which these characters were created.

The film, *Leave it to Beaver* (1997), has some interesting reinterpretations of cultural models of the 1950's. This film attempts to make satirical statements about our idealization of the era, showing a modern perspective of how parents and children really acted in the 1950's. Children in this film curse and talk back to their parents. Beaver has a problem with older bullies, and his older brother teaches him how to "suck up" to his father to get what he wants. Beaver's problem, which forms the conflict in this film, is that his father wants to relive his football career through his son. Beaver does not want to play football, but he does want a new bike, so he goes along with his father's wishes. This focus on the son's

relationship with his father is more exemplary of films of the nineties than of the fifties, but the father does not really exhibit the same interest in self-examination.

The film, *Dennis the Menace* (1993) provides a good example of a modern perspective of the past that shows negative judgmental treatment of both working and non-working mothers in the 1950's. In this story, Mrs. Mitchell takes a job and leaves Dennis with a sitter. Dennis tells Mr. Wilson, "We're getting poor, my mom's got a job now." This supports the modern perspective that mothers of the 1950's only worked if it was an economic necessity. The dialogue suggests that career women (non-mothers) of the 1950's were self-absorbed, unsympathetic to homemakers and had no interest in children. The childless woman in her office is portrayed as scornful when she belittles the knowledge of shoppers that Mrs. Mitchell has gained through her experience as a mother. She sneers at Mrs. Mitchell, "Could you spare us the family anecdotes please." This uncharitable office worker later refuses to cover an out-of-town trip for Mrs. Mitchell saying, "Hi, Mom...I don't have children, but I do have a life. I'm sorry, I'm just not going to be able to help you." The notion is that, in the business world, working mothers were not respected for their talent and home experience. Yet, Mrs. Mitchell is also portrayed as a mother who is missing her child's best moments, as a lonely, anxious mother who cannot sleep on her business trip, while Martha Wilson shares a tender moment with Dennis at bedtime. These sentiments are not found the original works, but reflect attitudes behind contemporary interpretations.

*Matilda: a tale of self-reliance and nurturance*

The film *Matilda* (1996) is a self-proclaimed modern fairy tale that provides a novel resolution for the tension between nurturance and self-reliance found in child-rearing. This is a story about a six-year-old girl, Matilda Wormwood, whose intellect goes unnoticed by her extremely stupid, self-absorbed parents. Due to her unquestionably "bad" parents, Matilda gains her self-reliance early in life, without any nurturance to interfere. She only gains a nurturing mother through her own efforts to free Miss Honey from the monster of the story, Miss Trunchbull.

From birth, Matilda is severely neglected, so must learn self-reliance in order to survive. Fortunately, she is an extraordinarily brilliant child. In the opening scene of this film, as the parents bring Matilda home from the hospital, they throw the baby's car seat in the back of the car, then proceed to forget to bring the baby into the house when they get home. The narrator informs the audience about the extent of the neglect of the parents in the first six years of Matilda's life. By age two, she has learned to take care of herself, and Matilda is shown feeding herself. By age four, she has read every magazine in the house and asks her father for a book. He tells her to go watch television. The narrator continues her story with, "She realized whatever she wanted, she would have to get for herself." We see that the bad parents are not nurturing Matilda at all. Matilda finds the library by herself, and after completing the children's section, begins to read the adult selections. The narrator, finishes her history by stating that Matilda continued to grow, nurtured by books. At this point, Matilda has a degree of self-reliance that would enable her to live on her own, if she

were not six years old.

The story begins as Matilda demands that her parents send her to school. She wants to enter into society in order to find a friend like those she has read about. Her parents are not happy with the idea because they rely on her to take care of a lot of their own business. However, they send her to Crunchem Hall, a school run in a dictatorial manner by a big, ugly tyrant of a woman named Agatha Trunchbull. Miss Trunchbull hates children and believes that if you are having fun you are not learning. Her teacher is Miss Honey, the sweetest, most understanding teacher possible. She encourages her students to be creative, supports them in their interests, and teaches them with kindness. However, Miss Honey is under the thumb of Miss Trunchbull, her guardian aunt who has been terrorizing her since she was a child. Miss Trunchbull had moved in with Miss Honey when her mother died, then killed her father and took over their mansion and guardianship of Miss Honey. In the manner of a fairy tale, Miss Honey is frozen in place, having fearfully moved out of her house as soon as she became an adult. She is now dwelling in a secluded cottage and fears returning for her possessions, even though she works for Miss Trunchbull at the school.

Matilda hates her home life, because her parents do not value her or any of her skills. Her parents try to force her to become more like themselves. She is punished for any intelligent act such as figuring out a math problem. Her mother states, "A girl does not get anywhere by acting intelligent." Her father is engaged in illegal activities and continually berates Matilda. He responds to her attempts to help with, "I'm smart,

you're dumb! I'm right, you're wrong! I'm big, you're little!" Because Matilda is continually punished for being "bad," she finally comes to realize that children can punish adults when they deserve it. She punishes her parents in small ways, relieving a bit of her anger over their treatment of her.

One day, Matilda discovers that she has hidden powers; she is so exasperated with being forced to watch game shows with her family that she uses her brain power to explode the television set. Matilda slowly develops control over her powers and uses them to defeat Miss Trunchbull and free Miss Honey. Matilda uses her power to move objects to retrieve Miss Honey's possessions, then uses her knowledge of the murder of Miss Honey's father to scare Miss Trunchbull with a ghostly message that causes her to disappear from town never to be seen again. The school is now so popular that children do not want to go home. Miss Honey moves back into her mansion and Matilda visits frequently.

Matilda now has found a nurturing substitute mother. Miss Honey is the perfect nurturer; she gives Matilda her unconditional love, her time and complete attention. Miss Honey has no need to worry about teaching self-reliance to Matilda, who instead desperately needs nurturing. The story ends with the perfect solution. Matilda's parents are leaving the country to escape arrest. They show up at Miss Honey's home to take Matilda with them. Matilda protests that she does not want to go, saying that she wants to stay with Miss Honey. Her mother cannot believe that anyone would want her, a "snotty, disobedient kid." Miss Honey declares, "She is a spectacularly wonderful kid and I love her," so Matilda suggests

that she be adopted. Matilda's parents sign the papers after very little consideration and leave town. The narrator informs the audience that "as bad as things were before, that's how good they became. And Matilda found to her great surprise that life could be fun...but the happiest part of the story was that Miss Honey and Matilda both got what they always wanted: a loving family." The scenes shown with the narration are of Miss Honey and Matilda reading and picnicking outside, skating and using hoola hoops inside, having a lot of fun, and showing a lot of joy. Matilda has found a nurturing mother whose focus of attention is on her alone and Miss Honey has been freed from the specter of a dictatorial, authoritarian figure, so that she is free to nurture not only Matilda but herself. There is no one to distract her from making Matilda the center of her life and she gets to have the joyful childhood that she never had.

In this film, self-reliance is established quite separately from nurturance. Because Matilda has already achieved self-reliance before she begins her quest for nurturance, the quest has no contradictions. The tale could be interpreted on an adult level as a quest for self-fulfillment; if Matilda were an adult, she would be searching for something more than her life offered. Miss Honey was certainly freed from the constraints of her past. This aspect of nurturance is discussed in the next section, but it is unusual in children's film's to find a girl as the protagonist in a story about self-fulfillment. However, as a story about the needs of a child, the resolution is pure in the condition of the nurturance portrayed. The need for self-reliance has been eliminated, since there are no interfering conflicts such as parental needs, other children, or a desire of the child for

independence. The story ends as a good fairy tale should, focused on the moral of the story: the fulfillment of a child's wish for an ideal caring mother who makes the child the center of her life.

#### **IV. Fathers**

If there is one area which is the primary focus of children's films of the 1990's, it is the relationship between fathers and their children. This may be due to a large increase in the number of single fathers raising children in our society. Data from the 2000 National Census shows that single-father homes rose sixty-two percent in the last decade, now comprising 2.2 million households, which is about one in forty-five households. (Census Bureau: [www.census.gov/](http://www.census.gov/)). Films appear to reflect an renewed interest in the relationship between fathers and their children; only two of the films viewed are about single mothers. In *The Client* (1994) a single mother is replaced by the female lawyer who acts as guardian, and in *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993) the mother divorces, is single and then prepares to remarry.

However, twenty-two films focus on conflict generated by the relationships between fathers and their children, some of which are discussed below. Twelve films are about single fathers or single men with the guardianship of children, while an additional ten films focus on the relationship between a father and his children within a traditional family setting. Even when both parents are found in the home, the plot of these films revolves around the father's role as a nurturer, while the mother's role as nurturer is taken as a given. The films focus on his life and problems. The only film that focuses on the mother's life with the same

intensity is *Look Who's Talking, Too* (1990), which was produced at the beginning of the decade. In this film, it is the mother's friends and family who are featured, as well as her relationship with her children.

Films of the 1990's directly address issues relating to the father's ability to interact in a warm, caring close relationship with his children, as expressed through a conflict between career and child-nurturing. Traube (1992:124) notes that men have been indifferent nurturers traditionally in our culture. However, with the shifting role of the father and the equal rights movement, men are expected to participate more in child-rearing and to form close nurturing relationships with their children. Since men lack early training in cultural models that support this type of relationship, the fulfillment of this role is a subject of great concern which is often portrayed in films of the nineties. Films focus on familial relationships from the adult point of view, so the issue of success is focused on the father, while the child is perceived primarily as an object of nurturance, even though the child acts with self-reliance.

The decade opened with a film sequel, *Three Men and a Little Lady* (1990), which seeks to provide a stable mother and father for a child who was left in the care of three bachelors at the end of the preceding film. This film, *Three Men and a Baby* (1987), which presented non-related men as suitable caretakers for a baby, was a remake of a French Film, *Three Men and a Cradle* (*Trois Hommes et un Couffin*) released in 1985. The film *Three Men and a Baby* and its predecessor told a story about three bachelors who suddenly find themselves guardians of a abandoned infant. In this comedic romp, the inept men learn how to care for a child. This film

presents to the public an alternative solution, a negotiation of the issue regarding what types of caretakers are acceptable for children.

*Three Men and a Baby* was a very successful film, but the sequel *Three Men and a Little Lady* (1990) reverses this situation, falling back on traditional models in choosing parents for the child. In the sequel, the mother of the child comes back into the picture and decides that her child needs a mother and father. She wants one of the bachelors, but settles on an unsuitable (non-nurturing) acquaintance, a very proper British gentleman. The object of the film becomes to obtain the proper father, the man who loves and has cared for the child, a man who will nurture the child rather than fulfill what is defined as a rigidly traditional role. Even though this film falls back on the traditional model for a nuclear family, the primary characteristic that defined a proper father was nurturance.

These films preface a decade in which the father's role as a nurturer has gained importance as a topic and as an ideal. It is accepted that mothers must balance their time between the spheres of the workplace and the home. In films of the last decade, rather than a lessening of the model for nurturance required by the mother as she moves into the workplace, we find the model for nurturance transferred to the father as well. The contemporary model of a child-centered household relies on the responsibility of both parents to nurture the child and consider the child's needs before their own.

#### *Fathers as primary caretakers*

A number of films of the 1990's support the message that a father

can be the primary caretaker, but he must learn how to form close interpersonal relationships in order to nurture his children properly. In these films, the father is inept as a parent, especially when he is called upon to replace the mother. In this case, his child-rearing practices do not work until he changes his outlook, and realizes the ways in which he must change to be effective in his new role as nurturer. The father in the film *Dunston Checks In* (1996) is just this kind of father. His wife has passed away leaving him with two children and a highly demanding job as manager of a large hotel in a city. He has little time to spend in his hotel apartment with the children. We are led to believe that things were fine when the mother was there (a reference to mother wisdom). The children have nowhere to play and are running wild in the hotel, breaking things and getting in the way. He does not nurture his children; his commands are ineffectual, he is continually flustered when dealing with them; he knows little of what they do, and he does not pay attention to what they tell him.

The father comes to realize what changes he needs to make: he must listen to his children, spend time with them and make them the center of the household. The father then makes his family life his first priority, supports his children at the risk of his job, and makes a further commitment to give up his present position so that he can take a job where the children can have a real home. He tells the children that he has achieved everything that he ever dreamed of doing, and now he would like to take a less demanding position. He says, "You do realize that we'll probably end up living in a Motel 6?" His son replies, "Yep, sounds pretty

good to me!" Of course, the father ends up as manager of a resort in Bali, giving us the message that he will be successful even if he puts the children first.

Another newly-widowed father is found in the film, *Krippendorf's Tribe* (1998). This father, Professor James Krippendorf, has let his family and career suffer when his beloved wife and colleague dies. He is left to father his three children, two young boys and a teenage girl. In his grief, he has ignored his children as well as his career. In attempts to keep his children happy, he has blown a \$100,000 research grant on television sets, video recorders and household expenses. Now his bank is clamoring for mortgage payments. However, his children are alienated and his home is a wreck. The children's grandparents want to take them away from the father and send them to boarding school because he is not what they consider a proper caretaker. In his attempt to falsify his research results, he uses his children to make fake movies of the tribe in New Guinea that he supposedly studied. His attempts, which eventually land him in trouble, have the effect of creating a nurturing relationship with his children.

By the end of the film, the father has realized that his relationship with his children is the most important aspect of his life. The youngest son tells his father to continue making fake films because this activity has made life like it was when the mother was alive, causing the father to realize that the key to becoming a warm, caring, nurturing parent is to spend time with his children. His son emphasizes the change in relationship by saying that they now have fun, and that the father pays

attention to them. The film ends with the family going picnicking. Once again, we find that the father can be a good nurturing caretaker if he is willing to create a child-centered household.

The cultural models surrounding nurturing relationships is being applied to fathers in the absence of the mother, but it is suggested that he should provide a new mother for the children as well. In deference to the traditional model of the nuclear family, the film suggests that his girlfriend, Veronica, will eventually be an excellent mother for his children. In one scene, she talks to the daughter, Shelley, about how lucky she was to have parents who took her along with them, rather than leave her in a boarding school. Veronica's early life is contrasted with the past in which the parents took the children along for field work and the present situation in which their father refuses to send his children away to school.

The situation surrounding a nurturing father becomes more complex when both the father and mother are still living, yet living apart. Cultural models regarding correct behavior for divorced parents are a subject of negotiation and confusion. Some films deliberately seek to inform the audience how adults should behave in situations involving divorce. The father is called upon to let the new stepfather be a father to his children in *The Santa Clause* (1994). When a new stepmother is present she should be allowed to mother the children, although the natural mother is allowed to be a bit more possessive of her position. This can be found in the film, *Stepmom* (1998), when the natural mother continually undermines the stepmother's relationship with the children, until she finds out that she is dying. At this point, she does what is best for

her children and helps them to develop a close, nurturing relationship with the only mother they will have when she is gone.

However, the single divorced father's role is perhaps the most difficult because he is called upon to develop a nurturing relationship with his children which is kindred, yet separate from that of the mother. The film, *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993) addresses this model in a very creative manner; when faced with his failure as a husband and father, Daniel learns how to be the perfect nurturer of his children by becoming a woman. In this film, the mother has a career-oriented job, while the father is a out-of-work actor. Even though he willingly takes on most of the child care, he is ineffectual. The children are misbehaved and not achieving success in their endeavors.

This film presents a number of cultural models surrounding how to nurture children. First we are presented with the tenet that unsupervised children misbehave and create havoc. Before the divorce, Daniel interacted with his children as if he were one of them, just having a great time with them with no thought of the trouble it might cause. A birthday party with a donkey in the house is the last straw for his overstressed wife. His wife demands a divorce, but he passionately loves being with his three children every day, so occasional visits are not enough. He solves his dilemma by dressing as a British nanny, and proceeding to remake himself into the nurturing, responsible person his ex-wife wants in her home caring for the children while she works.

Through the nanny, the audience is informed about what children need. Daniel seems to have already known what he is only able to

implement as Mrs. Doubtfire. He was popular with his children before the divorce because he showered them with possessions and let them do whatever they wished. The mother wants structure, and loving firmness for her children, so that is what Mrs. Doubtfire offers. None of the bad habits which the children practiced with their father are tolerated by Mrs. Doubtfire. Children need attention, and for their caretaker to join in their pursuits, so Mrs. Doubtfire plays soccer, bikes, reads with them, and helps with homework. He has finally achieved a genuine close interpersonal relationship with his children. He discovers that children should be listened to and respected, and then they will give you their allegiance. It works so well that the children become very happy and content even though their parents are divorced.

This film deliberately instructs the audience that the nurturance of children should be considered first, even in divorce. The new stepfather-to-be is allowed to become a nurturing figure as well and ultimately the father attains his proper role in his children's life, as a nurturing single father. However, before he can fulfill this goal, Mrs. Doubtfire is discovered to be Daniel and he loses all contact with his children. Daniel then goes on to star in a successful television show for children as Mrs. Doubtfire, sharing his wisdom about nurturing with his audience. After seeing his show, the mother relents and restores his custody rights. He has become a perfect divorced single father who can nurture as well as a mother.

### *Success & Nurturing*

The new emphasis on the father's need to achieve a present, nurturing role in the home creates a conflict with personal goals for success in the workplace. Cultural models regarding the changing relationship between fathers and their children within the nuclear family are important in children's films of the nineties; these films illustrate that even when both parents are present in the home, the father, as well as the mother, should place his personal relationship with his children above career needs. The home-based sphere of nurturance is placed in opposition to external concerns such as career, success, money, and technology, but the choice is presented only after a certain degree of success has been attained; over sixty percent of the fathers hold professional jobs. Most of these fathers are business executives and owners, but others include scientists, doctors, an architect and a hotel manager. In contrast, the assumption that mothers have already mastered warm close relationships with their children is reflected in the portrayal of mothers as homemakers in most films. Almost seventy percent of the mothers stay at home with their children. A number of films emphasize the importance of nurturing children over material concerns, even though many of these film parents are relatively wealthy. For example, in the film, *Richie Rich* (1994), the extremely wealthy parents keep their greatest treasures in a vault. When a crook finally gets into the vault all he finds are the keepsakes from Richie's childhood, such as his first bicycle and a bronzed baby shoe. The parents confirm that these are their greatest treasures.

A number of films focus on the father's ability to form close

interpersonal relationships with this children. He cannot rely on material goods, technological information, educational methods or expect to enact patterns of family life in the absence of these relationships. A father must be a continual part of his children's lives and must participate in a nurturing manner, in spite of career demands. The father's inexperience in this role is accepted and often used as a plot device to generate comedic situations. Although mainly a comedic vehicle for Richard Dreyfus and Bill Murray, the film *What about Bob?* (1991) provides a good example of the necessity of a father to develop close interpersonal relationships with his children rather than relying on educational methods. In this film, the central character is Dr. Leo Marvin, a father of two children, a brilliant psychiatrist and successful author of a new book, who is about to take a vacation with his family. Dr. Marvin acquires a new patient, Bob, who follows him on his vacation and insists upon inserting himself into the doctor's private life. It is significant that a part of Bob's diagnosis is "an extreme need for family relations."

Bob takes over Dr. Marvin's family and in spite of Bob's rather extreme problems, he does a better job of nurturing than Dr. Marvin. Bob quickly develops warm relationships with Dr. Marvin's children. For example, Dr. Marvin has been trying to teach his son to dive. His son, Ted, is fearful and will not dive off the pier. Dr. Marvin says to him, "I stopped everything to teach you how to dive." He is impatient for Ted to perform immediately, as he has set aside a period in which to accomplish the task. He says to Ted, "When I was young I thought diving was fun." Ted replies, "I thought you were born grown up." This is a son who sees his father as

someone who never has fun. In the meantime, Mom is inside conversing with her daughter. The daughter says, "Bob is fun!" Mom replies hesitantly, "Your father is kind of fun." The scene switches back to Ted, alone now on the pier. Bob comes along and starts talking and acting silly with him. Bob aligns himself with Ted's perspective as a fearful child and helps him to feel self-confident enough so that he can dive off the pier. Dad is amazed, but upset that Bob usurped his place. Ted is exuberant, and the rest of the family accepts Bob as a friend.

As the film progresses, Bob continues to participate fully in events in which Dad is left out. The role in which Dr. Marvin has established himself is as the family expert who tells everyone what behavior is correct, but he never relates with them on equal footing. The film presents his clumsy attempts to be a nurturing parent on this vacation, but it is obvious that in daily life he has joined in family time in a very limited manner. This father never does learn how to be a present, nurturing figure in his children's lives, although Bob does. However, he is so jealous of Bob that he tries to eliminate him in any extreme manner possible, and unrealistically, ends up in an insane asylum.

The increase in the father's participation in child-rearing has been accompanied by an intensification of personal issues that are expressed through choices by men between family and career. These films impart the message that fathers must learn to parent in a different manner in order to be successful nurturers. The sensitive, caring man who gives a great deal of his time and attention to his wife and children has been common in Hollywood films since the fifties (Traube 1992:147). However,

in past decades the father continued to be an agent of self-reliance and the workplace. His orientation was towards concerns outside the home, even though he was trying to balance work with the needs of his family. In *Please Don't Eat the Daisies*, (1960) the father commutes to the city, while the mother is the one worrying about nurturing the children without his help. She feels that she is missing fulfillment in her life due to her lack of time away from the family and the amount of time her husband must spend away from home, working and socializing to benefit his career.

The shift toward a psychological orientation that took place during the late sixties and seventies in the United States (Veroff, Douvan and Kulka 1981:14) provided a basis for a changing model of the father. The more traditional contemporary films such as *Beethoven* (1992) and *Beethoven's 2nd* (1993) continue to utilize the model of fathers who keep their self-definition firmly fixed in their occupation. However, other films express ideas relevant to contemporary concerns about self that are expressed through conceptions of fatherhood. It is no longer enough for the father to be sympathetic and present in the home. The caring, sensitive man must now fulfill himself through the excellence of his care of the family. Career decisions become aligned with personal issues, because a father's success and happiness depends on his capability as a parent.

Family films from the 1990's juxtapose the demands of the workplace with the capability of the father to be available to his children physically and emotionally. In the film, *Hook* (1991), the father learns this lesson very effectively. *Hook* (1991), a sequel to the story of Peter Pan, is the story of a father, Peter Banning, who is too consumed by his

career to spend time with his family. As the film opens, he misses his son's baseball game and his daughter's performance in a play about Peter Pan because he is too busy with a business deal. At his wife's insistence, he takes the time to make a trip to England to visit his wife's mother, Wendy, who inspired the Peter Pan story. He continues to spend all his time there on the phone, trying to supervise a buyout, until his children are kidnapped. He then voyages into Neverland, the land of his childhood psyche, to reclaim his children. It turns out that Peter Banning was Peter Pan, who has grown up and forgotten his childhood. Neverland can only be saved if he rids himself of the fog of adulthood and remembers how to be a child. This venture into his inner psyche teaches him to value his position as a father and by the end of the film he learns to ignore business needs when he is with his family.

Films of the nineties reflect the shift in salience of parenting models to include the need for fathers to be emotionally responsive in order to develop warm relationships with their children. One of the processes important in the construction of cultural models for parenting identified by Harkness, Super and Keefer (1992:171) is the redefinition of the self as a parent through an examination of one's past as a child and one's own parents. Veroff, Douvan and Kulka (1981:16-17) relate that the family has become a unit of support for the "psychological man," a warm, moral, sustaining haven from the outside world. The surge in the popularity of self-help books in the nineties indicates a new found interest in self-examination which is also reflected in family films of the nineties. As adults struggle with fulfilling these cultural models in our society, it

becomes necessary to address personal history and personal needs. Films of the nineties instruct fathers to resolve their past and focus on forming warm nurturing relationships with their children.

The film, *Beethoven's 3rd* (2000) provides an excellent example of a father's self-evaluation of his past and his own parents in order to reconcile his role as a parent. Unlike the first two films of the Beethoven series (*Beethoven* and *Beethoven's 2nd*), this film explores additional facets of the father's character. In this story, the father, Richard Newton, attempts to reconcile his childhood and how his father parented with how he parents his own children. His self-fulfillment depends on his success as a father, but he is unsure about his performance because his children are unhappy with his attempt to recreate the family vacation of his past. Richard attempts to duplicate exactly the vacation of his childhood, by taking the same route and visiting the same tourist attractions. These choices are rather flat to his technology-minded children. His son tells him, "Dad, this place was lame thirty years ago and it's even worse now. Did you like it as a kid?" In this dialogue, the role taken by his son is that of Richard's own inner voice, as he questions his past. The child could not know what the place was like thirty years ago. In spite a series of disasters, Richard clings to his dream vacation, refusing to stay in a hotel when the camper developed problems because he had not stayed in one on his childhood trip. His attempt to force his children to relive his childhood are unsuccessful, as is his attempt to recapture the magic of his own childhood wonder.

Finally, at the end of the film, Richard admits that his view of his childhood trip is overly nostalgic; rather than perfect, this trip was

difficult and fraught with tensions as well. He confesses that his Dad kept making them do things they did not want to do, and his mother kept telling them they were having a wonderful time. The brothers had fought the entire trip and they struggled with a carsick dog. In a validation of his father and himself, Richard maintains that the vacation is a wonderful experience in spite of the negative qualities, being together as a family has great value no matter what the circumstances, creating lifelong memories. Richard now realizes that his father did an okay job as a parent and that he is doing well also. The family vacation is an important icon for parenthood because it is a time when the family is the primary focus of the father as he is removed from the workplace.

Films of the 1990's impart the message that fathers should measure success by the achievement of good interpersonal relationships as well as prestige and wealth. Contemporary fathers who perceive themselves as nurturing role models for their children compare themselves to their own fathers, who were more traditional agents of self-reliance and success. Reconciliation of one's own childhood creates tension because many fathers look back at their childhood and remember that their fathers were often not present a great deal of the time and did not have the kind of interpersonal relationships which contemporary models deem necessary.

The idea of "nurturing the inner child," a New Age catch phrase, has gained importance for baby boomers in recent years for several reasons that have implications in children's films. The demands of career success in the complex world of modern business are in opposition to the needs of the family. In order to achieve stellar success, the individual must place

other interests aside, including children. The alignment of nurturance of one's child with nurturance of one's inner child is a means of allowing the father to retreat somewhat from the demands of achievement and focus on personal needs. The Neverland segment of the film *Hook* (1991) is an exploration of the self and the past as well as an attempt to recapture the creativity and wonder of childhood. Creative expression is a way in which fathers can attempt to learn how to access their emotions.

Like Peter Banning who had abandoned all the wonder of childhood, adults want to recapture some of the magic. As a generation which does not want to age, the baby boomers' search for fulfillment leads to a claim of the magic of childhood for themselves. The film *Beethoven's 3rd* (2000) imparts the idea that life for the modern parent is too serious, too busy and too concerned with money, and that adults need to rediscover childhood wonder. This notion reflects an opposition of contemporary culture with the nostalgic nuclear family. The main focus of *Beethoven's 3rd* (2000) is on the father's self-examination, but even the mother would like to recapture the wonder of childhood. The mother is cast as the reality-based parent on this vacation. She is very concerned with finances the entire trip; this is a film family that has to watch their expenses. The mother decries her position of authority and lack of ability to have fun, saying, "I used to be a nice person. I don't feel like a nice person. I used to be adventurous." Films such as this one suggest that a simpler way of life will help restore the nuclear family of the past, and aid parents in their quest for self-fulfillment.

The messages of the nineties about self-examination, reconciliation

of the past and the ability to form warm interpersonal relationships on the part of men culminates in the plot of Disney's production, *The Kid* (2000). In this film, the protagonist, Russell, must confront not just his past but himself in the flesh as a child. He is not even a parent, the child is himself. He must confront himself in order to gain the skills necessary to maintain a relationship with a woman well enough to get to the point of having a family. Russell has a highly successful career, a totally regimented life, and has repressed his painful childhood. His interpersonal skills are non-existent. He does not make small talk, shuns his father, offends his non-girlfriend, and keeps everyone away through the use of his secretary and a well fortified home security system. He executes his image consulting in a brusque manner which is accepted due to his brilliance in his field.

Russell's child self comes to remind him that the features of life that he should value are fun, family and dogs. The fun and the dog are for the child within him. The child, known as Rusty, and the woman in his life both tell him he is a failure because he is overly focused on financial success. Russell and Rusty work together to reconcile the repressed memories and the traumatic experience which was the catalyst for repressed emotions. When they are successful, Russell learns to work less, realizes the value of the woman in his life and comes to love his pudgy, unpopular child self. We are given a glimpse of his new future when an older version of himself appears as a happy, relaxed, married parent with a son, a dog and an airplane. This man has gone through self-psychoanalysis in concrete form, a necessity before he can become a part of a family unit and find self-fulfillment.

The cultural model for a life-plan is an underlying factor in plots that portray fathers who must choose how to balance home and the workplace. It might appear surprising that films of the 1990's continuously impart the message that models for nurturing the child are more important than models for success. The families involved in film plots most often have and retain prestige and monetary assets. The timing of the message for the protagonist appears to be important; the fathers in these films have all attained a certain amount of success and wealth, so have the freedom to make personal decisions. The ideal cultural model for a life-plan would thus involve the father gaining complete self-reliance as he came of age, attaining career goals and then having children. His complete success would be measured not just by career, but by then achieving a fulfilling family life, and fulfilling his own psychological needs. These films focus on the subject of self-fulfillment and family needs, removing economic needs as a factor.

The focus of films of the 1990's on the father's relationship with his children indicates a desire to clarify and redefine his role. Most often, in the portrayal of a mother's relationship with her children, either the mother is accepted unquestionably in her established position in the home or the plot contrives to reestablish her place as a traditional nurturer. An exception can be found in the film *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993), in which the mother is an executive and the father the caretaker. However, the father's role as an agent of self-reliance outside the home is being challenged. A great number of the films produced in the last decade offer alternative interpretations that indicate a change in how the role of the

father is perceived. Films are delineating the role of the father in a manner that includes a necessity for increased presence in the home and a new type of nurturing interpersonal relationship. The conflict of the new role of the father as a nurturer with his traditional role as breadwinner is mediated by the alignment of his personal happiness with the fulfillment of his role as a father.

Change can be seen between the portrayal of fathers in 1990, and the portrayal of fathers later in the decade. Several films produced in 1990 imbued fathers with more natural ability to form close relationships with their children than is found in any subsequent year. *Three Men and A Little Lady* (1990) and *Kindergarten Cop* (1990) present father figures who are successful, through trial and error, but *Problem Child* (1990) and *Look Who's Talking, Too* (1990) include fathers for whom a close, warm parenting relationship comes naturally. These films portray fathers in a way not seen in other films of the decade. Both of these fathers are warm, loving men who put their children first in their lives.

The cultural models found in *Look Who's Talking, Too* align with those found by Traube (1992:165) in films of the 1980's: a non-traditional father with a negative image of the mother. In this film, the plot revolves around the mother's conflict between work and home, rather than the father's. She is jealous of her husband's time with the children and argues over which of them should make the decisions about child care issues. It is she who leaves the children with her irresponsible brother, precipitating a crisis when he leaves them alone and the kitchen catches fire. In a revealing scene, the mother is waiting for her estranged husband take

over supervision of their children at a toddler gym. She is tensely standing aside as the teacher attempts to get the cranky children to cooperate. He is unsuccessful until the father walks in and immediately joins them. The children begin to follow the father around, becoming cooperative and happy, while the mother is left standing immobile at the side of the room.

This non-traditional father already has the characteristics and the priorities for which fathers are searching in films produced later in the decade. It is the father who is relaxed and competent with his children. He is portrayed as a temporarily unsuccessful man who is a loving father. He is less concerned about this than his wife and mother-in-law, but defensive about his salary when they criticize him. He feels a need for success as a pilot, but does not want to take an excellent job as a private pilot because he does not want to be away from home. However, he eventually takes a job as a pilot to make his wife happy, and misses the time spent with his children. The plot never reconciles this issue and the viewer is left with an ambiguous situation. He becomes estranged from his wife, but when they reconcile, there is no mention of how the household will be structured in the future.

The role of the father in this film is very different from the role of the father portrayed in the majority of the family films produced in the nineties. Just one year later, we find two very work-oriented, ineffectual fathers with little time for their children in *Hook* (1991) and *What About Bob?* (1991). This trend continues, becoming more intense toward the end of the decade, with films like *The Kid* (2000), that delve intimately into

the psyche of the father. This suggests that a change occurred in the salience of models about mothers and fathers due to a renewed interest of men in self-examination or the desire to spend more time in personal and family pursuits. The fundamental difference between these film fathers of 1990 and 2000 lies in self-examination. By portraying the father as successful monetarily, but inept personally, the filmmaker sets the stage for self-examination to occur as the father reconsiders his priorities. The utilization of the father's conflict between work and home or interpersonal relationships to create change on the part of the leading character is the most predominant feature found in family films of the last decade.

## ***V. Nostalgia and future orientation***

In family films, the models surrounding nostalgia and future orientation are expressed along the same lines as nurturance and self-reliance. Children represent the future with all its coinciding models for self-reliance, individualism, discovery, creativity and success, while parents embody a nostalgia for a mythical past that includes the qualities of nurturing, love, attention and structure. Due to their propensity to focus on the future, Americans tend to favor the child rather than the parent, attributing them with all these positive future-oriented qualities (Dundes 1980:75). Wolfenstein and Leites (1977:106) identified this tendency to relegate parents to the background in American films. Wolfenstein (1953:279) found that children in America are encouraged to outgrow and surpass their families. It is not considered adequate to reproduce the accomplishments of one's parent's. In family films from the 1990's, children are definitely favored. Parents are rarely portrayed more favorably than their children, and the primary focus of the parent's life is, or should be, their children.

The viewpoint of the child is far different from that of the parent; rather than focusing on nurturing, children actively create a future through self-reliance, individualism and success. Children in films may show a vulnerability in their need for love and attention, but they act independently. Dundes (1980:82) noted that future orientation is aligned

with individualism, which entails making one's future rather than passively playing out a part determined by the past. Children in films are not passive, but actively shape their own lives. The babies in *Baby Geniuses* (1999) represent the potential of the future for adults in a very immediate way. These children have a mastery over adults and the past through the use of technology. They understand technology and use it to solve problems in creative ways that the adults never imagined. For example, Baby Wit uses a toy tape deck to construct a device to unlock his electronically controlled door and escape.

Film children are invariably smarter and more aware of events happening around them than any of the adult characters, especially their parents. They often save their parents from a variety of misfortunes including embarrassment, loss of career, and criminal activity. For example, in *Dunston Checks In* (1996), it is the youngest child who notices the jewel thief, and the children who subsequently save the father's job by catching the thief. In *Baby Geniuses* (1999), the babies have access to all the information of past generations and do not need help from adults. They are able to outwit adults with ease. Even the babies' names, Wit and Sly, reflect their superiority. Adults underestimate these babies continually because they cannot even fathom their capabilities.

Parents, as agents of nurturance for children, focus on fulfilling the needs of their children. Parents in films worry more about the nurturance of their children and less about their development of responsibility. There is a renewed interest in creating a family life which meets criteria of the mythic nuclear family of the past. Nostalgia for a time when the ideal

family was commonly found in this country results in the idea that this age of nurturance is now threatened due to changes in society. One nebulous idea is that both mothers and fathers used to have more time for their families. The more explicit perception is that home life is being eroded because the mother is working outside the home, and has less time to lavish on her children. Hareven (2000:303) points out that nostalgia for a nonexistent past has led to the depiction of the present as an era of decline in the family.

In films about children, the concern about the disintegration of family values is expressed through the reestablishment of the mother in the home as well as a change of perspective by fathers. The film *Beethoven* (1992) provides an excellent example; the family is the picture-book nuclear family of the past. This family's idealized structure is threatened by modern ideas when the mother attempts to enter the workplace. However, the ideal is reestablished when the mother returns to her position, and the improvement of the model comes from the adjustment of the father's role to reflect modern values. The emphasis is toward nurturing as a means of preventing the devaluing of family life due to the modern pace of life.

The changes in family life associated with contemporary society is a concern that is addressed in many family films of the 1990's. The complexity and demands of a busy technologically-advanced society is seen as a significant cause of the erosion of family togetherness. The implication of technology in the degradation of the American family creates a tension between attempts to preserve the nostalgic past and the

future orientation of our culture. The demands of the modern, technologically-based society of today are seen as factors that disrupt the nurturing nuclear family of the past. A number of films produced in the 1990's focus on a conflict between technology and nurturance based parenting, mostly in a general manner. For example, in *What About Bob?* (1991), the filmmaker warns that one cannot parent solely by the use of psychology. Technology is presented as a threat to interpersonal relationships even for children in their peer relationships. In *The Sandlot* (1993), the boy has no friends because he spends all his time indoors using his computer. This film presents the message that old-fashioned pursuits such as baseball provide the opportunity to form friendships.

The nostalgia that drives the model of the eroding nuclear family, integrated with the contemporary redefinition of the role of the father, creates a modern solution to the problem of restoring the perceived model of the nuclear family. The nuclear family of the past is seen as both an ideal which is eroding and a model which could be recreated with the full participation of the father, as well as the mother. Both of these models are involved in the plot of the film *Baby Geniuses* (1999), which sets up an intense opposition between technology and nurturance as the basis of the plot. In this story, an unethical researcher separates twin babies, placing one in an experimental laboratory and the other with a loving family whom she scorns as ignorant. In order to create an intense contrast with the alternate method of child-rearing found in a laboratory existence, the normal family is the ideal nurturing, totally child-centered family. The environment of the laboratory is exactly opposite to that of the loving

home. Though the researchers totally discard nurturing techniques, they are successful in producing intelligent, extraordinarily advanced children.

There is a distinct contrast between the family, which provides a nurturing child-centered household for normal children, and the nurtureless, experimental, technologically advanced laboratory which selects only the most intelligent children in an attempt to use technology to create super-children. The normal family consists of the ideal nurturing parents. Both the mother and father are fully participating, sensitive, caring parents who happen to be child specialists. They run a daycare in which they live and work, always putting the needs of the children first. Unlike the laboratory subjects, these children represent a variety of ethnic groups. Even the other adults involved in caring for the children in the daycare home are tolerant and supportive of all the children, cheerfully helping a difficult teen worker through the process of coming-of-age. This appears to be a representation of what the world should be like; rather than a world skewed by technology, we find an idealized existence.

Science fiction films utilize children as representatives of the future in several diverse ways. In one situation, children function as a needy object of the parent's protection as well as agents of the future in "kidult" plots more suitable for adult viewing. In these films, the parent's responsibility to nurture is intensified when parents, or other guardians, must risk their lives to protect their children. One example is *Jurassic Park* (1993), a frightening adventure story in which children and adults

are terrorized by dinosaurs. This film is representative of a number of science fiction plots involving children; adults must protect children from some type of monsters. The parental figures in Jurassic Park are not the parents of the threatened children, but a couple who respond to familial instincts when terror arises. Although many parents take their children to these science fiction films, this genre is not not equivalent with family drama, in which it would typically be the children who saved the parents. These films depict children as innocent beings who must be protected because they are the best of us and our hope for the future.

A more romantic view of children is commonly found in both science fiction and family dramas; these films depict the young as more worthy or knowledgeable, or more connected with the universe because of their youth. A recent science fiction film, *The Sixth Sense* (1999), offers a story about a young boy who possesses supernatural talents as a part of his innocence. He can see ghosts and tries to help them deal with their transition from life to death. Children are often attributed with a special knowledge of the collective unconscious, a widely held notion that very young children possess an innate knowledge of the unknown, a natural mystical quality that erodes as they are enculturated. Aliens often contact children, and evil forces speak and work through children. This embodiment of knowledge is also found in *Baby Geniuses* (1999), in which the babies possess all the knowledge of prior generations until they "cross over," when they begin to communicate with adults. At this time they lose their knowledge and become members of the culture in which they live. The idea that children have more potential than the present

generation (which they lose as they join the generation) is inherent to models that equate children with the future.

The future orientation of our culture also plays a role in the differing degree to which film parents focus on the needs of the children rather than their own. Adult goals for the future fade into non-existence in many these narratives. However, a purely adult goal that family films focus on is self-fulfillment, a completion of the "inner child," which equates the child with the adult psyche. There is a prevailing desire among Americans to live for the moment and for the self, rather than for the past or the future (Lasch 1979:5), and a focus on the "inner child" allows the adult to apply models to himself rather than children. Lasch (1979:4) noted the desire on the part of Americans for psychic improvement in matters such as "getting in touch with their feelings, eating health food, taking lessons in ballet or belly-dancing, immersing themselves in the wisdom of the East, jogging, learning how to 'relate,' overcoming the 'fear of pleasure.'" However, in the typical family film, the product of finding self-fulfillment is the recognition of nurturance as the primary focus of parenthood, allowing the parents to find meaning in their daily life within the context of the family.

Children represent the future, but the complex model of the American family is affected by changing models of aging as contemporary adults attempt to retain their position of youth. This ambiguity is expressed in the film *Baby Geniuses* (1999), which presents the complexity of models surrounding children and their parents in the United States. In this film, there are a myriad of cultural models intertwined, creating a

zany plot that plays upon many emotions of the audience. There is the present technological generation of baby boomers that aligns itself with success and the young, their position as nurturing parents, and the potential of children as representatives of the future. These children could be said to represent the generation of the present which has embraced technology, and their ability to attain success by utilizing the pool of knowledge from past generations. Nurturing, warm interpersonal family relationships stand in opposition to the unemotional technological world. Technology is portrayed as cold and distancing in family relations, yet as a potential resource which can be used by the young and intelligent to triumph over past generations. Few family films attempt to integrate such diverse cultural models into one plot, yet a generation of parents is attempting to appropriate all these aspects of culture and integrate these models into their personal relationships and professional lives. They conclude that conflict between these elements does not need to be resolved if one can balance it all.

#### ***Chapter 4: Conclusion***

Films of the 1990's portray the immense complexity of cultural models that distinguish the American family. Durable models that developed along with American culture continue to be forceful in contemporary society. People draw from the body of culture established throughout history in order to act on a daily basis. Nurturance and self-reliance are durable models which underlie interaction within the American family. However, these models are being negotiated and altered continually as culture changes over time, as elements of the larger society affect the family. The numerous cultural models relating to families are addressed in films through plots that may focus on a few particular models or be a combination of a great number of intertwining, sometimes conflicting, models.

The psychological orientation that developed in the United States after the 1950's affected the model of the family and continues to provide a motivation for modification of the role of the father. The focus on the particular manner in which a father should relate to his children found in films of the nineties examines the father's need for skills in order to enact the role of the father as a nurturer. Films attempt to reconcile the conflicts between models for success and nurturance that make it difficult for men to execute the contemporary model of fatherhood. These films suggest that many fathers worry that they will fail in their ability to

interact with their children in the close, warm, nurturing manner which used to be reserved for the mother-child relationship. In the contemporary model, men participate more fully in the intimate sphere of family relationships.

The portrayal of children continues to follow traditional gendered models in many films, but the focus on fathers indicates that the gendered aspect of parenting is a salient issue in the 1990's. During the nineties, men are becoming more home-centered, and films focus on models of nurturance, and the skills needed by men. Mothers have retained a durable position as a "natural" nurturer, while fathers are discovering fulfillment through nurturing. It is important to recognize that the changing model of fatherhood has personal implications for men. As fathers focus on the self-fulfillment which is found through nurturing, their changing model of parenting requires self-examination. The models that are acquired during the process of becoming a father have changed. Fathers must assess the ways in which they are different from their own fathers and still reconcile their own childhood as a child of a different kind of father who did not relate in the manner dictated by the contemporary model.

The focus on the self as a being who can relate in a warm personal manner involves more than an examination of nurturing models applicable to parenthood. The redefinition of the self in a manner associated with the feminine involves a shift in psychological orientation. This has led to the desire to "nurture the self," and recapture the wonder of childhood. The father's ability to lead a creative, interesting life outside

the sphere of the workplace is highly salient to men in the nineties. These adults are less willing to relinquish ownership of the future to children. They want to retain primacy in the workplace as well as attain a satisfying personal life.

However, contemporary children continue to represent the future for adults, and models for success are intensely applied. Children are expected to focus on skills needed to prepare themselves for success as an adult. Children are registered for school at birth, sent to extracurricular classes such as ballet at an early age and often have impressive resumes long before they reach adulthood. Modern parents utilize a variety of other paid adults to prepare their children for success. This surrogate nurturance is very different in character from that found within the family. Dissatisfaction with this manner of nurturance is expressed through nostalgic evaluations of the family and outside elements.

The condemnation of technology found at the end of the nineties indicates a dissatisfaction with changes, calling for a return to the traditional model of nurturance inside the home. A look ahead at a film from the next decade, *Geppetto* (2001) confirms a to return to the model of the family that supports the notion of childhood as a separate stage of life. In this film, Geppetto wants to be a father, but he does not accept Pinocchio as a real son because he is not perfect. The contemporary message imparted by this film is that children who are perfectly behaved, or spend all their time becoming child prodigies, are little automatons who have no character. Children should be allowed to have faults, to be allowed to play, and should be nurtured, rather than forced to participate in an intense

competition which will ensure a winning future position when they reach adulthood. The primary message of this film is that the important aspects of a family are loving relationships and companionship.

The psychological orientation of American life continues to guide the changing models of the family, children and parenting as they modify in response to elements of the larger society. The changing model of fatherhood provides an altered family structure for children. The family is still perceived as a loving, close unit that provides a peaceful haven from the chaotic world and a unit of psychological support for the individual. However, both parents are required to provide nurturance in the child-centered household. The gendered aspects of parenting have provided factors that affected the model of parenting in the 1990's. The nineties can be characterized as the decade that focuses on fatherhood and the personal growth of men. Single mothers are not often found in films of the nineties, but single fathers are numerous. Models of success have been applied more intensely to children as a method of nurturing in an age when many households are headed by parents who both work. The conception of the family as a unit of close interpersonal relationships that provides love and a peaceful haven is characteristic of the nineties, but the model of that family is portrayed through the eyes of the father.

## **Appendix A: Methods**

For this project, I viewed Hollywood films produced during the decade encompassing 1990 to 2000 that focus on preadolescent children and identified and analyzed cultural models from a cognitive perspective. I have evaluated cultural models surrounding children and parenting in terms of historical perspective and indications of change exhibited by contemporary expressions of models surrounding the family. Separate components of the roles of father and mother were considered, such as nurturance, self-reliance, success and the workplace, and in what manner each of these is considered appropriate or inappropriate. The durability of cultural models surrounding children and parenthood were assessed in comparison to elements of changes and the contemporary negotiation of contradicting models. Films were evaluated according to the primary cultural message, and ancillary tenets noted.

In the process of choosing films for this study, I first considered all major releases of the 1990's that focus on children and eliminated those which did not fit my criteria. A number of factors were considered. Films produced for children with no children present were not included, as the focus is on animals or adults acting rather child-like, rather than on children and their parents. Examples of this type of film include *The Love Bug* (1968), a story a Volkswagen with a mind of his own or *Babe* (1998) a story about a pig and the man who owns him. Cartoons were not included

because the characters are so often a combination of adult and child characteristics as well as animal characteristics. In addition, many cartoons such as *Aladdin* (1992), *Anastasia* (1997), and *Mulan* (1998) have only adult or near adult characters, and might be considered coming-of-age narratives. Films that are considered not suitable for viewing by children (R-rated) were examined for models but not considered as a part of the main body of family films.

Films in this study are limited to those that focus on preadolescent children. A number of films were eliminated because they focused on teens who were "coming of age" or facing problems individual to teen years. Often, films about children include a teen as an older sibling, and these were included due to the presence of younger children. In these films, the "coming of age" of the teen sibling is often a subplot. For the purposes of this study, the defining characteristic of childhood is the separate stage of life during which one must be nurtured. A child is loosely defined as being between birth and puberty. The dividing line between childhood and adolescence revolves around "coming of age," that occurs somewhere around thirteen years of age. Babies are sometimes differentiated from children, which occurs somewhere around the time one begins to talk in sentences, but when they are of major focus in a film they most often have characteristics of far older children, or even adults. In small roles, where babies are simply babies, the models generally revolve around the parents perspective of "having a baby." Films about babies are included in this study as they fit into the period of nurturing that is defined as a separate stage of life.

The films that fit the criteria were then viewed and assessed and a smaller number chosen for in-depth analysis. Many films not specifically mentioned in this study included a number of the same cultural models discussed. Appendix C includes lists of all films viewed. Films have been viewed at least once, notes taken, and then viewed repeatedly when of particular interest. Choice of films for analysis were based on several factors including the manner in which children are utilized by the filmmaker, consideration of the focus of the narrative on the family, and the variety of issues presented in a particular film. However, the foremost consideration was the the predominance of one particular cultural model in the structure of the narrative, due to its employment as the primary motivation for main characters to effect change, thus providing a resolution to the conflict created by the narrative. Thus, the choice of specific models for discussion were based on the prominence of particular models in film narratives as well as the frequency of the portrayal of those models.

As a method of assessment, I evaluated the content of each film by directing questions toward the specific topic of analysis, adapting a number of questions and procedures outlined by Corrigan (1989:38-40)) and Bryan and Davis (1975:52-56, 59-62, 156-160). The procedure I adapted from these methods include the following steps:

- A. *Watch the film carefully, taking notes.*
- B. *Decide what the film is about.*
  - 1. *Write a synopsis.*
  - 2. *What are the major themes of the film?*

*3. Is there a coherent message?*

*C. Analyze the point-of-view. (From which character's perspective is the story told.)*

*D. Analyze the setting.*

*E. Analyze the characters.*

*1. Who are the central characters?*

*2. What do they represent in themselves and in relation to each other?*

*3. How are children used by the filmmaker?*

*F. Analyze the plot/what happened.*

*1. How do their actions create a story with some meanings or constellation of meanings?*

*2. Does the story emphasize the benefits of change or endurance?*

*3. What kind of life or what actions does the film wish you to value or criticize, and why?*

*G. View the film again, as needed, filling in notes.*

I constructed a form for the purpose of recording the information gathered through a consideration of the above questions. These questions aided the process of extrapolating and listing the cultural models that I considered to be a basis for the action, which were then recorded on the form. Forms were augmented after successive viewings, establishing a body of notes used to evaluate the films. An example of the form used to organize information about films after viewing can be found in Appendix B.

Although this research focuses on the films of the 1990's, I viewed a variety of films from the years spanning 1940 to 1990 as well, in order to gain a perspective on change. Because dramatic changes in society in the

United States, as well as the film industry, differentiate post-World War II films from the previous era, it is this latter era that has a greater historical impact on films today. However, films from earlier decades are addressed only when appropriate as a comparison in the assessment of contemporary films.

## **Appendix B: FILM FORM**

**NAME OF FILM:** Beethoven

**YEAR:** 1992

**RATING/GENRE:** PG/Comedy, Family

**SYNOPSIS:** A rigid, traditional father reluctantly allows his children to own a dog. The dog changes family life for the better, even though life is much more unpredictable.

**SETTING:** This is a model family living on a model street. The family follows a routine that is nostalgic in nature. A large breakfast is presented by the mother, the father goes out for the paper, dresses in his suit and tie and departs for work in the family station wagon. The children have the mothers help in getting ready for school and either walk or ride the bus to school. The mother is then outside gardening.

### **FAMILY STRUCTURE:**

George and Alice Newton: Married, mother and father in detached single family home with 3 children. Jobs: Father is advertising executive/business owner. Mother is non-working, except for one day working for her husband.

### **CHILDREN/ AGES:**

Emily: 4-5 years

Ted: 8-10 years

Ryce: 13 years

### **OTHER CHARACTERS/AGES:**

Beethoven, dog: a primary character who interacts with the children in a human manner.

### **PRIMARY CHARACTERS WHO CHANGE OR SHOW ENDURANCE:**

Father changes - Drops his regimented lifestyle, gets involved with the children, puts their needs, desires above his own.

Mother shows endurance, remains steadfast - goes to work for one day, then gains resolve in her desire to stay home with the children, be a support for her husband.

**NOTES ON USE OF CHILDREN IN NARRATIVE/BY FILMMAKER:**

The children are used to set up comedic situations, especially at the expense of the father and the crooks. The children's needs are focused on.

**PERSPECTIVE/POINT OF VIEW:** Father's view. He is the primary character and his business associates are involved in the plot; none of the mother's acquaintances are seen at all; none of Emily's friends; briefly, a boy Ryce likes, and briefly, Ted's friends and enemies. Most of the events affect his life.

**PRIMARY MODEL FOUND IN FILM:**

1. A father should form a warm caring relationship with his children. This model serves as the motivation for change on the part of the main character, the father. This model is facilitated through the model for the children's need for a pet. The father's relationship with his children improves as he learns how to be more emotionally responsive. This model is woven throughout the narrative.

**MOST FREQUENTLY FOUND MODELS:**

1. A mother should be in the home with her children. Found in numerous conversations between the mother and father. The question is whether she will come back to work in his office. She is reluctant. He points out monetary benefits. She is unsure until she goes to work, is patronized by his potential business partners because she is a mother, and finally finds that her child has been endangered. At this point she is resolute in her decision to stay home with the children. After a mishap, sitter states, "What these children need is a little discipline." The mother says, "What these children need is their mother!"

Later: "If I had been at home instead of trying to impress those people, Emily wouldn't have fallen into the pool...I'm not going back into the work force."

2. The needs of the child are more important than those of the parent.

This is reinforced continually. No matter what happens to Dad, or how inconvenienced he is, the children's need of a pet is still more important.

3. Children need a pet because the pet will protect them and foster independence.

The children behave better/get along better after they have the dog. They do their chores without being asked. They don't fight over the bathroom. Protection: 1. Ted is being threatened by bullies. Beethoven shows up and the bullies back off. Ted is proud, thinking he is the one who stood up for himself. 2. Beethoven rescues Emily from the pool. 3. Beethoven solves Ryce's problem by helping her get the attention of the boy she likes. He

then walks home from school with her.

**OTHER MODELS IDENTIFIED: SUPPORTING ACTION OR DIALOGUE**

2. A pet will teach children to be responsible. As soon as the children get the dog they start doing their chores without being asked. Before this, they were disorganized and asked mother for help finding things.

2. Mother wisdom: mother knows better than father. Mother has good relationship with children, they tell her their problems, they stand together against father except when Mother feels an obligation to support his decision. Mother's response to father's suggestion that they find another sitter: "Over my dead body!"

4. Children can be more effective than their parents. In this case, Ted is the one who takes charge and decides to drive the car into the building to help his father. (This forms the basis of the chase scene.) The children recognize that the business partners are not nice people. Ted also tells father how to tail someone in the car: "Dad, haven't you ever followed anyone? Turn off your lights!"

5. Parents should listen to their children: No one believes Emily when she tells what she has seen: the veterinarian fakes a bite, so he can take Beethoven away for lab experimentation.

## **APPENDIX C: LIST OF FILMS**

Sources: 1990-1995: Box Office Magazine

1995-2000: Box Office Magazine

1995-1999 Review Archives, [www.boxoffice.com](http://www.boxoffice.com)

Halliwell's Film & Video Guide 2001 (16th ed.), John Walker, ed., Great Britain:  
Harper Collins Publishers, 2001.

Video Hound's Golden Movie Retriever 1995, Martin Connors and Julia Furtaw,  
eds. Detroit: Visible Ink Press.

### Films from the 1990's:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Distributor:</u>
1990	Look Who's Talking, Too	Columbia Tristar
1990	Home Alone	TCF
1990	Kindergarten Cop	Universal
1990	Three Men and a Little Lady	Touchstone
1990	Problem Child	UIP/Universal/Image
1991	Problem Child 2	UIP/Universal
1991	My Girl	Columbia Tristar/Image
1991	The Addams Family	Columbia Tristar/Paramount
1991	Hook	Columbia Tristar
1991	What about Bob?	Warner/Touchstone/Amblin
1992	Beethoven	Brian Levant: UIP/Universal
1992	Home Alone 2: Lost in New York	TCF
1992	Honey I Blew up the Kid	Buena Vista/Walt Disney
1992	Three Ninjas	Buena Vista/Touchstone
1993	Addams Family Values	UIP/Paramount
1993	Beethoven's 2nd	Universal
1993	Dennis the Menace	Warner
1993	Free Willy	Warner/Canal/Regency/Alcor
1993	Jurassic Park	UIP/Universal/Amblin
1993	Look Who's Talking Now	Columbia Tristar
1993	Mrs. Doubtfire	TCF/Blue Wolf
1993	Life with Mikey	Buena Vista/Walt Disney
1993	Blank Check	Buena Vista/Walt Disney
1994	Angels in the Outfield	Buena Vista/Walt Disney
1994	The Client	Warner/Regency/Alcor
1994	The Santa Clause	Buena Vista/Walt Disney
1994	Andre	Rank/Kusner-Locke
1994	Baby's Day Out	TCF
1994	Little Rascals	UIP/Amblin
1994	Richie Rich	Warner Brothers
1995	Gordy	Miramax
1995	Indian in the Cupboard	Columbia/Scholastic
1995	Jumanji	Columbia/Tristar
1996	A Very Brady Sequel	Paramount

<u>Year</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Distributor:</u>
1996	Dunston Checks In	TCF
1996	Harriet the Spy	Paramount/Nickelodeon
1996	James and the Giant Peach	Guild/Disney/Allied
1996	Matilda	Columbia/ Tristar
1997	The Borrowers	Polygram/Working Title
1997	Fairytale: A True Story	Warner/Icon
1997	Free Willy 3, The Rescue	Warner Regency
1997	Home Alone 3	Twentieth Century Fox
1997	Leave it to Beaver	Universal
1997	Shiloh	Utopia/Carl Borack/Zeta
1998	Barney's Great Adventure	Polygram/Lyrick
1998	Krimpendorf's Tribe	Touchstone
1998	Paulie	Dreamworks/Mutual
1993	The Sandlot	Twentieth Century Fox
1998	Small Soldiers	UIP/Dreamworks/Universal
1998	Stepmom	Columbia/1492
1999	Baby Geniuses	Tristar
1999	Big Daddy	Columbia/Out of the Blue
2000	Beethoven's 3rd	Universal
2000	My Dog Skip	Warner Brothers
2000	The Kid	Walt Disney Pictures
2001	Geppetto	Walt Disney Pictures

Films from previous decades:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Distributor:</u>
1943	The Human Comedy	MGM
1953	Shane	Paramount
1956	Giant	Warner Brothers
1956	The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit	Fox
1957	Old Yeller	Walt Disney
1959	The Shaggy Dog	Walt Disney
1960	Please Don't Eat the Daisies	MGM
1960	Swiss Family Robinson	Walt Disney
1961	The Absent Minded Professor	Walt Disney
1962	The Music Man	Warner Brothers
1962	Mr. Hobbs Takes a Vacation	Fox
1964	Mary Poppins	Walt Disney
1965	The Sound of Music	Fox
1965	That Darn Cat	Walt Disney
1967	The Gnome-Mobile	Walt Disney
1968	With 6 You Get Eggroll	Fox
1968	Yours, Mine and Ours	MGM
1975	The Apple Dumpling Gang	Walt Disney
1975	Escape to Witch Mountain	Walt Disney
1977	Close Encounters of the Third Kind	Columbia
1979	Kramer vs. Kramer	Columbia
1980	The Shining	Warner Brothers
1982	E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial	MCA
1982	Terms of Endearment	Paramount
1983	Mr. Mom	MGM
1985	National Lampoon's European Vacation	Warner Brothers
1987	Three Men and a Baby	Touchstone
1989	Uncle Buck	MCA
1989	Honey I Shrunk the Kids	Walt Disney
1989	Look Who's Talking	Columbia
1989	National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation	Warner Brothers

**Films with children who are peripheral characters:**

<b><u>Year</u></b>	<b><u>Title</u></b>	<b><u>Distributor:</u></b>
1990	Edward Scissorhands	Tim Burton: Fox
1995	Nick of Time	John Badham: Paramount
1998	Dr. Dolittle	Betty Thomas: TCF
1998	Deep Impact	Mimi Leder: Paramount/ Dreamworks

**Adult films with children:**

<b><u>Year</u></b>	<b><u>Title</u></b>	<b><u>Distributor:</u></b>
1992	The Hand That Rocks the Cradle	Buena Vista/Hollywood
1993	The Good Son	TCF
1994	When A Man Loves a Woman	Buena Vista/Touchstone
1996	Jack	Buena Vista/Hollywood
1999	The Sixth Sense	Hollywood Pictures

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note that it might be acceptable for mother to be killed by a rocket in children's cartoons, which often contain violence of this sort.

- <sup>2</sup> Luedtke (1992:19) cites a comprehensive list of America's traditional core values, originally presented by Albert and Williams in the early 1960's. A review of this list aids a more comprehensive understanding of the values affecting the complex network of schemas surrounding childhood in the United States:
- \*An activist approach to life, based on mastery rather than passive acceptance of events
  - \*Emphasis on achievement and success, understood largely as material prosperity
  - \*A moral character, oriented to such Puritan virtues as duty, industry, and sobriety
  - \*Religious faith
  - \*Science and secular rationality, encouraged by a view of the universe as orderly, knowable, and benign, and emphasizing an external rather than inward view of the world
  - \*A progressive rather than traditionalist or static view of history, governed by optimism, confidence in the future, and a belief that progress can be achieved by effort
  - \*Equality, with a horizontal or equalitarian rather than hierarchical view of social relations
  - \*High evaluation of individual personality, rather than collective identity or responsibility
  - \*Self-reliance
  - \*Humanitarianism
  - \*External conformity
  - \*Tolerance of diversity
  - \*Efficiency and practicality
  - \*Freedom
  - \*Democracy
  - \*Nationalism and patriotism
  - \*Idealism and perfectionism
  - \*Mobility and change

<sup>3</sup> Gorer (1964) *The American people: A Study in National Character* was first published in 1948, with the revised version published in 1964. He wrote his description of children in the period following World War II.

