

IF MY MOTHER and dad read this, they'll probably say, "Gracious, but our little Sarah has grown." I have, but it's taken 34 years, including college, work, marriage, and two children, for me to find out how the other half lives. By the other half, I mean parents—those much-maligned members of society who deserve a better break than they're getting.

Right now I feel that I'm very much one of them, helped by the endearing remarks of my children. Eddie, for instance, described his first-grade teacher, who is 25, as "pretty old." You know what that makes me! When Ruthie was put out because I refused to buy her a new doll, she said, "I always knew you were bad. If you loved me, you'd want me to be happy."

The dishes are still in the sink. The car battery is dead. Eddie has

a dental appointment at four, and Ruth's dresses need the hems let down. I must discover, tactfully, what happened to the change John left on his dresser, and why my children are constantly fighting the Wilson kids down the block.

My parents know the lines of this play by heart, but I'm still rehearsing, and sometimes miss my cues. I was in the wings for so long, and from the child's vantage point the role of parenthood looks different. I remember the time I came home from that course in psychology, an expert in child care, and told them the error of their ways!

"When I have children," I said, "things will be different. I won't stuff them with healthful foods they hate. I will never spank them. And I surely will never play household cop, waiting up to see when they check in from their dates."

"Well," my mother said patiently, "we'll see how you feel when you have children of your own." Mother and Dad are both much too nice to say, "I told you so," but the truth is they did. Their little Sarah now frets about vitamins. She hates chewing gum left in the pockets of

jeans. Regularly at 4:30 p.m. she loses her temper. I've spanked Eddie for leaving fireflies in my shoes, and for raiding a dessert prepared for company. By the time Ruth is old enough to go out with boys, I'll probably make John learn their "intentions." If they're too shy to answer, it's a safe bet I'll find out by acting as chaperone.

Oh, yes, I took the courses and I know the theories. I try, every day in every way, but I know now that this is a big job, with long hours, little pay, and a lot of critics.

I guess it's the sideline experts (often single) who bother me most. They must have badgered Mother and Father too, but somehow they're better organized today. They write books, preach sermons, run schools, courts, and social-service agencies. They've rooted out the ills of society in general and of Tommy Jones in particular, and when they explain all the reasons, their fingers always point to the home and to me.

AS A TEEN-AGER I was all for these experts. Someone else was the target then. Now I am, and it's no longer funny.

Last week, for example, I went to a meeting and heard a sociologist discuss juvenile delinquency. "Troubled boys come from troubled homes," he explained. "Over the years we've learned that there are no delinquent children. There are only delinquent parents."

The week before that I picked up the newspaper and discovered why Johnny can't read. Bad eyesight or poor teaching? No, the answer is as simple as A B C. The child is emotionally disturbed. Emotional problems relate to the home, and it is Mom who keeps Johnnie from reading what Philip Wylie writes about her.

Not long ago a well-known athlete reported that far too many American children are soft; that a shocking proportion flunk out on military fitness tests. Why? It's simple. Parents pamper them, keep them out of competitive athletics. About the same time a group of doctors announced that parents, especially those of grammar-school youngsters, were straining their children's endurance by stressing the need to win on the playing field.

Which group of experts do you

follow? Should a mother go to work? If she does, she's placing a premium on material values, risking her children's security, giving them responsibility beyond their years. By supper she'll be as cross as the three bears. If she stays home, her children will grow dependent, use her as a chauffeur and doorman. Out of sheer boredom she will wind up a clubwoman and worry about everyone's children except her own.

Should father help around the house? If he does, his children may get a fuzzy picture of the male role, and they will lack a forceful figure to look up to. If he doesn't, he's a Victorian hangover in an era of partnership marriage, and his family will miss his camaraderie and a feeling of family togetherness.

Will your child go to college? Are you sure he should, or is it because you feel this is the thing to do, the way to a better job or a brighter marriage? If he doesn't get there and should, it won't be because of a shortage of scholarships. You didn't plan ahead or pay attention to the life-insurance ads to make his future secure. If he should and could go but doesn't, it's Father

or Mother who failed to motivate him properly.

If Johnny fails to pass a grade, flops in business, or fizzles in marriage, the fault, my friends, lies in Johnny's seniors, not in his stars. It's so convenient to have a well-padded progenitor who can carry the burden of shortcomings, ease guilts, and shoulder faults. "Poor Joe," a neighbor's wife said to me, "how he'd love to be a do-it-yourself whiz. But his father robbed him of the chance. Joe's dad sent him to camp, prep school, and college, so he missed out on those years when fathers teach boys these things."

I'm reminded of my mother's words when I was about to marry and became upset because I couldn't cook. Mother laughed, "Sarah, I've always known you could read, and the world is full of cookbooks." What a wise woman she was!

I'M THE LAST person on earth to deny the importance of parents in the life of a child. But sometimes the cocksure experts speak up too often, and the poor parent becomes a scapegoat for all the ills of the world. If you have

ulcers, for instance, it's easy to pinpoint your trouble. Maybe you're compensating for a lack of mothering. If you're asthmatic, your wheeze may well be rebellion to smothering.

I'm not belittling the importance of psychosomatic conditions, but I'm willing to sniffle into my own hankie once in a while. Not long ago a skinny little boy I know looked in the mirror and said angrily, "I could kick my Pop for skipping his cereal when he was a kid!" Bright boy he is, and he's learned enough biology to know that curly hair, color blindness, and body build result from parental genes. But it's overdoing the act when you resent being a chip off the old block because your profile is less than classical, your stance less than heroic.

It's too bad that the prejudice against parents runs so high in so many quarters. The disease is contagious, I think. Each time a judge or an educator blames the faults of the nation on the parents, the children happily take up the chorus. I think this encourages young people to listen less, act more defiant, and look for trouble. After all, the authorities say the fault lies with

their families. This attitude puts the parent on the spot. He knows he's damned if he does, cursed if he doesn't. He has a feeling of helplessness and confusion, a sense that whatever he attempts will be criticized by someone.

In my latter-day wisdom I realize that 99 out of 100 parents are deeply conscientious. They spend about 20 years on each child, happily giving of themselves, their resources, their time and talent. All they ask in return is that the recipient of their efforts will become a contented and honorable member of adult society.

As I think about my parents—the wounds they bandaged, the pennies they saved, the love they lavished—I realize how hard a job they've had. Now that I'm a parent myself, I understand so much more than I did when I was growing up.

I worry sometimes that I won't do this job well. It seems that the doctors and lawyers and judges are talking directly to me—warning me of the future. But now I know my parents will say, "Don't be intimidated by the experts. Think for yourself and do what you feel is right. After all, that's all we did."

It's time we stopped blaming them
for all of Junior's shortcomings,
says a defiant mother.

In Defense of PARENTS



Most parents, says author, are deeply conscientious, devoting 20 years of their lives to each child. Devotion includes such unsung duties as worrying over bills.

Society calls parents delinquent for what they fail to do, but seldom gives them credit for many things they don't fail to do, such as filling children's lives with moments of happy laughter.



Many parents go beyond merely fulfilling ordinary parental responsibility, ardently overseeing their children's proper development, instead of just letting them grow.



What child hasn't found comfort in mother's arms?