Historically, the roots of national policy in this country can be traced to the European countries which first colonized the North American continent. England, France, Spain, The Netherlands and Russia chartered colonies, opened territories, solicited or induced population resettlement, started new towns, promoted trade, and resettled their children and families. These actions occurred virtually all along the boundaries of what later became the 48 states.

In the colonial period, the task of society regarding children was to insure their salvation, usually through baptism or conversion. Puritans considered children to be depraved from birth, and the child at risk was one who might not ultimately find a home with God. While risks to children's health were high, control over a child's health was minimal, making salvation an even greater imperative. Insuring salvation was the responsibility of the parents; fathers, as a matter of law and custom, had absolute authority over the child and were responsible for instilling discipline, obedience, and self-denial in the child, all essential to a child's ultimate salvation. Reinforced in the tracts and sermons of religious leaders, the authority for childrearing practices and definitions of social and religious goals came from the church, and responsibility lay squarely with the parents. However, when parents failed, the consequences were both religious and civil. As early as 1648, according to historian Ross Beales, heads of New England families were required by law to catechize their children once a week. In the 1670s, the Massachusetts General Court appointed "tithing men," each overseeing ten or twelve households, whose duty it was to ensure domestic harmony and be sure that parents properly discipline unruly children.

Beyond parental training, children were expected to learn and obey a host of moral lessons. When discipline failed, children became responsible for their own behavior. Although "stubborn child" laws, enacted in Massachusetts in 1646, threatened disobedient children with the death penalty, in fact willful children were bound out as apprentices, and parents of boys over sixteen could turn to the courts to compel obedience in their children.

In the Chesapeake, where the parental mortality rate was higher than in New England, Children who were orphaned became members of extended or step families, "rooting the parentless child within the society." Moreover, the fear of early death often prompted fathers to ensure their son's well-being by deeding cattle and appointing trustees to oversee that the sons received the cattle at marriage or majority. Legal mechanisms protected these children and their property, and, signaling consensus about the need for children's financial protection, historians Darrett and Anita Rutman found relatively few unscrupulous guardians or stepparents.

In the tightly woven New England communities, the family was the basic political, economic, and religious unit, with the family deeply embedded in public life. Moreover, family responsibilities extended to the care of orphans, invalids, and the elderly. The family and the church, the principal institutions taking formal responsibility for children, shared a common set of values regarding social order and religious salvation and a common language for defining and controlling deviance.

Still, the greatest risks to children in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were childbirth and disease. Historian John Demos estimates that 25 percent of all children born in seventeenth-century Plymouth died during the first decade of life; and

epidemics of smallpox, diphtheria, whooping cough, measles, and mumps that swept

North America in the first half of the eighteenth century "doubled and tripled" the normal

average of thirty deaths per one thousand born in Boston during those years.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, a variety of public charitable institutions

began to reproduce traditional family responsibilities. Most visible in the complex

commercial centers of the Atlantic seaboard, cities built almshouses to offset the cost of

caring for widows, orphans, and the poor and mentally ill. Free schools and common pay

schools began to replace the educational function of families, and workshops increasingly

substituted for families in the apprenticeship of youth. Among civic leaders,

revolutionary ideas about individualism and secularism permeated the language of public

policy discourse over expectations for the youth, and therein the future, of the nation. For

adolescents, the end of the century witnessed an upsurge in premarital pregnancy and

weakening of the traditional parental control over young men and women. Moreover,

rising educational standards coincided with an expansion of choices available to youths,

prolonging economic dependency.

Salve children were threatened by the risks dependent upon their status. In this

period, the slave trade was at its peak. According to historian Alan Kulikoff, of the

550,000 Africans forcibly brought into the colonies, 60 percent arrived between 1720 and

1780. Malnutrition, poorer health, separation from parents, and demands for work

contributed to higher death rates and less protection for these children.

By the end of the eighteenth century, attitudes about strict discipline were

softening, less punitive, and more nurturing. Concepts of individual rights that permeated

the political landscape were reflected in greater respect for the individuality of the child

and in the language of childrearing. Even before the revolution, the language of family

governance changed from that of discipline and authority to that of government and laws.

The goals for children were shifting from salvation to citizenship, and concern for

children's religious life expanded to include education and health. Family law, however,

did not change much during this century. The father retained absolute authority over the

person and property of the child, with the exception of the poor laws. For example,

following the Act of 1735 until the end of the century, half of Boston's eleven hundred

poor children between the ages of five and nine were "bound out," boys to learn a trade

and girls to domestic service. During this period, too, children could be separated from

their parents and forced to work, or grandparents could be compelled to support them

when their parents were incapable of doing so.

In the case of orphans, a "reasonable effective mechanism" developed from

Orphans Court to protect property and create a method of adoption, even though no

common or statute law provided for the assignment of parents. Through the practice of

apprenticeship or indenture, parents could petition the General Court for permission to

change a child's name and transfer inheritance to a child "created" in this way.

At the opening of the nineteenth century, goals for child began to reflect the

aspirations of the new nation: republican citizenship, secular governance, and work.

Although Christian moral values continued to form the basis of children's education;

social control and secular order were taking on equivalent importance. A growing

number of larger, less intimate towns were straining to accommodate rapid population

growth from increasing numbers of foreign immigrants and domestic southern and rural

immigrants.   The exigencies of industrial labor and poverty shifted responsibility for

orphaned or delinquent children away from families with inadequate resources to public

and private institutions, to schools, and to courts. Illegitimate births, for example, led

mothers in increasing numbers to abandon their infants to care of private almshouses,

churches, and convents rather than to relatives. Public discourse increased to define and

ameliorate problems and to find the means to intervene on behalf of others people's

children.

The Civil Was, an unfortunate watershed for children, left thousands of children

with one or no parents, in numbers that almshouses could not accommodate. Public

outcry against incarcerating children in public poorhouses with the adult insane, vagrants,

drunks, and prostitutes led, albeit slowly, to an increase in orphanages and to policies of

fostering out children to families. This recognition of the special needs of children was

accompanied by experiments with industrial schools, lodging homes for working youth,

and foundling hospitals for abandoned infants. Attempting to house child criminals

orphaned and impoverished by the loss of parents, reformatories became vastly

overcrowded. Postwar inflation added to the stress on these publicly funded institutions,

making contract labor inside the reformatories appealing to head-pressed directors. The

practices continued into the 1890's, when child labor laws led to their abolition.

The Civil War also created new classes of black and female juvenile delinquents.

Reformatories during this period were segregated both by sex and by race. Girls were

customarily incarcerated in single-sex institutions not for the petty larcenies usually

associated with boys, but for precocious sexual behavior, a crime with which boys were

virtually never charged. Moreover, few institutions admitted newly emancipated black

youths at all, and those that did kept them strictly segregated. Nineteenth-century

reformers expressed little concern with preventing the exposure of black children to the influences of adult criminals. Most black youths charged with crimes were locked up with adult criminals.

Linking juvenile crime with immigration, heredity, poverty, and urbanization, late nineteenth-century reformers began to distinguish between the dependent and the delinquent. These distinctions were, however, often based more on ethnicity than of children's behavior. Urban reformers feared the congestion and urban disorder associated with rapid migrations to the cities of blacks from the South and poor Catholic and Jewish immigrants from Europe, and south to control rather than assist those groups of children born of "inferior stock. Social Darwinists and hereditarianism linked crime and school failure with the foreign born and black and turned to local governments for the solutions that would shield the community against their disruptive and unsavory influences. By the end of the century, juvenile crime was considered to be the concern of the government, with most reformatories supported by public funds. Child poverty, however, an idea more sympathetically applied to certain groups, required protection from the impersonal and dangerous cities. Organized assistance remained outside the public sphere, with most orphanages supported by private charitable organizations or religious groups taking care of their own. The Children's Aid Society, for example, proved to be a model of such child welfare efforts. Founded in 1853 by Yale trained minister Charles Loring Brace, the Children's Aid Society sought to save the needy homeless children of New York by placing them in foster care, lodging houses, and industrial schools. Others followed this pioneering agency in efforts to protect the child from impersonal and crowded institutions, negligent parents, and urban dangers.

Often linked with the decline in rural craft, farming culture and the rise of commercial life, responsibility for children in the nineteenth century shifted from the father to the mother, both legally and in terms of education and socialization. Child custody laws came to favor the mother during a child's "tender years," and courts took on parental responsibilities when both parents failed their children. In addition, the complex process associated with the rise of common schooling increased the participation of women both as educators in the homes and as teachers. The idea of mother as nurturer both elevated the responsibilities of women in the home and increased their culpability for children's failures.

By the end of the nineteenth century, several dramatic shifts had occurred to reorient children's place in society. Fundamental in its significance, the school became the most pervasive public institution for socialization and control over the lives of children. An almost universal institution, reinforced by restrictive child labor laws, schools constituted irrevocably and increasingly a substitution for former environments of work. Thus, as the primary workplace for children, schools became entrenched as the common mediators through which the problems of risk were negotiated. Although the local authorities of family and church did not disappear, control became a shared and often contested enterprise with the schools.

In the eyes of child advocates, children's moral failures shifted from an emphasis on personal character flaws to being the result of negative environmental and genetic influences. Moralistic children's literature of the nineteenth century gave way to social scientist's analyses of parental, neighborhood, and socioeconomic factors, thereby shifting responsibility away from the child and onto the community and its institutions.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the categories of risk were elaborated in conformity with new theories of child development. Moreover, laws such as those limiting child labor, establishing compulsory schooling, and defining juvenile crimes combined to segregate children as a unique class of people with special needs for protection and guidance.

Broadly drawn, the goals for American children have changed from the intense colonial religious need for salvation, with the church in authority, to the nineteenth century need for order and citizenship, controlled by private philanthropy in local communities, to the twentieth-century belief in individual development, with law, science, and government as the arbiters.

Along with these differences, the twentieth century brought new language and nuance to older, well-established concepts of the child. Armed with the new vocabulary of science and psychology, and the weight of truth associated with scientific research, reformers joined with social scientist to reinforce the values of social order, Christian morality, nativism, and racism in defining which children were at risk and which children were causing risk to society. In all times, protective policies toward children, whether private or public, have been heartfelt attempts to reconcile the conflicting values of parental responsibility and authority, the well-being of children, and the preservation of social order defined by the institutions designed to promote that order.