



CHILDREN V. CHILD REARING IN MODERN PERSIA

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The topic of child rearing (from birth to social adulthood in the mid-teens) is largely neglected in systematic research; there are no comparative studies of child-rearing practices among different ethnic and cultural groups in the country and only a few specialized studies (Rudolph-Touba). Most related issues are treated only anecdotally in the literature (Guppy; Shirazi). The description here is based on this literature and the author's own research, conducted in the small agriculture- and service-oriented town of Sīsaḳt in southwestern Persia from 1344 Š./1965 to 1368 Š./1989 (cf. Friedl, 1985), supplemented by observations from other areas, including tribal areas, villages, and cities. Basic theories about child development and some related customs seem common to almost every part of Persia, though regional differences do exist, compounded by class and educational differences (Dezhkam; Gulick and Gulick, pp. 510f.). Although child-rearing practices also vary from one family to another and even within one family, due to such factors as the sex of the child, birth order, family size, number and competence of adult caretakers (Tashakkori and Mehryar, p. 808), personality differences, and socioeconomic changes of a family while a child is growing up, only general features of child rearing will be presented, without reference



to religious, legal, or historical origins.

A major Persian attitude toward children is somewhat ambivalent: Although children are considered part of the (ordained) natural order and essential to the status and the economic and emotional well-being of adults, they are also considered a burden, requiring economic support (mainly by the father) and physical care (mainly by the mother; Aghajanian, 1988, p. 91). Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1358 Š./1979 the birth rate has risen sharply, and families with seven or more children are becoming more common (Aghajanian, 1990a, p. 16); this basic ambivalence is thus felt more sharply than before, especially as the rising costs of rearing and educating children are severely taxing most families' resources.

The main determinant of child-rearing practices is the sex of the child, and treatment of boys and girls is progressively differentiated in each developmental phase. Parents often hope for a boy, particularly as their first child, but daughters are usually welcome as long as the number of girls in the family is not disproportionate. They require more care in rearing, but they are also considered "sweeter" than boys, more empathic and supportive, especially toward elderly parents. Nevertheless, despite these virtues, a couple with only daughters is often pitied, while a couple with only sons is envied, though at the same time there is sympathy for the mother who has no daughters to be close to. This ambiguity in attitudes toward children of different sexes is expressed in gossip, jokes, and arguments.

Infants (birth to eighteen months). Pregnancy affirms a couple's fecundity and is expected to occur within a year of the wedding. According to folk belief a father's seed (*tokm*) is nourished by the mother's blood in the womb, and the sex of the child is determined by the mother's temperament (in the galenic sense) at the time of conception: if her temperament is "cold," her "cold" blood will cool the "warm" semen, and the child will be a girl; "warm" blood will allow the "warm" semen to produce a boy. (A careful mother may take dietary precautions to render herself as "warm" as possible at time of conception.) The parents' moral condition at time of conception will influence the child's character, and therefore parents should conceive their children while free of sin (Friedl, 1985, p. 199). The child's personality is shaped further by the mother's behavior during pregnancy: the child will take on some characteristic of the person the mother happens to look at while the unborn child is receiving its soul, that is, while it moves in *utero* for the first time. If the mother is sick, suffers from indigestion, or eats food unbalanced as to



“warm” and “cold” qualities, the child will be weak; if she does not guard herself properly against possible evil from jinn, the evil eye, or other dangerous powers, the child might be miscarried, born crippled, weak, or ugly. But while the welfare of the unborn child rests on the mother, she is not excused from any heavy routine work, gets no special dietary attention, and has to ignore the bodily changes that come with pregnancy. Anemia and malnutrition of pregnant women are endemic and turn pregnancies into severe and often resented hardships for many women (Friedl, 1985, p. 200). Gestation for a boy is said to be a few days shorter than for a girl, and easier, because a boy’s naturally “warm” disposition will, unlike a girl’s “cold” one, not imbalance the mother’s naturally “cool” temperament. The birth of a boy on the other hand is said to be often harder than that of a girl.

Most children are delivered at home with the assistance of a midwife (*māmā*), who may have received some medical training or has grown into the job through experience and success. The newborn baby is rubbed dry with a cloth, then dressed in a shirt and swaddled. As young infants are considered especially vulnerable to hostility from dangerous powers, steps are taken for their protection and benefit, varying from region to region; they include bloodletting, painting the eyes with soot, feeding the child herbs and sugar water, pinning amulets on the swaddling cloth, and so on. The birth of a boy (but not of a girl) is celebrated with a feast, and the new mother receives many visitors. On an auspicious day soon after the birth the child is placed on diaper rags in or on a cradle, where he or she may remain most of the day, even during nursing, depending on the mother’s time. The traditional wooden cradle onto which babies are strapped in many parts of the country allows for a wooden drainage pipe directly from a baby boy’s penis to a container at the end. Various amulets (e.g., items of iron, shells, blue and other beads, wolf’s teeth, Koranic verses) are attached to the cradle, and seeds of wild rue (*esfand*) are burned, with the intention of warding off the dangerous influence of tired strangers, the evil eye, and malevolent spirits. As a new mother is expected to resume her usual work within a few days after delivery, much of her behavior has the practical goal of making the baby sleep much and cry little. To these ends lullabies, rocking, and bottles filled with sugar water are administered by the various caretakers, often older siblings of the baby. Yet, though quiet babies are considered “good,” loud and demanding ones are said to be healthier and to have better chances of survival.

After forty days the baby receives the first bath, in the [bathroom](#) or a private



bathroom, where the mother undergoes the religiously prescribed ritual cleansing (see [ablution](#); [cleansing](#)). From then on the infant is bathed whenever the mother has a bath and is sponge-bathed in between, as necessary. If possible, babies are nursed on demand. Mother's milk is said to come in different qualities, with different effects on children's physical development; it is also believed to influence a baby's character, transmitting some traits from the mother. Wet nursing is thus frowned upon. Since about 1350 Š./1970 bottle feeding with infant formula has become popular, but recent shortages have made this alternative too expensive even for many mothers whose milk supply is insufficient. Diarrhea is popularly believed to be the most frequent infant disease and cause of death. Like other diseases it is believed to be sometimes caused by the evil eye. This belief creates conflicts: A healthy, clean, beautiful child is said to be more in danger of attracting the evil eye than a weak or unattractive one. Children are therefore seldom praised or admired and never without a precautionary exclamation (*māšā'llāh*) to deflect the evil eye. A baby should not be left alone in a room, but exposure to others increases vulnerability; in public therefore infants are usually completely hidden under their mothers' veils or wrapped in blankets for protection against heat, cold, and the evil eye.

Because the environment is considered potentially dangerous for an infant, the mother's prime responsibility is to protect and defend the baby, rather than to educate or entertain him or her; and she makes little conscious effort to respond to the baby's wishes or to follow set routines of care. Even within the family playful interaction with a young infant is uncommon and consists mainly of teasing, kissing, and rapid up-down movements. Siblings are encouraged to kiss the baby; babies are encouraged to smile at whoever plays with them and at the same time to hit the playmates. Especially in traditional rural areas toilet training is casual, and babies are allowed to urinate and defecate anywhere without fuss, though as soon as they can walk they are encouraged to use the latrine or toilet. Diapers are used only in the cradle, which necessitates frequent changing and washing of pants or wraps. Among the urban middle classes diapers and toilet-training devices like chamber pots are used, but the approach remains casual, and children are not expected to be fully trained until they are two or three years of age.

Although infant boys and girls are generally treated equally, boys are more often indulged in extraordinary demands, such as costly health care, at least partly reflecting the contradictory notion that girls, though weaker, are easier



to keep alive at this age and therefore need less attention than boys. In some areas this treatment results in slightly higher rates of survival among male infants (Aghajanian, 1990b, p. 7). A young child who dies is washed and buried quickly without mourning ceremonies, and parents are discouraged from weeping.

Toddlers (eighteen months to three years). Socially, toddlers are in a sort of limbo; they are considered “sweetest” in this phase, and their parents become very attached to them, but at the same time their physical care is most neglected, especially if they must compete with older siblings and new babies. Weaning usually takes a few days and occurs during the mother’s next pregnancy or after about the age of two years, whichever comes first. Techniques include diversion, mockery, and placing hot spices and dyes on the nipples. A weaned child is supposed to participate in adult routines for eating and sleeping. As adult routines (late bedtime, late dinners) and diet (tough, chewy foods, much consumption of tea and sugar) are unsuitable for young children, toddlers often deteriorate physically, becoming weak, cranky, and demanding. Their only strategy for gaining attention is whining; yet, because whining is considered “normal” for this age, it is largely ignored or punished, even in urban middle-class families with better resources for child care than poor or rural ones have. Physical care during this phase is largely delegated to older siblings, especially sisters, who often resent this duty, do as little as possible, and attempt to control the child through teasing, fear, and false promises. The dress and appearance of unusually big, healthy, or beautiful children are sometimes deliberately neglected as a protection against the evil eye. Both boys and girls are bathed by their mothers about once a week, either at home or in the public bathhouse during the women’s bathing times.

As the toddler is beginning to reveal individual personality and character, parents are said to have the duty to instill permanent values like honesty, piety, wisdom, respect, and generosity; but in effect socialization is oriented primarily toward control, to keep the child from danger, check misbehavior (including whining and tantrums), and instill obedience through fear. The use of praise and persuasion, as well as of teasing, deception, scolding, curses, threats, and corporal punishment, varies widely among families and classes. Teasing and deception are especially popular, however, creating distrust and insecurity where honesty and trust are supposedly desired. Although peaceful and polite interaction among people is highly valued everywhere in Persian society, young children are frequently encouraged to behave aggressively



toward adults, playmates, animals, or objects, and often are hitting or throwing things in anger and frustration or simply for amusement. Although excessive use of fright, threats, and beatings is considered likely to thwart a child's physical and intellectual development, without persistent effort to instill respect for authority (*tars*) there is a perceived danger that children will grow up ill-mannered, loose, and irresponsible. Nevertheless, strong-willed and misbehaving children, especially boys, are viewed with a mixture of pride and exasperation, which often encourages them to test the limits of their parents' patience. Treatment of boys now becomes noticeably different from that of girls (Kendall, pp. 142ff.). Boys are considered more unruly by nature; but because standards of propriety allow them much more freedom in appearance, behavior, and spatial mobility than their sisters enjoy, they are easier to care for. Girls are watched more closely, and their mothers strive to instill in them a heightened sense of propriety. As they are kept close to home, they often have better access to food and meet with fewer accidents than their brothers do. In the urban-oriented middle class little girls are already encouraged to be "feminine" and seductive; they are frequently dressed up (e.g., as little brides), adorned with ribbons and jewelry, and jokingly encouraged to kiss visiting male relatives and to dance in front of visitors and others. Beauty is the quality most frequently commented on in discussions of girls, and little girls become conscious at a very early age of their "femininity," as well as of ambivalent social attitudes toward female seductive powers.

Fathers tend to be less in contact with daughters than sons, because they do not move much in female circles; but otherwise they may interact with their little daughters frequently, carrying and cuddling them and taking them out into the street and on visits. Boys and girls are not encouraged to play with each other, and male children are kept from looking at their little sisters' bodies, while no such prohibition exists the other way around. Older girls, however, often express embarrassed distaste for the exposed penis of their baby brothers, while female adult relatives may, and often do, kiss little boys' genitals enthusiastically, suggesting great appreciation of male sexual potency.

Young children (three to eight years). The goals and techniques of training are the same as for toddlers, but most children have adapted to adult routines and educational tactics by the time they are four or five years old and have learned not to be too gullible, to watch out for themselves, and to manipulate authority. Adults regard children in this age group as "devils": too old to be easily controlled but too young to assume responsibilities and destructive by



nature. Because misbehavior is expected, parents, especially of boys, focus on preventing damage. Boys and girls are discouraged from using each other's tools and toys and from playing together: They may be told that their sex will change or that boys will lose their penises. Wherever schools are available, most boys and girls are sent at least for the first three grades. Kindergartens are often coeducational, but the sexes are almost completely segregated in school, though the primary curriculum is the same for boys and girls (Higgins, p. 10).

Male children are circumcised either by a local barber or at a medical facility (see [circumcision](#)). The operation, which is said to be necessary for hygienic reasons, and the small feast (*katna-sūrān*) that follows it are called “wedding,” and the boy receives presents of sweets and wears a loincloth for a few days afterward. In rural and urban lower classes boys spend most of their waking hours in peer groups, where they practice leadership skills and proper male aggressive behavior and become familiar with the workings of a hierarchical authority structure (Friedl, 1975, p. 8). Until very recently toys were rare, except in urban middle-class families. Boys mainly played with slings, rocks, sticks, and ropes. More recently balls, bicycles, and various mechanical toys have become popular. In most parts of Persia television provides cartoons and educational programs disseminating government ideals. In the cities and in schools sports and games of Western origin provide additional recreational choices, though again more so for boys than girls.

For girls, toys traditionally consisted of simple dolls, swings, pebbles, and miniature women's tools. Little girls' games are either solitary (swinging, playing a version of jacks) or played in small groups with highly rhythmic, cooperative, and verbal patterns. As girls are considered “wiser” by nature and are believed to mature more rapidly than boys, they are expected to work alongside their mothers or older sisters, to watch over younger siblings, and to sit still during long visits, whereas boys are expected only to keep out of harm's way. In practical terms girls in traditional rural families are treated as round-the-clock servants and apprentices, though they soon learn to dodge the constant demands of their elders. They are admonished to be shy and ashamed of improprieties—especially those connected with their bodies, such as going bare-headed or showing their feet while sitting. Even in tribal areas with characteristic costumes, girls, especially schoolgirls, since soon after the revolution of 1357 Š./1978-79 dress in trousers topped with a long-sleeved sweater, blouse, or dress and a long-sleeved outer garment like a coat (*manto* <



Fr. *manteau*), with a scarf covering the head. Most girls at this age learn to be embarrassed to the point of giggling when spoken to, to hide from strangers, and to cover their faces when speaking. In urban middle-class families girls have rather different recreational experiences and norms of proper conduct emphasizing beauty, nice clothes, and admiration from others, which become sources of self-esteem and female identity.

Older children (eight years to marriage). Girls are thought to have developed “reason” (*aql*) by the age of eight years, boys by ten to twelve years. They are then expected to take on responsibilities and to work reliably. Misdemeanors can no longer be excused easily by childishness and are often punished severely. At this stage all children are supposed to know the fundamentals of Islam and to pray and observe fast days. A large proportion of formal education is devoted to religious studies.

Boys, by virtue of their sex, rise in status and authority above their mothers and sisters, though the degree to which this authority is exercised varies greatly among families. They know that responsibility for their womenfolk and younger brothers includes the right to admonish and punish, and girls have learned to expect—if not always to accept—physical violence or the threat of it from the men close to them. At this age boys also acquire skills that will make it possible to care for their families later. There is no essential change in their clothing.

For girls the situation is very different. Legally they can be married at the age of nine years, by which time they should have mastered the essential domestic skills. To keep their developing sexuality tightly under control, as well as to train them, girls are closely supervised by everyone in the house, including brothers. Brothers tend to become stricter disciplinarians than fathers, who are usually less well informed about what happens at home. The sexual attractiveness of a nubile girl is considered a potential threat to the moral stability of the men in her community and must be guarded carefully by her. Proper outdoor dress now also includes a tightly wrapped scarf (*maqna'a*) pulled down over the forehead and very frequently also a veil (*čādor*). Menarche, which may or may not precede marriage, is not marked ritually. A girl's actions, movements in public, and reputation reflect directly on her family, especially in negative ways, whereas boys act more freely, imposing their own agendas, demands, and restrictions on their sisters. School attendance among girls drops markedly after the fifth grade and again after



the ninth grade, partly owing to marriage and partly because the costs and risks of sending a girl to school outweigh the benefits: Even a high-school diploma does not guarantee a suitable job, and acceptance by a university is exceedingly difficult (Tohidi). In traditional families girls feel themselves under constant scrutiny, especially though not exclusively by young men, who often base their marital choices on the briefest of encounters. Young women with academic ambitions dread the appearance of suitors, but having no suitors by the age of sixteen or seventeen years is just as great a source of dread. Especially in rural areas marriages are usually arranged; the amount of choice exercised by the young woman is highly variable, but men often choose their future brides themselves. Reportedly girls often threaten suicide during discussions of marriage, and anecdotal evidence suggests that attempts are not uncommon.

Both boys and girls are expected to be virgins at marriage. Sexual experimentation is discouraged through separation of the sexes. Whenever facilities allow, older brothers and sisters sleep in separate rooms, though anecdotal evidence again suggests some incestuous activities, especially between siblings and cousins, initiated by boys and taking the form of anal intercourse to prevent defloration. In general, however, little is known about children's sexual experiences, whether heterosexual or homosexual, in Persia.

Since about 1355 Š./1975 even in small towns and rural areas a kind of teenage culture has been developing, marked by resistance on the part of both sexes to parental and brotherly authority and elaboration of leisure activities. Among girls the latter include visiting school friends, taking walks, reading novels, and listening to music, as well as experimenting with stylish clothes, hairdos, and cosmetics. Boys increasingly participate in sports, go to movies and picnics, hike, visit friends, even travel, and groom themselves carefully. Such behavior is tolerated more or less graciously by most parents as part of a "modern" way of life.



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