

**WORRIED WOMEN:
THE POPULARIZATION OF SCIENTIFIC MOTHERHOOD
IN THE 1920S**

Kim Klausner

Child-rearing practices vary from one historical period to the next. In the first quarter of the twentieth century, both the actual practices and the ideology behind them were informed by certain social, political, and economic forces, a number of which stand out as particularly influential. The concerns expressed by some women in the late 1920s, as evidenced by their letters to a newspaper baby advice column, show how these mothers were influenced by science, medicine, and industrialization. During this time “scientific knowledge was growing rapidly and the application of knowledge derived from science was expected to have widespread social utility.”¹ In the same vein, some of the guiding principles of industrialization, particularly efficiency and time management, had infiltrated the home. Women were encouraged, and many attempted, to raise their children according to both scientific and managerial principles. The previous generation’s patterns of child rearing, although culturally and historically bound, had been based on an assumption that motherhood was more instinctual than learned. By the twentieth century, experts pronounced maternal intuition insufficient for the task of raising children who would become responsible adults. They advocated that new methods, based on research from the emerging disciplines of social work, psychology, and child development as well as the evolving concerns of the medical and scientific professions, be self-consciously learned and elevated them to a new ideal. Two ideological assumptions underlay this shift: a belief in the importance of environment, rather than heredity, as the key to raising intelligent, well-socialized children, and a faith that

¹Elizabeth M. R. Lomax, in collaboration with Jerome Kagan and Barbara Rosenkrantz, *Science and Patterns of Child Care*, Committee on Brain Sciences, Division of Medical Sciences, Assembly of Life Sciences, National Research Council (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1978), 11.

science, broadly defined, would provide answers for the many challenges faced by American mothers. Many mothers took the job of training their young extremely seriously and wanted to do it the right way, following the experts' advice.

Enthusiasm for capitalism's successes and scientific and medical advances did not account for the new child rearing ideal; a mechanism was needed to validate and disseminate these ideas to mothers. Several factors combined to provide such a mechanism. As a result of their increased access to higher education at the turn of the century, more middle class women were entering professional life as social workers, nurses, home economists, and educators. These growing professions helped to appropriate mothers' roles, redefine them in professional terms, and teach women how to be modern mothers. Professional women and others interested in child welfare pressed for reforms that would greatly expand the role of the government as an educator of mothers, at the national level with the establishment of the Children's Bureau and at the local level through state, county, and municipal departments of health, extension services, and others.

Finally, during the Progressive Era a third mechanism for the dissemination of advice on child rearing had emerged: magazines and newspapers. Advice columns, articles, and advertising about proper baby care proliferated in sources as varied as city papers, *Farmer's Wife*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Hygeia*, a popular health journal published by the American Medical Association. It is no coincidence that these articles appeared in such great numbers at a time when commercial baby care products like baby foods and vitamins were gaining popularity and new markets were being sought for them through advertising.

"Your Baby and Mine," a syndicated advice column that appeared in *The San Francisco Chronicle* between 1926 and 1932, is a useful source of information about what some mothers were worried about. The column was penned by Myrtle Meyer Eldred, a midwesterner born in 1885. Eldred married at age 22, had four children, and began writing a newspaper column in her early thirties. By 35, Eldred had divorced and within a year her first book was published, *For the Young Mother*, written with Helen Cowles Le Cron. Eldred had little formal training in child rearing prior to that point. After her first book appeared,

she spent the next two summers studying at the University of Chicago and Teacher's College at Columbia. "Your Baby and Mine" first appeared in *The Des Moines Tribune* and was soon syndicated nationally; it was so popular that Eldred published a book based on the column in 1931 (reprinted in 1951).

The columns that appeared in October and November of 1926 show a range of concerns, including behavior, health, schedules of all sorts, and clothing. But by far the most space was devoted to infant feeding, including breast and bottle feeding, nutrition, formulas, and weight issues. Women seemed preoccupied with what, how often, and how much to feed their infants. But it was not only mothers who were focused on infant feeding. Historian Rima Apple, in *Mothers and Medicine*, noted that at the turn of the century the medical and scientific communities viewed poor infant nutrition, which they attributed to inferior quality breast milk or poorly supervised use of commercial baby foods, as one of the prime causes of an unacceptably high infant mortality rate. She asserted that, initially, the medical profession did research on infant feeding to provide safer and healthier ways to feed babies. However, Apple contended that medical professionals also used their research to legitimate their relatively new role as experts in feeding babies, a role formerly held by mothers, and to gain control over the feeding process. Within a generation, decisions about feeding, that had been made solely by the mother, perhaps with advice from her social network of family and friends, now were rarely made without input from the scientific community, in one form or another.

The transition from family- or community-based mothering to one based on scientific principles produced tension and ambivalence about heeding the word of experts. Indeed, one "Your Baby and Mine" column that Myrtle Meyer Eldred titled "Heeding the Neighbors," showed Mrs. J. F., Jr. lamenting that she did not know why her eleven-week-old baby had trouble sleeping. She explained that he ate "patent" food (commercially prepared baby food), and that the clinic told her to change it, but "everyone else" advised her not to switch feeding techniques until the cold weather. She went on to say, "The doctor tells me one thing and everyone else tells me differently, so I am asking you what is the thing to do." Eldred

imperiously replied, "First of all, make up your mind if you are going to rear your baby according to the neighbors' advice or if you are going to follow the directions of those who know how the baby should be fed. . . . When you ask advice of a specialist, then you must follow that advice." Eldred went on to recommend cow's milk, rather than the patent food, and suggested a formula (proportion of milk, water, and sugar) that Mrs. J. F., Jr. could make herself to feed the baby. Eldred added that she was mailing her the feeding leaflet which "will show you how formulas can be measured to a baby's age and weight."

The interchange in "Heeding the Neighbors" vividly conveys the anxiety created by the transition from community-based to scientific motherhood. Mrs. J. F., Jr. complained that her baby did not sleep. It is curious that either she did not offer more details of the problem or Eldred did not see fit to publish them, so we do not know whether the deficit was in the amount or timing of the sleep. We also do not know whether Mrs. J. F., Jr.'s evaluation was based on how she thought her baby should be sleeping (in comparison to expectations formulated by professionals or those around her) or whether the baby's sleep patterns were actually harming the child or disrupting the family. In any case, Mrs. J. F., Jr. saw her baby's diet as the cause of the sleep disturbance. While diet is one possible reason for a sleep problem, other causes could have come to mind: for example, the temperature of the bedroom, illness, tightness of clothes, or sleeping arrangements (was the baby sleeping with its siblings or parents?). Mrs. J. F., Jr.'s anxiety, however, goes beyond the amount she feeds her infant (a common concern of parents in the 1920s as well as today). She questioned the type of food she was feeding her child. Imagine a mother's distress at thinking that she is not giving her tiny baby the right food. Before the turn-of-the-century this problem would have been virtually unheard of, since most eleven-week-old infants received most of their nutrition from breast milk.

Whatever difficulty her child's sleeplessness had caused her, Mrs. J. F., Jr. was equally, if not more, unsettled by her inability to decide whose advice to heed, the doctor's or "everyone else's." For some reason, she wrote to yet someone else (Mrs. Eldred) to help her

²Myrtle Meyer Eldred, "Your Baby and Mine," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 11 October 1926, p.

decide. Mrs. J. F., Jr.'s letter implied that she would trust Mrs. Eldred's judgment. Several factors may account for this faith in Eldred. Perhaps Mrs. J. F., Jr. viewed the columnist, either because she was a journalist or a woman, as an impartial arbiter of doctors' knowledge and lay people's wisdom and experience. Possibly some other advice from the column had "worked" for Mrs. J. F., Jr. in the past. Apparently, the humiliating tone that Eldred regularly used in her columns, such as 'make up your mind, are you going to believe your neighbors or someone who *knows* how to feed babies?', did not deter Mrs. J. F., Jr. from writing for advice.

Eldred's other revealing comment was her instruction to follow unquestioningly the specialist's advice, if Mrs. J. F., Jr. was going to consult one in the first place. No room for second opinions here, this was not an inter-disciplinary approach to problem-solving. Eldred, a journalist with little professional training, clearly accepted the scientific approach to motherhood and thought her readers should, too.

The complex relationship between the increasing acceptance of scientific advice on mothering and the operation of familial and social networks varied from one community to the next. It would be interesting to see how the strength of a particular community's social and family bonds affected the degree to which women embraced advice from experts. It is speculative, however, to assert that women isolated from family networks were most vulnerable to adopting scientific motherhood as an ideal. At the same time, it would be useful to investigate a particular community to see how, or whether, expert advice contributed to the loosening of those networks. Myrtle Meyer Eldred's injunction that Mrs. J. F., Jr. disregard her neighbors' opinions is evidence, though, that scientifically based advice was offered with the hope that mothers would renounce some of their ties to their communities.

Eldred did not directly address Mrs. J. F., Jr.'s baby's sleep problem, instead, she gave an opinion about how the baby should be fed. Her suggestion to switch from a patent food to cow's milk reflected the recommendations of the medical establishment at the time, an attitude which changed soon after. By the 1920s, both research-oriented and general practice

doctors had discarded the use of individualized, complex formulas for baby feeding in favor of more standard, easier-to-use whole milk formulas. Either of these systems were, for many physicians, preferable to patent foods, over which the doctor had little control. On occasion, doctors did suggest commercially prepared foods but it was not in their economic self-interest to do so since mothers could use these foods without a doctor's direction. Apple reported that some physicians "estimated that 25 percent or more of the case loads of general practitioners consisted in directing the routine feeding of infants," by the late 1920s.³ Only when the commercial baby food companies started advertising directly to doctors, rather than mothers, and eliminated directions for use on the container, did the medical establishment fully endorse the use of patent foods.

Mrs. J. F., Jr. certainly was not alone in her concern about what to feed baby. Many mothers expressed confusion about the "right" combination of foods and liquids to give an infant. For example, Mrs. E. McC. worried that her four month old daughter was underweight. "I am giving her 16 ounces of water, 24 ounces of milk and two tablespoons of maltose. I give her six ounces of this mixture every three hours, but she does not seem satisfied. She gets one-half ounce of orange juice in one ounce of water every morning. Shall I start cod liver oil and how much? When can I begin to give her other foods and what would you advise me to give her? Hope you will help me as you have helped so many others."⁴ Mrs. X. Y. Z. reported that her baby "gets one quart of milk daily with eight ounces of water in it and four tablespoons of dextrose. In addition, he gets orange juice and cereal morning and night and vegetable at two," yet his bowels were very loose and his nights restless.⁵ Mrs. H. H. wrote that she fed her three-month-old daughter (weighing 12 pounds) "a malted food,

³Rima D. Apple, *Mothers and Medicine: A Social History of Infant Feeding, 1890-1950*, Wisconsin Publications in the History of Science and Medicine, no. 7 (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 75.

⁴Myrtle Meyer Eldred, "Your Baby and Mine," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 15 October 1926, p. 15.

⁵Myrtle Meyer Eldred, "Your Baby and Mine," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 06 October 1926, p. 11.

having no breast milk, and I also give her one tablespoon of orange juice with the same amount of water. How much boiled water should she have a day?"⁶

Eldred's response to Mrs. H. H. was in the form of a precise mathematical equation:

It is computed that a child needs two and one-half ounces of fluid for each pound of its weight, which in your case would be thirty-six ounces of fluid. If you are giving eighteen ounces of milk; eighteen of water and the food you mentioned, this, put into seven bottles, would be exactly right. If you have less than seven feedings daily, you will have to use less water in your formula and give the extra water to drink. Is this clear?⁷

The disembodied phrase, "it is computed" must have added to a woman's worry that she was unable to decide, without the assistance of a mathematician, how much her children should drink. "Exactly right" gives the impression that anything else would be wrong, a risk no mother would want to take. Mrs. H. H. had to pay close attention to the number of bottles she fed her daughter each day, as well as the proportion of ingredients in each bottle, if she expected to follow Eldred's advice. Taken at face value, Eldred's parting words express a sincere interest in Mrs. H. H.'s ability to comprehend her instructions. However, the words also hinted that feeding a baby was extremely complicated and not every woman could do it well.

Eldred gave the impression that she understood that mothering was undergoing a transition in a column titled, "Why We Give Water to Babies." She concluded by saying:

Incidentally, this is the newest viewpoint on water drinking, heretofore doctors having differed in their opinion, some advising all the water a baby would drink, some advising not any at all, on the premise that the breast milk contains all the water a baby needs. At any rate, this seems less like guesswork or merely an opinion, and decidedly more scientific.⁸

It is hard to evaluate why Eldred viewed the current advice as more scientific. Perhaps she had read new studies on how much water a baby should drink. But it is obvious that she privileged scientific advice over advice that was merely guesswork, opinion, or passed on by

⁶Myrtle Meyer Eldred, "Your Baby and Mine," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 23 November 1926, p. 11.

⁷*Ibid.*, 11.

family or friends. It is difficult to say how Eldred integrated her own experience as a mother into her analysis. Presumably, she had predicated her decisions about how much to feed her own children when they were infants on guesswork or opinion, whether it was a doctor's advice, her own instincts, or information gathered from her social network. Unless she had seen her children suffer from whatever amounts of water she had fed them, her acceptance of scientific advice as superior seems to denigrate her own experience.

The columns contained a wide range of feeding inquiries that Mrs. Eldred always answered with authority. On October 30, she counseled three mothers how to feed their babies. She instructed Mrs. J. A. L. how to feed her twins, "At three months you can use the general formula of half water (boiled, of course) and half whole milk and use about one tablespoon of sugar to every ten tablespoons of milk. The babies can take, probably, one and one-half ounces of the milk, water, and sugar formula after a nursing."⁹ In her columns, Eldred expressed no opinion about whether she preferred breast feeding or bottle feeding. While she did recommend a supplementary bottle feeding for Mrs. J. A. L.'s twins, who were not gaining weight as rapidly as desired, she did not counsel her to give up nursing altogether. This was not unusual for this period, although many experts had conflicting thoughts about breast feeding. On the one hand, they knew that for most babies, nutrition via the breast was healthiest and for the mother it was the most economical. Many authorities also clung to the idealized belief that nursing was a mother's duty to her child. However, the process of breast feeding, for the most part, remained controlled by the mother, rather than the doctor, patent food manufacturer, advice columnist, or social worker. Some doctors also questioned the nutritional reliability or adequacy of amount of any given woman's breast milk. Eldred, too, expressed her ambivalence about nursing in a column about giving water to babies. Towards the end of the column she said, presumably serious:

While we can actually figure formulas so that one knows exactly what the baby is getting in water, it is not always so easy when the baby is nursing. If

⁸Myrtle Meyer Eldred, "Your Baby and Mine," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 29 October 1926, p. 11.

⁹Myrtle Meyer Eldred, "Your Baby and Mine," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 30 October 1926, p. 15.

the mother weighs a baby before and after nursing for the whole day she will know exactly how many ounces of fluid he is getting and she will know whether it is necessary to give much or little water between feedings.¹⁰

It is hard to imagine a mother weighing a baby before and after each nursing, even if she had a scale that was sensitive enough to register mili-ounce changes. But, such was the mania for measurement, control, and research-based knowledge.

At times, Eldred's advice sounded like instructions for maintaining an expensive piece of machinery, one that required a specific amount of oil to keep it lubricated and a certain type of fuel to run it efficiently. On October 30, Eldred wrote to Mrs. A. G., "I should feed him eighteen ounces of milk per day, just as if he weighed the amount he should, which would be twelve pounds. So he had best take five ounces at a feeding in order to get in the required amount of water."¹¹ Eldred's advice to feed the baby a certain number of ounces per feeding is difficult to understand today. A mother can offer a baby five ounces of milk but there is no guarantee that the baby will drink all of it, or, just as likely, maybe she will want seven ounces. Eldred's suggestion implied that the mother had a great degree of control over her baby. Were babies more malleable in the 1920s than they are today? Or did Eldred's advice cause mothers more anxiety when their babies did not drink the required amount at each sitting? Finally, Eldred wrote Mrs. A. S. K.:

Thirty-six ounces of milk is too much for any baby. One quart daily is sufficient. You are . . . entirely forgetting that he should be having both cereal and vegetables as well as orange juice at eight months of age. Fine wheat cereals, well cooked, can be given at the 10 o'clock and 6 o'clock feedings, starting with teaspoonful amounts and increasing cautiously until the baby can take one to three tablespoons at a feeding. Give orange juice or tomato juice one-half to one hour before morning feeding. Put one uncooked egg yolk in the two o'clock feeding and give a tablespoon or so of finely sieved carrot or spinach. In this way you get in all the elements necessary to the child's diet.¹²

11. ¹⁰Myrtle Meyer Eldred, "Your Baby and Mine," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 29 October 1926, p.

¹¹Ibid., 15.

15. ¹²Myrtle Meyer Eldred, "Your Baby and Mine," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 30 October 1926, p.

Once again, Eldred reaffirms a belief in a scientific baby care that prescribed the right and wrong amounts to feed a baby. She rejected the idea that there might be a range of possible amounts to feed a baby based on the needs of the baby herself. She said, with total assurance, 'thirty-six ounces of milk is too much for any baby,' and then went on to recommend thirty-two ounces as the proper amount. How was she so certain? The four-ounce difference between the two quantities is relatively small. Certainly a baby with high metabolism might need four ounces more than one with slow metabolism. What happened to all the poor infants who really did need thirty-six ounces of milk, if their mothers rigidly followed expert opinion?

Eldred's advice is also needlessly complicated and anxiety-provoking to someone who wanted to follow it exactly. How did Mrs. A. S. K. adjust to Eldred's suggested routine? Did Mrs. A. S. K. pace around her kitchen asking herself, "Now was it the uncooked egg yolk in the fine wheat cereal at the 10 o'clock feeding and the orange juice a half hour later or was it three tablespoons of finely sieved spinach at 6 o'clock?"

As the response to Mrs. A. S. K. indicates, concerns about how often to feed babies were as common as what and how much to feed. Of course, the three elements are inextricably linked. For example, Mrs. N. H. I. wrote "I have been nursing my 5-month-old baby every three hours, but wonder if it wouldn't be wise to nurse but once in four hours as after five minutes of nursing he seems to be satisfied."¹³ She was worried that her baby was not gaining enough weight, although "[h]e seems unusually bright and strong and his flesh is solid and his cheeks rosy. I would be very grateful for your advice." Mrs. N. H. I. fully accepted a feeding schedule based on a clock, not her baby's needs, however, she was unsure whether to use the three-hour or four-hour timetable.

Eldred did not advocate one schedule over another in her November 16 column, "Nursing Technique," but she was clear about the desirability of schedules:

The training in regular habits begins the first day the baby is born, and the very first habit a baby acquires is the habit of nursing regularly...If the mother

¹³Myrtle Meyer Eldred, "Your Baby and Mine," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 22 October 1926, p. 11.

chooses the three-hour periods, [intervals between feedings] she will nurse the baby at 6 - 9 - 12 - 3 - 6 and 10 and 2 at night for the first month or two... The four-hour interval baby will be fed at 6 - 10 - 2 - 6 and 10 and 2 at night, which is one less feeding. He will merely take that much more milk at each individual feeding.¹⁴

Her comments summed up the popularly held attitude that children could be molded into perfect little citizens or industrial workers if only the mother provided the correct training. Scheduled feeding was the key to this training. In fact, in the same column, Eldred claimed, "There is nothing so important to the welfare and good health of the baby the first year as this item [feeding a baby according to a schedule]." Eldred's conviction about the importance of schedules was echoed by other contemporary sources of advice for mothers, including *Infant Care* and *Are You Training Your Child to be Happy?*, publications of the U. S. Department of Labor's Children Bureau.¹⁵

As in the case of the advice to feed babies a certain number of ounces of milk a day, so too, the schedule concept assumed a uniformity of infant needs, a disregard of their differences, or both. In a way, this attitude reflects, or coincides with, capitalist production values of the day. Mechanized factories, based on assembly line technology and time-motion studies, forced laborers to work at equal speeds and in regulated ways. The letters to "Your Baby and Mine," revealed very little about how mothers coped with, or viewed, babies who wanted to be fed different amounts at irregular intervals. Although the prescription was to follow the schedule, a mother, faced with listening to her infant scream for another two hours until his scheduled feeding, may have chosen sanity over keeping to a tight feeding schedule. Even Eldred herself showed some flexibility at the end of her response to Mrs. C. F. G.:

At 20 months old the child would be much better on a three-meal a day schedule. Give the farina with the 7 o'clock breakfast. Give orange juice as you are doing and feed the 3 o'clock meal at 12. If the child is hungry before

¹⁴Myrtle Meyer Eldred, "Your Baby and Mine," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 16 October 1926, p. 15.

¹⁵Elizabeth M. R. Lomax, in collaboration with Jerome Kagan and Barbara Rosenkrantz, *Science and Patterns of Child Care*, Committee on Brain Sciences, Division of Medical Sciences, Assembly of Life Sciences, National Research Council (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1978), 130 - 135.

its 6 o'clock dinner, a piece of bread and jelly, a glass of milk or some fruit will be perfectly all right to give.¹⁶

Eldred, and other child care experts, believed in the usefulness of schedules for all aspects of a baby's life, not just for feeding. Eldred's October 28 column, "Schedule for Baby of Six Months," once again provides evidence of the philosophy that one set of guidelines could be used with virtually all children. She said, among other things, "After six months, unless a child is tremendously underweight, he should be fed but once in four hours. If a baby can't go this long without food, it is plain his diet is not adequate for his needs." Not only was she adamant that all babies were alike but it was the mother's fault if her baby did not conform to the standards determined by the experts. Eldred's words betray a certain underlying animosity for children and women. She proselytized the use of a baby care system created by professionals, which couldn't possibly have been useful to all women, and then blamed women for being incompetent mothers if their, or their babies', experience did not match the experts' expectations.

In the same column Eldred continued, "It makes little or no difference if a baby starts his day at 6 or 7. Whatever time he starts it, he will end it at the same time." The wording of Eldred's response shows her desire to standardize the range of children's behavior: all babies awaken "at 6 or 7," rather than "most children awaken between 6 and 7." Her admonition that "he will end it at the same time" told mothers that they must control their children's habits completely. Her own experience surely showed her the great variation among children, but once again, the desire for an efficient system prevailed.

Indeed, the efficiency theme permeated her columns. "The wise mother will prepare bottle feedings and wash clothes while the baby is taking his long morning nap and then rest during the time when he is taking his short nap after 2 o'clock."¹⁷ Not only did this exhortation assume that a mother could control how long and when a baby naps, it also implied that mothers did not have any other children to supervise or other tasks to

¹⁶Myrtle Meyer Eldred, "Your Baby and Mine," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 18 October 1926, p. 11.

accomplish during the baby's nap. Her use of the word "wise" maligned women who had other responsibilities, not to mention working mothers. Eldred's advice to rest was an example of the contradictory messages contained in advice from the 1920s. It affirmed women's right to take care of themselves and it validated their need for good physical and mental health, however, for many women, it was difficult to rest during a baby's nap time because of the large amount of other child care and household tasks they faced. Indeed, some of these tasks, such as those based on the preoccupation with measurements, cleanliness, and orderliness, had been created by science-based advice.

These letters, Eldred's responses, and her columns on particular subjects, paint a picture of women at home, boiling water, measuring and mixing various elements from complex equations, filling sterilized bottles, straining vegetables, pumping food into their infants, and recording how much they have fed their babies. All that is missing from this home laboratory is the white coat and the Ph.D. diploma on the wall. In addition to the scientific imagery, the picture also has elements of a smoothly run factory, where the mother (worker) feeds the baby (machine) exactly so much, every so many hours, in order to produce a well-made product. At other times, it is possible to view the mothers as bosses training an unruly, unskilled work force (babies). Scientific and capitalistic advances contributed to mothers' seeming loss of control of child rearing authority; the ideology behind these forces may, at the same time, have helped women maintain their dignity during this transition.

The "Your Baby and Mine" advice column provides further evidence that the 1920s were indeed the era of scientific motherhood. However, for a number of reasons, we cannot use this source to provide the definitive version of motherhood in the 1920s; instead we should view it as a fragment which can help us piece together the larger picture. The letters themselves do tell us something about what the letter writers' concerns were, what caused them anxiety, what they thought they didn't know, and what they were already doing. The responses show what experts were advocating. However, since the letters, presumably, were edited for publication, valuable information about the women's feelings and attitudes has been

¹⁷Myrtle Meyer Eldred, "Your Baby and Mine," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 28 October 1926, p.

lost. We do not know how representative the published letters were of the total number received by Myrtle Meyer Eldred or whether she left out some which, while not representative, may have provided important clues to motherhood at this time. And, it is possible for columnists to create letters, either as composites of letters they have received or to illustrate an issue they think is important (although this was probably not the case with "Your Baby and Mine," as Eldred was able to expound on issues of concern to her through the occasional special topic column). And the letters do not, for the most part, tell us the women's reaction to the advice they received. We do not know whether they followed the advice, and, if so, with what results.

In spite of these limitations, the inquiries themselves give us more information about how women were actually raising infants than the responses do. Historian Jay Mechlinger has rightly cautioned historians against using child care advice as evidence of how people actually raised their children.¹⁸ As can be seen in "Your Baby and Mine," an advice giver is able to lay out a coherent system of child care, but mothers are never able or willing to raise their children strictly "by the book." However, scrutiny of the advice and those giving it can provide insights into prevailing ideology; who formed it, how it was conveyed, and what purpose it may have served. Myrtle Meyer Eldred, a working mother with little formal education, was elevated through her column to a position of great authority. The column's popularity indicates that women were hungry for advice based on scientific principles from a non-professional expert.

Although prescriptive literature for mothers had emerged at least as early as the nineteenth century, newspaper baby care advice columns, such as "Your Baby and Mine," were a distinctly twentieth century phenomenon. By the turn of the century, newspapers had evolved from political party organs into businesses driven by advertising. During the time in which Eldred's column ran, *The San Francisco Chronicle* published many articles meant to appeal to women, including stories about society news, women's social and

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¹⁸Jay Mechling. "Advice to Historians on Advice to Mothers." *Journal of Social History* 9:1 (Fall 1975): 44 - 63.

benevolent clubs, home, fashion, and, of course, baby care. The rise in the number of stories geared to a female readership occurred at the same time that advertisers sought out women as consumers. Advertising's impact on the ideology and practice of motherhood in the 1920s is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is worth pointing out that the interests of advertisers and profit-motivated newspaper publishers converged to provide a public forum for mothers to discuss their concerns.

Mothers responded to the transition to scientific motherhood in different ways based on class, race, ethnicity, and education. Some women, perhaps those of the upper or middle classes who had greater educational opportunities, had already embraced the concept of scientific motherhood in the nineteenth century. As early as 1899, a mother wrote in the *Ladies Home Journal*, "Ideal motherhood, you see, is the work not of instinct, but of enlightened knowledge conscientiously acquired and carefully digested."¹⁹ However, even by the late 1920s, those women whose lives were less touched by the medical, scientific, or commercial food establishments, such as southern black mothers or immigrants unable to speak English, may have integrated relatively little of the ideology into their mothering.²⁰ The mothers seeking advice from "Your Baby and Mine" all seemed to accept the value of scientific motherhood and wanted to learn more about it. They may have been a demographically homogeneous group; few of the mothers writing to "Your Baby and Mine" spoke of extreme economic hardship or racial or ethnic prejudice. None mentioned working outside the home or on a farm, despite the column having originated in Des Moines, Iowa. We can assume, perhaps, that most of the writers were white, Protestant, middle or working class women whose husbands earned a family wage. Not surprisingly, husbands went virtually unmentioned in this column that was dedicated to child care.

While insularity or illiteracy may have hindered professional advice givers from reaching certain groups of women, poverty alone did not exclude mothers from the influence of scientific ideas. Many poor women, both rural and urban, particularly if they were

¹⁹Apple, *Mothers and Medicine*, 100.

literate, were affected by the ideology of scientific motherhood by advertising and through the work of the U. S. Department of Labor's Children's Bureau and private welfare organizations. Between 1914 and 1925, the Children's Bureau distributed about three million copies of *Infant Care* to women of all races, classes, and regions.²¹ Historian Molly Ladd-Taylor estimated that the Children's Bureau received as many as 125,000 letters asking for advice each year.²² These letters are a valuable resource for understanding how scientific motherhood was disseminated to poor, rural women, among others. This source, like newspaper advice columns, was a product of the Progressive Era. In addition, reform work, and the increased role of government that it spawned, provided a unique forum for the voices of average women as well as for those of professional women. While the mothers writing to advice columns and the Children's Bureau came from varied backgrounds, their inquiries shared a deferential quality and gave the impression that women felt unable to care for their children without expert advice.

The "Your Baby and Mine" column provides ample evidence to validate the claim that many women depended on expert advice, based on scientific and managerial principles, to raise their children in the late 1920s. These women demonstrated a faith in science, and the professionals (in this case, a journalist) who proselytized it. Mothers were convinced that these methods of child-rearing were correct, a belief for which they had scant proof. For example, not only did professional advice about infant formulas and feeding change periodically, as a result of new research or changes in advertising by commercial baby food companies, but professionals offered competing views on the subject. How can we account for the attitude that mothers were incapable of raising their children without guidance from professionals?

²⁰ It would be interesting to survey the foreign language or African-American newspapers of the Progressive Era for baby advice columns, and if they existed, explore how they differed from "Your Baby and Mine."

²¹Elizabeth M. R. Lomax, in collaboration with Jerome Kagan and Barbara Rosenkrantz, *Science and Patterns of Child Care*, Committee on Brain Sciences, Division of Medical Sciences, Assembly of Life Sciences, National Research Council (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1978), 137-138.

²²Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Raising a Baby the Government Way: Mothers' Letters to the Children's Bureau, 1915 - 1932* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 2.

Gender politics do not fully explain the popularity of scientific motherhood, although it was women, as mothers, who were responsible for child rearing. Myrtle Meyer Eldred was only one of many female professionals advocating science-based mothering. Many women took leadership roles in the process of validating professional advice, working at the Children's Bureau, private charitable organizations, and women's magazines. These professional women increased their authority by accepting scientific theories and through their association with professionally controlled institutions. It is ironic that Myrtle Meyer Eldred subordinated her personal experience as a mother when she began giving child care advice as a vocal champion of scientific motherhood. She was elevated to a position of authority despite her lack of professional training. While she was convinced that modern research would improve child rearing, she deferred relatively little to doctors in her column. In spite of her instruction to heed the advice of specialists, Eldred advised readers on issues, such as infant formulas, that the medical profession tried to appropriate for itself. She rarely suggested that a reader consult a medical professional. But, Eldred's authority, despite her sex, seemed to come at the expense of the mothers who wrote her. The desperate, subservient quality of the "Your Baby and Mine" letters indicate that many women, as mothers, did feel unqualified to raise their children without some guidance on the most basic elements of child-care.

By the late 1920s it was readily apparent that the authority for infant care had shifted from mothers to professionals, particularly doctors, scientists, and social workers. This transition depended on economic, ideological, scientific, and cultural developments that had originated in the Progressive Era. For example, Rima Apple's careful study of infant feeding attributed this transformation to the medical profession's desire to expand their pediatric business, the commercial baby food industry's interest in expanding their markets, a prevailing ideology that science represented progress, and, not the least, mothers' desire to provide the best for their children. Similarly, the capitalist production ideology of the 1920s, the increased role of women in journalism, nursing, education, and social work, and the desire of publishers of general interest newspapers to appeal to women readers, can frame our

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reading of "Your Baby and Mine" and bring a greater understanding of infant care in the first quarter of this century.

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