

THESIS

“CONSIDERING THE SICKNESS OF MY CHILDREN, MY HEART WAS EXCEEDINGLY
SUNK”: FATHERHOOD AND CHILDREN’S HEALTH IN COLONIAL NEW ENGLAND,
1660–1785

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, Colorado
Summer 2023

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ABSTRACT

“CONSIDERING THE SICKNESS OF MY CHILDREN, MY HEART WAS EXCEEDINGLY SUNK”: FATHERHOOD AND CHILDREN’S HEALTH IN COLONIAL NEW ENGLAND, 1660–1785

A reading of Puritan fathers’ personal writings from 1660–1785 indicates a larger ethic of loving, hands-on fatherhood. When fathers wrote about their children in their personal writings, it was most often related to their children’s spiritual and physical health. By providing for their children in times of physical distress, Puritan fathers participated in the private life of their families and formed intimate bonds with their children.

This thesis challenges the narratives that present the distribution of household labor as divided between the public and private. It rejects the assumption that caring for children was women’s work and sickrooms were women’s spaces. The fathers examined in this thesis were mentally, emotionally, and physically present throughout their children’s illnesses. Fathers’ detailed descriptions of their children’s physical health and the medicine given to them to ease their suffering makes it clear that the sickroom was not strictly a place for women. In addition to physical remedies, fathers also employed spiritual methods to cure their children in hopes of earning God’s favor. Fathers had to reckon with the religious aspects of physical disease. They ruminated on the possible causes for disease, sought for religious meaning in their children’s illnesses, and worried for the sanctification of their children’s souls.

At its core, this thesis tells the story of fathers who loved their children. It does not paint these fathers as men who cared for their children because of an internalized goal of living up to an abstract concept of ideal Puritan manhood or paternal power. A reading of these diaries does not unveil a series of emotionally distant patriarchal authoritarians. These men were hands-on fathers who deeply loved their families and wanted to protect their children at all costs.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I first want to thank the Colorado State University History Department for the academic, professional, and financial support. Thank you to all the faculty who have helped me along the way. For giving me ideas, supporting my research, and fueling my curiosity by encouraging (and answering!) my continuous questions. I am thankful for my committee member, Zach Hutchins, who helped me gain confidence in my scholarship and encouraged me to dig deeper. I am very grateful for Jared Orsi, who has dedicated much of his time to help me grow as a writer, a scholar, and a professional. I am very lucky to have had the opportunity to be mentored by such a great writer, historian, and person. I am extremely thankful for my advisor, Ann Little. Our weekly meetings helped understand what questions I wanted to be asking about my topic, helped me learn how to answer those questions, and understand the significance. She has guided me through many professional opportunities that have helped me grow as a scholar. I would not be the historian I am without her guidance and support. Thank you for everything.

I thank the facilitators, presenters, and attendees of the Front Range Early American Consortium and the Colonial Society of Massachusetts Graduate Student Forum. I also want to thank Lisa Wilson, who I was recently able to meet in person and discuss at length the importance of family histories. I also want to thank the Massachusetts Historical Society for the four wonderful days in their archives and CSU's Inter Library Loan staff for helping me attain the four microfilm reels of MHS's "Pre-Revolutionary Diaries," which made up most of the diary sources used in this thesis. I would not have been able to write this thesis in Colorado without those four microfilm reels.

This thesis would not exist without my family, who are my support system and my closest friends. I want to thank my partner, Ben, who has been my rock for the past seven years. I love you all. A special thanks is for my dad, who talked through ideas with me for hours, offered insight that only a father can to sources written by historical fathers, read through many drafts, and helped construct my abstract ideas into sentences. Additionally, I would not have wanted to write a thesis on the love fathers had for their children if I had not had such an amazing, thoughtful, hands-on, loving dad.

Another huge thank you is for my nephews, Harrison, Mikey, Teddy, Leo, and Will. Their mischief, humor, curiosity, and love led me want to uncover the experiences of historical children. Watching them grow up and seeing their “firsts” while reading the words of Puritan fathers who witnessed the same events has brought me closer to these historical actors more than anything else has.

DEDICATION

*This thesis is dedicated to my dad,
just one of the many great fathers and caregivers in the world who would do anything for their
children.*

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Chapter 1 – “A Purge for Tender Children”: Fatherhood, Childhood, and Medicine in Colonial New England

In early November 1683, Peter Thacher, the first minister of Milton, Massachusetts, came face to face with the terrifying prospect of the death of his children. Illness threatened the lives of two of his children, Theodora, age five, and Oxenbridge, age two. Peter Thacher tended to his children himself and documented their progress in detail. He first noted, “this night Theodora was taken with a vomiting, and Oxenbridge with a sharpe and sore pain in his Ear.” The next day “Theodora remained very ill, and Oxenbridge was ill. They both took a vomit this afternoon.”

The two children faced the worst of their illnesses on November 10, 1683:

Theodora and Oxenbridge were Exceedingly ill...this day I studied as much as I could considering the Sickness of my children, my heart was exceedingly sunk all this day...this night wee laid fowle to Oxenbridges feet for four houres, and gave him Doctor Winthropes night-cordiall powder, hee lay as one reedy to dy the greatest part of the night, wee gave him gaskin powder and hee then hee lay still and into a fine sleep. This night I had hard tuing with my heart.¹

Thacher found hope the next day, “Oxenbridge was something revived, I went to meeting prayed for him...I came home I found both my children unexpectedly revived, Oxenbridges fever was gone for the present.”² This attention to detail concerning his children’s health is prominent throughout Thacher’s diary. The evidence also suggests that Thacher actively contributed to their recovery and often performed the intimate administration of medicine.

A reading of Puritan fathers’ personal writings from 1660–1785 indicates a larger ethic of loving, hands-on fatherhood. When fathers wrote about their children it was most often related to

¹ November 10, 1683, *Peter Thacher, Diary, 1682-1698/9*, reel 9, Pre-Revolutionary Diaries, microfilm edition, Massachusetts Historical Society.

² November 11, 1683, *Peter Thacher, Diary, 1682-1698/9*.

their children's spiritual and physical health. The well-being of their children consumed most fathers' minds, and they did everything in their power to assist in their return to health. By providing for their children in times of physical distress, Puritan fathers participated in the private life of their families and formed intimate bonds with their children.

Disease was a regular presence in early New England. Illness was an especially dangerous threat to children. More than one in four children failed to survive to their tenth birthday.³ Scholars suggest that half of the deaths in colonial New England were children under the age of eleven.⁴ Disease and healing certainly affected family structures in New England households. Sickness consumed a family's resources due to the time and money needed to tend to sick family members.⁵ This paper aims to integrate the history of medicine into the broader narrative of domestic relationships in early New England.

Puritan Fatherhood Literature

While several scholars have hinted at the connections between fatherhood and medicine, historians have not deeply explored the prevalent concern fathers had for the physical health and spiritual sanctity of their children in early New England. Scholars have not seriously contemplated the role of fathers in the Puritan household through the lens of medical history. This concern fathers had for their children's health and the hands-on care they provided to them pleads to be studied in further depth.

Some scholars studying Puritan masculinity have explored fathers' concern for their children's well-being in their studies but have not focused on the subject in the context of medical history. Lisa Wilson in *Ye Heart of a Man: The Domestic Life of Men in Colonial New*

³ David E. Stannard, "Death and the Puritan Child," *American Quarterly* 26, no. 5 (December 1974): 465

⁴ Ben Mutschler, *The Province of Affliction: Illness and the Making of Early New England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 71.

⁵ Mutschler, *The Province of Affliction*, 5.

England discusses men's role in the domestic sphere. She argues men's "'usefulness' in the domestic realm defined an adult man."⁶ She pushes against the tendency for some scholars to apply the nineteenth-century ideology of separate spheres—"the private for women, the public for men"—to seventeenth and eighteenth-century New England. She argues for a much more nuanced depiction of the New England world. I also reject rigid depictions of labor separation for fathers and mothers. Wilson briefly addresses fathers' roles in the domestic sphere in reference to health, and while her discussion is compelling it is not the focus of her book. She provides excellent examples of fathers who were attentive to and documented their children's physical development, but she focuses mainly on the spiritual aspects of fathers caring for their children.

Anne S. Lombard in *Making Manhood: Growing up Male in Colonial New England* investigates manhood in early New England. In doing this, she delves into the responsibilities and expectations of men within family structures. Like Wilson, she argues against superimposing nineteenth-century labor spheres to early New England. Opportunities for men to prove their masculinity existed in both the "public sphere" and in domestic spaces. Lombard investigates familial relationships as a "series of hierarchical relationships, in which fathers' authority within the polity and their authority within the family were homologous."⁷

Though Lombard touches on the subject of fathers tending to their children during illnesses and suggests that fathers played a role in the care of their sick or injured children, her discussion is limited. She acknowledges evidence of fathers caring for their children and suggests that fathers formed deep attachments with their children after infancy. She discusses the care of sick children in the context of the division of household labor. She suggests that fathers

⁶ Lisa Wilson, *Ye Heart of a Man: The Domestic Life of Men in Colonial New England* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1999), 10.

⁷ Anne S. Lombard, *Making Manhood: Growing up Male in Colonial New England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 12.

cared for their children in part out of necessity, for a “seriously ill child requires intense and concentrated care around the clock, care that a mother could not provide alone,” and because fathers’ had more knowledge of medicine and illness. Though she acknowledges that fathers were often attentive and emotional during times of illness, she still hints that fathers cared for their children’s health out of societal obligation. “Fathers had the ultimate legal and moral responsibility for their children’s well-being.” When a father grieved his ill or deceased children, they proved unable to “[master] his own feelings” and failed to meet the masculine expectations for fathers to be rational and responsible, as opposed to irrational and sensual women.⁸ Additionally, though this is not a failure of her book, her brief discussion does not address these subjects in much detail.

While this study engages with Wilson and Lombard’s ideas, this study in part is a response to Rebecca Tannenbaum’s *The Healer’s Calling: Women and Medicine in Early New England*.⁹ Tannenbaum claims that “medical practice enabled women to participate in the world beyond the household and allowed them to exercise surprising autonomy and authority.”¹⁰ While this is certainly true, evidence as it appears in diaries also suggests the inverse may also be true for fathers—children’s illnesses were a means by which fathers could demonstrate their care and concern within the household. Tannenbaum suggests that mothers used the medical sphere to assert their autonomy and authority to broaden their presence and influence in the public world. Through this Tannenbaum dismantles previous arguments that the father was the family’s sole liaison to the public world. Women employed medical knowledge to assert authority in the public sphere, which scholars, such as Demos and Morgan, have previously suggested was

⁸ Lombard, *Making Manhood*, 24-5.

⁹ Rebecca J. Tannenbaum, *The Healer’s Calling: Women and Medicine in Early New England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019).

¹⁰ Tannenbaum, *The Healer’s Calling*, ix.

within the realm of fathers' responsibilities.¹¹ I suggest that tending to their children's medical needs contributed to fathers forming closer relationships with their children.

I further develop the concept of ideal Puritan masculinity in chapter three. It demonstrates that when it came to their children's lives, emotion and a fatherly desire to protect one's children drove their actions. Reason did not always guide fathers' actions when their children's health was at risk. Instead, passion drove fathers' seemingly desperate desire to save their children, both physically and spiritually. Parents employed religion to control themselves in situations that could cause serious internal upset, but they also used physician-recommended medications in conjunction with religious remedies in their attempts to control their outward situations. Chapter two will illustrate how Puritan fathers, instead of singularly using religious ruminations to control their own emotions in the archetypal Puritan fashion, passion and love drove Puritans' actions. Rather than exercise self-restriction, Puritan fathers acted with urgency when their children were sick.

While women used medicine to branch into the public sphere, men used medicine as a channel into the private sphere. Medical care offered fathers an opportunity to engage with their children and families in the private sphere in intimate, caring ways. The medical environment of New England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries created this possibility. The "preacher-physician," was a prevalent phenomenon in New England up to the early eighteenth century when occupational doctors became medical authorities in the colonies. Preacher-physicians, in addition to their ministerial responsibilities, often performed the duties of a physician. Most ministers were Harvard or Yale graduates and thus had some degree of instruction in medicine.

¹¹ Edmund Morgan, *The Puritan Family: Religion and Domestic Relations in Seventeenth-Century New England* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966); John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Early Life in Plymouth Colony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

While in later generations Puritans turned to doctors more often than ministers for medical advice, most Puritans still had some knowledge of medicine.¹⁶

Histories of Childhood

It is not unusual for historians to emphasize change over time in their studies. This pattern is especially prevalent in the histories of childhood. It is common to depict parents of the past as a group who did not acknowledge childhood as a distinct period of life. Philippe Ariès' *Centuries of Childhood* (1962) popularized the theory that the modern concept of childhood did not exist in medieval Western Europe. Other scholars have applied this to early-modern New England. John Demos suggests "Childhood as such was barely recognized in the period spanned by the Plymouth colony. There was little sense that children might somehow be a special group, with their own needs and interests and capacities. Instead, they were viewed largely as miniature adults: the boy was a little model of his father, likewise the girl of her mother."¹⁷ Some scholars of the history of childhood, such as Lloyd deMause, view the history of childhood from a progressivist lens. In his essay, "The Evolution of Childhood," first published in 1973, deMause suggests that the "history of childhood is a nightmare from which we have only recently begun to awaken."¹⁸ He argues that children's conditions and existences degrade as one recalls earlier periods of history.

However, scholars have not universally clung to the need to uncover historical change over time or depict parents of the past as ignorant of the concept of childhood. In her expansive study of over four-hundred English and American diaries from the sixteenth to the nineteenth

¹⁶ Patricia Ann Watson, *The Angelical Conjunction: The Preacher-Physicians of Colonial New England* (Knoxville, The University of Tennessee Press, 1991).

¹⁷ As quoted in Linda A. Pollock, *Forgotten Children: Parent-child Relations from 1500-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 3.

¹⁸ Lloyd deMause, "The Evolution of Childhood," in *The History of Childhood: The Untold Story of Child Abuse*, ed. Lloyd deMause (New York: Peter Bedrick Books, 1988), 1.

century, Linda Pollock in *Forgotten Children: Parent-child Relations from 1500–1900* claims that “there have been very few changes in parental care and child life from the 16th to the 19th century in the home, apart from social changes and technological improvements.”¹⁹ Like Pollock, my argument is rooted in continuity rather than change over time. When looking at diaries from 1660 to 1785, fathers documented their children’s physical ailments and were personally involved in attempts to regain their health. While this study asserts that fathers throughout the time period continually documented their children’s physical ailments and expressed concern that they return to health, there are notable medical advancements during this period. This mirrors Pollock’s conclusion that while there was little change in the way parents viewed children and the parent-child relationship, the ways parents administered medical care for children changed.²⁰ This is evident in this study, as the field of medicine advanced rapidly during this period.

Pollock’s study is rooted in an analysis of diaries. This method assists in deterring historians’ tendency to hinge their arguments on evidence that supports their own theories. She suggests that primarily employing diaries exposes what was truly happening in the home, as opposed to employing published sources such as sermons and childrearing manuals. Diaries present an intimate illustration of home life. Pollock’s work heavily influenced Judith S. Graham’s detailed study of Samuel Sewall’s diary.

Graham reckons with the fact that “despite the clear record of engaged, affectionate fatherhood that both Sewall and Mather have left behind, much of the literature presents a grim portrait of the Puritan family.”²¹ Rather than continue to project this image, Graham presents

¹⁹ Pollock, *Forgotten Children*, 268.

²⁰ Pollock, *Forgotten Children*, 271.

²¹ Judith S. Graham, *Puritan Family Life: The Diary of Samuel Sewall* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000), 4.

Sewall as a loving father, evidenced by the documentation of his children's lives in his detailed diary. In *Ye Heart of a Man*, Lisa Wilson also portrays Puritan fathers as loving parents who in part measured masculinity in relation to how well they could provide for their families.²² Men's usefulness in the domestic sphere defined the status of adult men from 1620 to the American Revolution. While earlier scholars, such as John Demos and Edmund Morgan, mostly investigate fathers' roles as a family's liaison to the public world, Wilson also ventures into the domestic lives of men in the private sphere. Like Graham, Wilson paints the image of loving and "tender" fathers.

This study is heavily influenced by the works of Graham and Wilson. Through mainly an analysis of diaries, it uncovers the role of Puritan men in the home. This study focuses on fathers' usefulness in the domestic realm and aims to reframe the roles of mothers and fathers as it relates to the care of their children. It investigates the domestic role of fathers through the lens of medicine. A reading of Puritan diaries reveals a group of men who recorded the health of their children in detail beginning in infancy and suggests that fathers were also intimately involved in nurturing their children back to health.

Medical History

Due to the focus on the medical history of early New England, this study engages closely with Patricia Watson's *The Angelical Conjunction: The Preacher-Physicians of Colonial New England*. In her work, she investigates the history of the preacher-physician in Puritan New England. In her effort to understand the reasons behind the popularity of the preacher-physician, she first exposes the connections between religious and medical belief systems. In addition, she examines the similarities and differences between medical practice in England and the colonies.

²² Lisa Wilson, *Ye Heart of a Man: The Domestic Life of Men in Colonial New England* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1999).

Though Watson does not frame the history of medicine in the context of family relationships, as is the purpose of my thesis, Watson's work influenced my investigation of the connections between physical and spiritual health.

Because this thesis is so deeply rooted in medical history and the illnesses of children, an overview of the state of medicine during the period of this study as well as the common childhood illnesses referenced throughout this paper is warranted. Though physical health was intrinsically tied to spiritual health in Puritans' minds, Puritans recognized natural, or biological, causes of disease. While people usually prayed to aid a sick individual, it was usually accompanied by the administration of pharmaceutical prescriptions. While chapters two and three rely heavily on diaries and personal communications, this overview of medical history in New England additionally draws from published medical guides.

Several schools of medicine influenced the medical practices of physicians in New England. Galenic humorism, aimed at balancing the four bodily humors (blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile), and Paracelsian-iatrochemistry, medicine based on chemical theories, dominated New England medicine.²³ Galenic medicine, first presented in the second century A.D. by the Greek physician Galen, dominated European medicine until the sixteenth century. In the sixteenth century, Paracelsus, a Swiss physician, openly "rejected Galenism and developed a medical system which, based on chemistry, promoted an ontological concept of disease."²⁴

While in England physicians often practiced one of the two schools of medicine and openly opposed the other's theories, medical practitioners in New England often combined tenets of both Galenic humorism and iatrochemistry. While Puritans employed methods of the two

²³ Patricia Ann Watson, *The Angelical Conjunction: The Preacher-Physicians of Colonial New England* (Knoxville, The University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 5.

²⁴ Watson, *The Angelical Conjunction*, 74.

branches of medicine, Puritans especially engaged with iatrochemistry, which was usually practiced alongside alchemy, because of its connection to the Puritan doctrine. For example, alchemical medicines' visceral effects on the body appealed to Puritans' belief in medical providentialism, "the unwavering conviction among the godly that God played an active role in both inflicting and healing diseases." Puritans' belief in God's direct influence in curing diseases did not prevent Puritans from tending to their own sick. The Puritan doctrine did not negate medical theory and Puritans did not deny the biological sources of illness. Instead, especially for earlier generations, Puritans understood that illnesses had natural causes, but a spiritual shortcoming may have prompted their physical infirmity.²⁵

In her survey of nineteen ministers' libraries, Patricia Watson found that ministers owned many of the same medical authors' published works. Nearly half of the surveyed library contained one or more works by the astrological physician and Puritan Nicholas Culpeper (1616–1654). Culpeper's popular manuals on herbal remedies were the most popular in New England. This was in part because he intentionally wrote his works in English, as opposed to Latin, to reveal "secrets' of physick," and in Culpeper's own words in the introduction to *The English Physician* to "Oblige the World with several useful things, which I shall fit to the common Capacity of all People."²⁶ Culpeper's *A Physicall Directory, or a Translation of the London Dispensatory* (London, 1649; Boston, 1708) was an unauthorized translation of the College of Physicians of London's work *Pharmacopoeia Londinesis* (London, 1618). William Salmon's (1644–1713) work was also popular among New England physicians, over a quarter of the libraries surveyed by Watson contained one of his works. William Salmon was also

²⁵ Walter W. Woodward, *Prospero's America: John Winthrop, Jr., Alchemy, and the Creation of New England Culture, 1606-1676* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 164.

²⁶ Watson, *The Angelical Conjunction*, 78 ; Nicholas Culpeper, *The English Physician. Containing Admirable and Approved Remedies, for Several of the Most Usual Diseases* (Boston: Nicholas Boone, 1708)

committed to making medicine accessible to the common people, and aimed to share the “many rare *Secrets* of the Medical Art.” In *Doron Medicum: Supplement to the New London Dispensatory* he vowed to “continue in this good Work (through the Assistance of the Divine help) till I have happily rendred the whole Body of Physick, (compleat in all its parts) in the English Tongue.”²⁷

Both Culpeper and Salmon emphasized accessibility in their works. Their publications mainly contained lists of common ailments and herbal remedies. In line with his commitment to medicine for the common people, Culpeper purposefully did not use exotic or expensive herbs in his written treatments and wrote herbs’ names in English “for the publick good.” Culpeper wrote the guide “in such a language as might be understood by al,” and additionally provided a glossary of terms the public may not have been familiar with such as calcination, “the burning of a thing in a Crucible.”²⁸

In addition to possessing a collection of popular medical books, ministers often had their own compendiums of remedies they transcribed from various medical authorities including remedy books, other ministers, family, and friends. Patricia Watson presents Reverend Thomas Palmer’s 1696 collection of recipes that followed the Galenic principles of medicine. Watson also uncovered several written exchanges of medical recipes. For example, Reverend Jared Eliot sent a recipe for “Catarrhous humour” which consisted of a plant that was a popular emetic, together with the garden herb camomile, “steeped in wine . . . [with] the yoke of an egg in cyder sweetened with honey,” to another minister. Another example was a written cure for “Receipts for Worms in Children,” a common problem for New England children, which contained garlic,

²⁷ Nicholas Culpeper, *A Physicall Directory or A Translation of the London Dispensatory* (London: Peter Cole, 1649), 2.

²⁸ Culpeper, *A Physicall Directory*, 2.

eggs, and rye, that was sent to Reverend Thomas Symmes to “Sister Blower.”²⁹ Observers noted that the vermin usually troubled children over the age of two and rarely manifested in infants who still breastfed.³⁰

Common Children’s Medical Ailments

Worms were just one common ailment in New England children. Culpeper includes a list of “Childrens Infirmities to Cure” in *The English Physician*. This list includes convulsions, teething pains, fevers, phlegm, worms, thrush, cough, and colic.

Fevers, also called agues, were one of the most frequent general symptoms reported by colonists regarding the health of their children. It was acknowledged that fevers were “the most general disease incident to mankind. It attacks every age, sex, and constitution.” Additionally, fevers were considered to be “an effort of nature to free herself from an offending cause.”³¹ Often there are separate treatments listed in medical guides when these symptoms occurred in children. For example, *Aristotle’s Compleat Master Piece* (1753) recommends “*For Fevers in Children*” to “Take Crabs Eyes a dram, Cream of Tartar half a dram, white Sugar Candy, finely powdered.”³² Other guides give cures for fevers in children that are caused by another affliction, such as teething. *The English Physician* recommends for teething-related fevers “one spoonful of Ungent...two spoonfuls of Oyl of Roses.”³³ For teething-related fevers, *Domestic Medicine* (1784) warns if the fever is too high, “bleeding will be necessary, but this, in very young children, ought always be sparingly performed.”³⁴ It then suggests that “Purging, vomiting, or sweating, agree much better with them.”³⁵ Though *Domestic Medicine* was published in the late-

²⁹Watson, *The Angelical Conjunction*, 81.

³⁰ *The Husband-man’s Guide, in Four Parts* (Boston: Elea Phillips, 1712), 77.

³¹ William Buchan, *Domestic Medicine; or, The Family Physician* (Philadelphia: John Dunlap, 1772), 97.

³² *Aristotle’s Compleat Master Piece*, 25th ed. (London: The Booksellers, 1753), 133.

³³ Culpeper, *The English Physician*, 43.

³⁴ Buchan, *Domestic Medicine*, 349.

³⁵ Buchan, *Domestic Medicine*, 349.

eighteenth century, the practices documented in the book were practiced for decades in the colonies. For example, Peter Thacher had a physician come to bleed Oxenbridge when he was almost two years old over one hundred years before *Domestic Medicine* was published. Thacher wrote, “Doctor Swan came to let Oxenbridge bleed in the Ears.”³⁶

Other specific ailments of children including colic, thrush, rickets, asthma, and convulsions were recorded and treated. Colic was said to be a “very common Distemper, and begins, generally, with a grievous Pain the the Bowels...The Patients frequently vomits every Thing he swallows, and can hardly go to Stool, even with the Help of purging Medicines.”³⁷ *Domestic Medicine* denotes four kinds of colics, flatulent, bilious, hysteric, and nervous. Each type of colic had different symptoms and treatments. The guide denotes *flatulent* colic as the most common for those “whose digestive powers are weak.”³⁸ The guide *Medicina Britannica* (Boston, 1751) suggests sweet almonds as a “fine safe Remedy for Infants.”³⁹

Thrush, often called sore mouth in the seventeenth and eighteenth-century, was characterized by “Little ulcers in the mouth and throat, of a white or yellowish colour. Frequent in children.”⁴⁰ It is now known to be a fungal infection of the mouth. It was treated with magnesia or rhubarb. Published around the same time, *Domestic Medicine* also suggests Five grains of rhubarb and a dram of magnesia alba,” given in the child’s food.⁴² Published earlier, *The English Physician* (1708) recommends “Take an empty Egg-shell, by sucking the meat out

³⁶ April 24, 1683, *Peter Thacher, diary*.

³⁷ John Tennent, *Every Man His Own Doctor* (Williamsburg: William Parks, 1734), 18.

³⁸ Buchan, *Domestic Medicine*, 207.

³⁹ Thomas Short, *Medicina Britannica* (Philadelphia: B. Franklin and D. Hall, 1751), 3.

⁴⁰ John Elliot, *The Medical Pocket-book; For Those Who Are, and For All Who Wish, to be, Physicians* (Philadelphia: Robert Bell, 1784), 65.

⁴² Buchan, *Domestic Medicine*, 342.

at a hole on the top, then fill the Shell with Honey and burnt Allom mix together, let it boil on the Fire, still stirring it with a Bodkin, and dress it.”⁴³

Puritans had two primary types of medications used to treat children, regardless of their illness—laxatives and emetics. Though thrush was a disease which manifested largely in the throat and mouth, they opted to treat their children with laxatives such as rhubarb and alum, a chemical compound of aluminum and potassium used in various colonial medicines. While it is unlikely that these medicines would cure their children’s thrush or other diseases unrelated to the digestive system, parents still administered the medicines to their children. These aggressive medications had tactile effects which both confirmed the medicines’ efficacy and likely reassured parents that their efforts increased their children’s likelihood of recovery.

Perhaps the most common complaints were children who suffered from convulsions and convulsion fits. Though several of Samuel Sewall’s (1652–1730) fourteen children suffered convulsions, Sewall’s son Hull’s fits were the most severe and eventually caused his death at almost two years old. His son’s fits disheartened Sewall and prompted detailed diary entries. On March 19, 1685, Sewall found “Hullie extream ill having had two Convulsion Fits, one of them very long: the Child is much changed.” Hull suffered many convulsion fits including one while he “sits in his Grandmother’s Lap at Table,” and one as “Little Hull...lay with me in Bed.”⁴⁴

Though Hull Sewall’s convulsions were certainly of the most severe degree—Hull endured seizures frequently throughout his short two years of life—convulsions were not always related to “epileptic disorders.”⁴⁵ Convulsion most broadly refers to the involuntary contraction

⁴³ Culpeper, *The English Physician*, 44.

⁴⁴ Samuel Sewall, *Diary of Samuel Sewall, 1674-1729*, vol. 1 in Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society 5, vol. 5 (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society), 122.

⁴⁵ David Hartley, *Observations on Man, His Frame, His Duty, and His Expectations* (London: S. Richardson, 1749), 120.

or stiffening of a muscle or body part. Delaware preacher-physician Matthew Wilson (1734–1790) classified sneezing in his medical “pocket dictionary” *Multum in Parvo* as a “Convulsive Agitation of ye Membranes of ye Nose.”⁴⁶ Being such a vague term and used very frequently, “convulsions” most likely referred to a variety of conditions. In *Observations on Man* (1749), David Hartley addressed “convulsive Motions of various Kinds.”⁴⁷ Harley concluded that convulsions, whether they were “tremor-like” or those indicative of seizure disorders had effects on other functions of the body including “irritation in the Bowels” and stomach.⁴⁸

One ailment that appears frequently in domestic medical guides is rickets in children. Rickets, now understood to be caused by a vitamin D deficiency, causes weak, soft, and sometimes deformed bones, such as bowed legs, in children. New Englanders observed that rickets generally manifested in “children betwixt the age of nine months and two years” and the symptoms included a child flesh and bones grew “soft and flabby; its strength is diminished.” While domestic guides recommended prescriptions for other childhood ailments, medicines for rickets were “of little avail. The disease may often be cured by the nurses, but seldom by the physician.”⁵⁰ Instead, bracing the deformed bones and soothing the child with cold baths was recommended.

Epidemic Illnesses

Colic, thrush, rickets, and convulsions were just a few of the common conditions that affected children, but New England children and adults also suffered from frequent epidemic illnesses. Historian Patricia Watson argues that previous scholars have minimized the influence

⁴⁶ As quoted in Maurice Bear Gordon, *Aesculapius Comes to the Colonies: The Story of the Early Days of Medicine in the Thirteen Original Colonies* (Ventnor, N.J.: Ventnor Publishers, Inc., 1949), 300.

⁴⁷ Hartley, *Observations on Man*, 254.

⁴⁸ Hartley, *Observations on Man*, 98.

⁵⁰ Buchan, *Domestic Medicine*, 283-5.

of epidemics in early New England. The writings of New Englanders reveal that sickness was consistently present and caused distress for Puritans, especially when epidemic illnesses affected children. When the “throat distemper,” which was likely diphtheria or a combination of scarlet fever and diphtheria, struck Sudbury, Massachusetts, in 1751, Reverend Israel Loring (1682–1772) grieved the death of children to a greater extent than adults.⁵¹ When the throat distemper killed several children in his community, Loring wrote:

How far it may Spread among us God only knows. O that this Sword of the Lord that has been Drawn Chiefly against the young People and has Cut off the Children from Without...Save them Lord from the Arrow that [flew] by Day, and the Pestilence that walketh by Darkness, and the Destruction that [Waiteth] at noon day.⁵²

The “throat distemper,” was just one illness that plagued early New England. Other major epidemic illnesses included influenza, measles, pneumonia, dysentery (bloody flux), tuberculosis, typhoid fever, and smallpox.

Perhaps the most threatening epidemic disease to those living in New England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was smallpox. In 1721 Cotton Mather gave the disease the moniker “the destroying Angel.”⁵³ Smallpox was a greater threat to the lives of the colonists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in comparison to England. This is partly because Europeans would have experienced the disease more frequently, thus creating a population with higher immunity. Additionally, some parents in England purposefully exposed children to smallpox in hopes that the children would contract a milder form of the disease because Europeans concluded healthy children and young adults had a greater chance of surviving the disease.⁵⁴ American colonists had a vastly different experience. Due to lower population

⁵¹ Watson, *The Angelical Conjunction*, 82.

⁵² November 1, 1751, *Israel Loring, diary, 1750-1751*, Pre-Revolutionary Diaries, microfilm edition, Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁵³ Cotton Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather: 1709-1724* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1912), 621.

⁵⁴ Elaine G. Breslaw, *Lotions, Potions, Pills, and Magic: Health Care in Early America* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 28.

numbers and more geographically isolated communities, colonists encountered smallpox much less frequently than their European counterparts. Thus, when smallpox struck New England communities it quickly became epidemic and especially deadly to New Englanders whose smallpox antibody-free immune systems were vulnerable to the virus.

Recurring smallpox epidemics prompted the first medical article written and published in the Colonies. Thomas Thacher's "A Brief Rule To guide the Common People of New England how to order themselves & theirs in the Small-Pocks, or Meassels," in 1677. Thomas Thacher, the father of Peter Thacher, was educated in England for both the ministry and likely medicine to some degree. He refers to himself as "no Physitian, yet a well wisher to the sick."⁵⁵ In the pamphlet, the elder Thacher outlines symptoms that occur throughout the illness, the "hopeful" and "Deadly" signs. Hopeful signs included a mild fever and easy breathing while deadly signs were "Flux o the Belly" or bloody or black urine.

Thacher's advice consisted of when and when not to administer vomits, purges, or cordials to the sick, how hot and cold to keep the patient, and what to feed them, such as boiled apples. Due to a major smallpox outbreak in Boston in 1721, smallpox treatment in New England changed drastically with the rise of inoculation across the British colonies. Zabdiel Boylston (1679–1766) and Cotton Mather (1663–1728) led the fight for inoculation across the colonies. While Boylston performed the procedure, Mather supported Boylston's efforts in part because Mather saw firsthand proof that the procedure worked. Years before the 1721 outbreak, in 1716, Mather asked Onesimus, one of his slaves, if he had had smallpox. Onesimus "answered, both *Yes* and, *No*." Mather documented the operation as Onesimus described it. The

⁵⁵ Thomas Thacher, *A Brief Rule To Guide the Common People of New-England How to Order Themselves and Theirs in the Small Pocks, or Measels* (Boston: John Foster, 1677).

operation “had given him something of the *Small-Pox*, & would forever preserve him from it.”⁵⁶ Mather wondered why, “no more is done to bring this operation, into experiment & into Fashion...When there are so many Thousands of People, that would give many Thousands of Pounds, to have the Danger and Horror of this frightful Disease well over with them.”⁵⁷ He resolved that if smallpox ever entered Boston, he would encourage physicians to perform the procedure. In 1721, Mather strongly supported Boylston through the backlash they faced from fellow educated men, the public, and the press who condemned inoculation.⁵⁸

Boylston described his inoculation procedure, which consists of extracting the matter from an external smallpox lesions and implanting the diseased matter into incisions made on the arm of a healthy individual, in detail. Boylston writes, “I shall conclude this whole Account with Some Directions, which may be of Use and Service to the inexperienced, in managing the inoculated Small-Pox”:

Take your Medicine or Pus from the ripe Pustules of the Small-Pox, of the distinct Kind; either from those in the natural Way, or from the inoculated Sort, provided the Person be otherwise healthful, and the Matter good; in some it may be on the 9th, others on the 11th, 12th, 13th, or 14th, Day after Eruption...the best is white, even, and thick, and without smell...Take a fine cut...and open the Pock on one side, & press the Boil, and scoop the Matter in your Quill...
Let the Incisions be made with a good Lancet thro’ the Skin...and about a quarter of an Inch long...drop one full Drop (after wiping off the Blood) into the Incision...and gently bind it.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Cotton Mather, *Some Lost Works of Cotton Mather*, ed. George Lyman Kitteredge (Cambridge: John Wilson and Son, 1912), 422.

⁵⁷ Cotton Mather, *Some Lost Works of Cotton Mather*, ed. George Lyman Kitteredge (Cambridge: John Wilson and Son, 1912), 422.

⁵⁸ Maurice Bear Gordon, *Æsculapius Comes to the Colonies; the Story of the Early Days of Medicine in the Thirteen Original Colonies* (Ventnor, N.J.: Ventnor Publishers, 1949), 84.

⁵⁹ Zabdiel Boylston, *Historical Account of the Small-pox Inoculated in New-England* (Boston: G. Gerrish, 1730), 43-4.

The spread of smallpox in April 1721 in Boston prompted Boylston to begin inoculating. Boylston first performed the procedure on his “Son *Thomas*, of about six, my Negro Man, *Jack*, thirty six, and *Jackey*, two and a half years old.”⁶⁰ Boylston was confident in the procedure and thus inoculated his other children to protect them. He wrote that he performed the practice, “for my Children, whose Lives were very dear to me, were daily in danger of taking the Infection, by my visiting the Sick in the Natural Way.” Here Boylston demonstrates his caring nature as a father and also an understanding of the spread of epidemic disease. Being a doctor and visiting diseased patients, Boylston understood he could transmit the disease even if he could not contract it, since he had smallpox in 1702.⁶¹ In addition to his children, Boylston inoculated many white, black, and Indigenous boys and girls. The youngest documented was Mr. and Mrs. Brasier’s nine-month-old child.⁶²

Boylston was concerned with the effects the epidemic had on families. He wrote that in addition to the physical symptoms, possible consequences were, “Parents being left Childless, Children without Parents, and sometimes Parents and Children's being both carried off, and many Families broken up by the Destruction the Small-Pox”⁶³ Boylston was concerned about the health of children and documented specific instructions for the recovery of young people. For example, for what to eat after the inoculation, Boylston noted, “if it be a young Child, it may have a Milk Diet, or milk in its Pap or Gruel.”⁶⁴ By the end of the epidemic in early 1722, of the 6,000 infected naturally, 844 died. Of the 247 inoculated, only six died.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Boylston, *Historical Account of the Small-pox Inoculated in New-England*, 2.

⁶¹ Gordon, *Aesculapius Comes to the Colonies*, 84.

⁶² Boylston, *Historical Account of the Small-pox Inoculated in New-England*, 27.

⁶³ Boylston, *Historical Account of the Small-pox Inoculated in New-England*, iii.

⁶⁴ Boylston, *Historical Account of the Small-pox Inoculated in New-England*, 45.

⁶⁵ Breslaw, *Lotions, Potions, Pills, and Magic*, 32.

Like Boylston, men writing on medicine in seventeenth and eighteenth-century New England differentiated between the ailments and cures of adults and children. In a letter disclosing the best way to manage measles, published for “the Benefit of the Poor,” Cotton Mather made note of cures that worked especially well on children. He wrote that a “*Tea* made of *Rhubarb*, and sweetened with the Syrup of *Marshmallows*...will also carry off the *Worms* that so often follow the *Measles*; especially in *Children*. Additionally, Mather recommended patients “Lie very *warm*, till all be over,” but recommends “*Infants* are best kept in the *Arms*.”⁶⁶

English colonists knew that some epidemics affected children more severely or more frequently than adults, such as whooping cough. Whooping cough, then called “chin-cough” was known to “seldom affect adults, but is often epidemical among children,” according to the guide *Domestic Medicine* (1772). It was a common disease, for it was “so well known...that no description of it is necessary.” The book presents whooping cough as an infectious disease because it was not “uncommon to find the chin-cough prevailing in one town or village.”⁶⁷

Treatment

While common and epidemic illnesses varied in symptoms and severity, medical journals usually recommended similar treatments due to the Galenic humoral system. Different medications could restore the balance of the four bodily humors, blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. Many medicine guides note how these symptoms manifest differently than adults and should be treated different than adults. William Buchan in the guide *Domestic Medicine* (1772) concluded that “diseases of children are far less complicated than those of adults...the method of curing them is likewise very simple...In all the acute diseases of children, cool air, diluting

⁶⁶ Cotton Mather, *A Letter, About a Good Management under the Distemper of the Measles* (Boston: S.N., 1713), 4, 2.

⁶⁷ Buchan, *Domestic Medicine*, 198-9.

liquors, and gentle evacuations, are almost the only things needful; and in their chronic diseases, restorative diet, free air, and proper exercise, are what the cure must chiefly depend upon.”⁶⁸

Medical authorities viewed children’s diseases as simpler than adults and believed that the medicines administered should be more gentle in nature. *The Medical Pocketbook* (1784) indicates that one should alter doses for patients of varying ages. For “children of two years old may, in general, take about a third part of the doses for adults; or a little more; and so in proportion for other ages, the constitution being also considered.”⁶⁹

The most common cures acted as laxatives or emetics. In his private collection of medical notes and cures from 1696, Reverend Thomas Palmer reflected on the differences of vomits and purgatives:

Some work chiefly by Vomit [emetics], some chiefly do work downward [purgatives], some work both ways; some are Violent & dangerous...Others are...safe...Some purge Phlegm, some choler [yellow bile], some Melancholy [black bile], some most humours, & some all humours.

Additionally, Palmer noted the prescriber needed to alter a medication depending on the "age, strength, custom of the patient, season & manner of ordering.”⁷⁰

To rebalance the humors, physicians would often prescribe “physicks” to stir up the “ill humours” of their patients.⁷¹ “Physicks,” likely mixtures of various herbs or alchemical remedies, was a general term used to describe a drug used to empty the bowels. Various purgatives worked with different intensities; thus children often received more gentle physics. *The English Physician* recommends a specific purgative “for tender Children” consisting of licorice, aniseeds, raisins, and the herb hyssop boiled in wine.⁷² It was common for medical

⁶⁸ William Buchan, *Domestic Medicine; or, The Family Physician* (Philadelphia: John Dunlap, 1772), 350.

⁶⁹ Elliot, *The Medical Pocket-book*.

⁷⁰ As quoted in Watson, *The Angelical Conjunction*, 80.

⁷¹ Watson, *The Angelical Conjunction*, 85.

⁷² Culpeper, *The English Physician*, 45.

guides to specify different medications, instructions, and doses for children as opposed to adults. Like kids today, little Puritans rejected bitter medicine. Thus, manuals offered solutions. *Domestic Medicine* relays “Most children are fond of syrups and jellies, and seldom refuse even a bitter medicine when mixed with them.”⁷³

Like purgatives, vomits were used frequently during illnesses to restore the body’s humors. It was thought that vomits not only emptied the stomach but prompted sweating and bodily secretion. *Domestic Medicine* recommends that a vomit be taken at the beginning of a fever to be most effective. For whooping cough in children, *Domestic Medicine* suggests that when children are in danger of suffocating from the cough’s severity, vomits are safer than intentional bleeding but if the disease persisted the child “ought to be bled.”⁷⁴ Vomits “cleaned the stomach, and greatly relieve the cough,” but the dose should vary depending on the age of the child. Additionally, “gentle vomits, frequently repeated” were more beneficial and safer than violent vomits.

While most books are filled with treatments, *Domestic Medicine* suggested some preventative cures. It reads “Our humours, even in the most health state, have a constant tendency to become putrid, which can only be prevented by frequent supplies of fresh nourishment. When that is wanting too long, the putrefaction often proceeds so far, as to occasion very dangerous fevers.” It also cautions that a lack of nutrients “is extremely hurtful to young people.”⁷⁵

English colonists saw childhood as a distinct period of life and their approach to childhood medicine reflects this. They observed how illnesses manifested differently in adults

⁷³ Buchan, *Domestic Medicine*, 200.

⁷⁴ Buchan, *Domestic Medicine*, 199-200.

⁷⁵ Buchan, *Domestic Medicine*, 45.

and children, and varied the types, dosages, administrative methods of medicines in response to these differences. Despite all the possible variations of diseases and medicines, Puritans usually responded to sickness of any kind by prescribing a laxative or an emetic, though often more “tender” or mild than those intended for adults. Alongside the Puritan’s faith in the legitimacy of the prescriptions, laxatives and emetics caused visceral reactions which gave parents sensory confirmation that the medicine was working. Parents could see, hear, and smell the bad humors leaving their sick children’s bodies.

Looking Forward

The topics of fatherhood and children’s health will be explored in more detail throughout the remainder of this thesis. This will take place over the next two chapters. Put simply, chapter two discusses the medical care fathers provided for their children and chapter three uncovers the spiritual understanding of illness and fathers’ responses to their children’s ailments. Chapter two’s narrative unfolds in the physical world and chapter three’s narrative largely unfolds in the immaterial world. Chapter two discusses the medical care fathers provided for their children. Chapter three uncovers how religious beliefs influenced the Puritan conception of body and soul, and sickness and sin.

Chapter two details how fathers formed intimate bonds with their children through medical care. It aims to challenge the idea that caring for infants and sick children was women’s work only and that sickrooms were uniquely women’s spaces. Though my thesis analyzes a period of over one hundred years, and medical practice evolved during this time, the evidence suggests that Puritan fathers documented their children’s illnesses consistently throughout the period. Fathers throughout the mid-seventeenth to late-eighteenth century cared for their children and carefully recorded the progression of their illnesses. Despite this emphasis on continuity, this

chapter examines the actions of Puritan fathers across three “generations,” though the grouping used in this study does not necessarily mirror other historians’ categorizations of generations. For the purpose of this paper, Puritans writing from 1630–1665 are considered first-generation. Second-generation writings fall mostly between 1665–1700, but occasionally as late as 1715. The third group analyzed here wrote between 1735–1780.

Chapter three dismisses this generational approach to focus on continuity. While chapter two discusses the ways fathers formed intimate bonds with their children through hands-on medical care, this chapter explores the ways fathers coped with their children’s ailments spiritually. This includes the ways fathers used spiritual methods to restore their children’s health, such as through fasting or prayer. This chapter also includes a discussion on the ways fathers interpreted their children’s afflictions.

This thesis largely studies the relationships Puritan fathers had with their children. Largely, historians have painted Puritan fathers as their family’s patriarchs, who provided for their family because it was expected of them. It is also often implied that it was a “legal and moral responsibility” to care for one’s children.⁷⁶ Other scholars have suggested that fathers provided for their families because the “ideal family was to function as a ‘little commonwealth’ in which the patriarch protected his dependents in exchange for their allegiance and submission.”⁷⁷ I take a different approach.

At its core, this thesis tells the story of fathers who loved their children. I do not paint these fathers as men who cared for their children because of an internalized goal of living up to an abstract concept of ideal Puritan manhood or paternal power. A reading of these diaries does

⁷⁶ Lombard, *Making Manhood*, 24-5.

⁷⁷ Mutchler, *The Province of Affliction*, 37.

not unveil emotionally distant patriarchal authoritarians. These men were hands-on fathers who deeply loved their families and wanted to protect their children at all costs.

Chapter 2 – “I Gave Each of Them a Pil of Pill-Ruff”: Children’s Physical Health and Hands-On Fatherhood

This chapter will explore the role of fathers in the Puritan household through the lens of medical history. It will illustrate the ways men engaged with their families in the private sphere in caring ways through medical care. Through this, I also challenge the perpetuated narratives that present the distribution of household labor as divided between the public and private spheres. It disrupts the assumption that caring for children was women’s work and sickrooms were women’s spaces. A reading of Puritan father’s writings uncovers a group of fathers who were mentally, emotionally, and physically present throughout their children’s illnesses. Fathers’ detailed descriptions of their children’s physical health and the medicine given to them to ease their suffering makes it clear that the sickroom was not strictly a place for women. By providing medical care for their children, they formed intimate social bonds with their children. In this chapter I argue by providing for their children in times of physical distress, Puritan fathers participated in the private lives of their families and formed meaningful relationships with their children.

The chapter analyses of how three generations of Puritans documented the health of their children and tended to them in New England. Though this study analyzes a period of over one hundred years, and medical practice evolved, the evidence suggests that Puritan fathers documented their children’s illnesses consistently throughout the period. Fathers throughout the mid-seventeenth to late-eighteenth century cared for their children and carefully recorded the progression of their illnesses. Despite this emphasis on continuity, this chapter examines the actions of Puritan fathers across three “generations.” For the purpose of this paper, Puritans writing from 1630–1665 are considered first-generation. Second-generation writings fall mostly

between 1665–1700, but occasionally as late as 1715. The third group analyzed here wrote between 1735–1780.

Each group's analysis is broken down into the ways fathers documented their children's physical condition during different circumstances. The section on first-generation Puritans covers infant health and childhood disease. A collection of letters written to John Winthrop Jr. constitutes the majority of the evidence. The second and third-generation sections each begin with a summary of how fathers recorded pregnancies, nursing, and the dangerous period for mother and child immediately following birth. A section discussing fathers' documentation and treatment of childhood diseases follows. Then, a section on childhood injury, followed by a summary of the ways fathers documented and perceived their children's physical and mental developmental milestones such as their children's teething, first words, heights, and weights. The level of detail in these fathers' private writings reveals a group of men mentally and emotionally present throughout times of their children's physical distress.

These fathers' interest in the health of their children coincides with the popularity of the preacher-physician in colonial New England. Puritan ministers often possessed some medical knowledge, and it was seen as a minister's duty to tend to both the spiritual and physical health of their congregation. Cotton Mather (1663–1728), described these duties of Puritan ministers as the "*angelical conjunction*."

⁷⁸ Mather declared "Tis an *Angelical Conjunction*, when *the Ministers who do the Pleasure* of CHRIST, shall also be *Physicians* and *Raphaels* unto their People!"⁷⁹ Puritans believed, to varying degrees, that physical and spiritual health were connected and at the mercy

⁷⁸ Patricia Ann Watson, *The Angelical Conjunction: The Preacher-Physicians of Colonial New England* (Knoxville, The University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 1.

⁷⁹ Cotton Mather, *Bonifacius*, (Boston: B. Green, 1710), 106.

of God's will. Therefore, sometimes it was most effective for preacher-physicians to "unite councils" of medical and spiritual knowledge to treat patients.⁸⁰

Preacher-physicians were common in colonial New England. Patricia Watson identified 126 ministers in colonial New England who also practiced medicine in their communities.⁸¹ Watson also explained that few questioned the inseparability of physical and spiritual health. Religious men with some degree of medical knowledge were common in New England. These men exhibited their competence in both theology and pathology when tending to the physical ailments of their children.

The First Generation

Most Puritan fathers who left diaries documented the health of their children in times of sickness. In his introduction to the diary of Michael Wigglesworth (1631–1705), historian Edmund Morgan admits that Wigglesworth, though an extreme example, resembles very closely "the unhappy popular conception" of Puritan men. Wigglesworth was a solemn man, constantly worrying, ridden by guilt, and "hostile to pleasure."⁸² While Morgan acknowledges Wigglesworth's exceptional circumstances, such as consistently poor health and possible psychological disorders, he also suggests that "he was closer to the ideals of Puritanism than his more warm-blooded contemporaries who indulged the flesh."⁸³ It is worth noting, then, that despite being a man who embodied strict Puritan ideals, Wigglesworth documented tender moments of reflection at the birth of his first daughter, Mercy, on February 21, 1655. Mercy was his only child born during the years of his diary, which spanned from 1653–1657.

⁸⁰ Mather, *Bonifacius*, 106.

⁸¹ Watson, *The Angelical Conjunction*, 3.

⁸² Edmund Morgan, *The Diary of Michael Wigglesworth, 1653-1657: The Conscience of a Puritan* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), xii.

⁸³ Morgan, *The Diary of Michael Wigglesworth*, x, xiii.

Wigglesworth worried for the health of his wife and daughter. This may stem from the fact that Wigglesworth was a preacher-physician and familiar with Galenic medicine and common herbal remedies used to restore bodily humours. Wigglesworth often viewed disease as God's way of informing colonists of their sins. Wigglesworth's view of disease as a physical manifestation of God's displeasure presents itself often in his poetry:

Affliction is Christ's School
Wherein he teacheth his
To know and do their Duty, and
To mend what is amiss
For though Afflictions may
Unto the Flesh be painful:
David and other Saints of God
Have found them very gainful⁸⁴

The night that his wife was in labor, Wigglesworth wrote "so long as my love lay crying I lay sweating, and groaning. I was now apt to be hasty and impatient..."⁸⁵ His wife's labor, which Wigglesworth noted lasted "about 30 houres or more," had his faith wavering. After acknowledging he must submit to God's will, Wigglesworth reported that his wife lived and had given birth to a daughter. After Mercy's birth, Wigglesworth documented his newborn's health out of concern for both her physical and spiritual health. He wrote that at two weeks old, she was "afflicted with a sore mouth, which continued near 3 weeks, accompanyd with griping and loosnes and sore hips...she had in this time 2 pitiful nights, especially one of them."⁸⁶ Sore mouth, or "thrush," characterized by fluid-filled blisters in the mouth, was a common "children's infirmity" according to the popular healing guide *English Physician* (1708), which Wigglesworth

⁸⁴ Michael Wigglesworth, "Meditation III," in *Meat Out of the Eater* (Cambridge, Mass: Samuel Green, 1670), 9.

⁸⁵ Michael Wigglesworth, *The Diary of Michael Wigglesworth, 1653-1657: The Conscience of a Puritan*, ed. Edmund Morgan (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 96

⁸⁶ Wigglesworth, 96

owned a copy of.⁸⁷ Additionally, looseness of the bowels was a common problem for children. An entry from *Every Man His Own Doctor* (1734) recognizes the condition “needs no Description,” perhaps to save the reader from a graphic description of a condition that most people are familiar with at one point in their life.⁸⁸ These developments disturbed Wigglesworth. He soon submitted to God’s will, for “he knows what is best, and is as tenderly affected as I.” He reminded himself, “*amare deum castigantem*,” to love God, even when he is punishing.⁸⁹ Regardless of Wigglesworth’s motivations, his daughter’s illness compelled him to document her physical symptoms in his private writings.

Other fathers contacted physicians through letters when their children faced physical threats. They detailed their children’s symptoms and asked for advice on remedies. First-generation Puritan fathers, such as William Leete (1612/3–1683) and Theophilus Eaton (1590–1658), who did not practice as preacher-physicians, nevertheless sought out John Winthrop the Younger’s (1606–1676) advice.⁹⁰ Winthrop was the son of the founding governor of Massachusetts and served as the governor of Connecticut himself from 1659 to 1676. Winthrop devoted much of his life to the study of science and medicine, and traveled the through Europe and the Middle East searching for insight into the scientific mysteries of the world. In his early twenties, Winthrop studied alchemy, which many considered to be the key to the understanding of the universe. Christian alchemists believed God guided them in their curiosity with the intention that they use their acquired knowledge to benefit society. An understanding of medical

⁸⁷ Nicholas Culpeper, *The English Physician. Containing, Admirable and Approved Remedies, for Several of the Most Usual Diseases* (Boston: Nicholas Boone, 1708), 43; Watson, *The Angelical Conjunction*, 84.

⁸⁸ John Tennent, *Every Man His Own Doctor: or, The Poor Planter's Physician* (Williamsburg, Virginia: William Parks, 1734), 17.

⁸⁹ Wigglesworth, *Diary*, 96, translation by author.

⁹⁰ In her study on preacher-physicians in New England, *The Angelical Conjunction*, Patricia Watson includes Leete and Eaton in her catalog of Puritans with medical training.

treatment was a key benefit of studying alchemy. Winthrop provided medical services throughout New England as an alchemical healer.⁹¹

Alchemical medical treatments were derived from “minerals and metals, unlike the herbal medicines that made up much of the colonial pharmacopeia.” Christian alchemists like Winthrop employed these techniques because of the powerful effects of the prescriptions, such as “violent purgative reactions.” In seventeenth-century New England, patrons of alchemists viewed these outward physical reactions as “God’s direct intervention into disease.” Additionally, Winthrop offered his medical advice free of charge as a “Christian service.”⁹² Thus, families seeking guidance frequently reached out to Winthrop for advice on which medications to administer to their children.

New Englanders admired Winthrop’s skills as a physician. As his biographer Walter Woodward indicates, by the 1650s Winthrop was one of the most sought-after physicians in New England. Woodward proposes that Winthrop received over sixty requests between 1650–1654 from individuals across New England.⁹³ Woodward details the letters that Winthrop received, noting that the letters came from both the rich and poor, for varying degrees of illnesses. These illnesses varied from a simple sore back to Edward Wigglesworth, father of Michael Wigglesworth, pleading for help for his condition. His condition is now assumed to have been Lou Gehrig’s disease.⁹⁴

Though Woodward and other historians such as Rebecca J. Tannenbaum have acknowledged the many letters Winthrop received, they have not seriously analyzed these

⁹¹Walter W. Woodward, *Prospero’s America: John Winthrop, Jr., Alchemy, and the Creation of New England Culture, 1606-1676* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 1-2.

⁹² Woodward, *Prospero’s America*, 6.

⁹³ Woodward, *Prospero’s America*, 184.

⁹⁴ Woodward, *Prospero’s America*, 185.

requests from the point of view of fathers tending to the needs of their children. Instead, historians like Tannenbaum use this pattern of men requesting advice to suggest that often it is their wives who prompted the letters. She suggests that although men wrote most of the letters to Winthrop, often it “was a woman who requested the advice.” For example, John Pynchon wrote to Winthrop on June 24, 1667, “These lines are to request your advice and help in the behalf of my wife.” Tannenbaum further suggests that it was women who “performed the intimate tasks for the birth chamber and sickroom, while men ensure that they could perform these tasks by dealing with the outside world.”⁹⁵ While wives often encouraged their husbands to write to physicians, this does not mean fathers distanced themselves from their sick children. Rather, the details in first-generation Puritans’ letters to physicians signify some attention to their children’s ailments. This proposition is not meant to imply that mothers were not careful attendants to their children, as men writing to Winthrop would often write for advice specifically on behalf of their wives. Instead, I argue that the parental division of labor may not have been as strict when it came to the illnesses of their children.

For example, William Leete (1612/3–1683), who became Governor of the Colony of New Haven in 1661 and Governor of the Colony of Connecticut beginning in 1676, wrote several letters to his friend John Winthrop Jr. detailing his children’s illnesses. A letter from 1663 may partially explain why Leete opted to ask his dear friend for advice rather than physicians in his home of Guilford, Connecticut, about 15 miles distance from Winthrop Jr. in New Haven. Leete feared that “some phisitians of our time may be too highly conceited of cureing diseases by violent fomentations, which I euer judged not to be your method, but rather

⁹⁵ Tannenbaum, *The Healer’s Calling*, 62

by graduall ripening and softening supplements.”⁹⁶ Though Winthrop practiced alchemical medicine, which often consisted of forceful purges, preacher-physicians often employed a combination of both chemical medicines and herbal Galenic folk remedies.⁹⁷ Winthrop may have favored the more gentle herbal remedies for children, and thus, when it came to his children’s health, Leete wrote to his friend for advice.

Leete appears to have been embarrassed to exploit his friend for medical advice, but his desire to preserve the health of his children overcame any hesitations he may have had. In a letter from 1658, Leete wrote “we are ashamed of our so continued and encreaseing boldnes...I shall yet adventure to present another passage of our affliction on another childe.”⁹⁸ Leete observed and communicated to Winthrop that his newborn child Peregrine, only nine weeks old at the time, had been troubled by red pimples across his entire body. The spots, having been present since he was “three or four dayes old” had now spread so the pustules had sealed his son’s eyes shut so that they had “a white seame, like the white heads of wheales.”⁹⁹ While Leete had women healers examine his son, “none of our woemen can tell that they haue euer seene the like,” he asked for advice on behalf of himself and his wife. Additionally, he presented his son’s physical state in detail, suggesting he personally observed and documented these symptoms. Sadly, Leete’s child died soon after the letter was sent.¹⁰⁰

On February 19, 1660, Leete, again hesitant to use his friend for personal medical advice but driven by the fatherly desire to help his seventeen-year-old son Andrew, wrote, “I am bold to adde a word more about my son Andrews starting fits, which doe again begin, though as yet not

⁹⁶ William Leete to John Winthrop Jr., June 25, 1663, in *The Winthrop Papers*, in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 4th series, vol. 7 (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1865), 551.

⁹⁷ Woodward, *Prospero’s America*, 194; Watson, *The Angelical Conjunction*, 121.

⁹⁸ William Leete to John Winthrop Jr., 1658, *The Winthrop Papers*, 539.

⁹⁹ William Leete to John Winthrop Jr., 1658, *The Winthrop Papers*, 539.

¹⁰⁰ Peregrine was born in 1658 and died “young.” Joseph Leete, *The Family of Leete*, 2nd ed. (London: East & Blades, 1906), 163.

to conuulsions, stupifying as formerly; to entreat your help by such meanes as you think best.

Henry Lines tells us that he hath beene so, and found help by some phisick you gaue him, but not your Rubila.”¹⁰¹ Rubilia was John Winthrop’s “celebrated alchemical remedy.”¹⁰² Winthrop’s Rubilia was “composed of four grains of antimony with twenty grains of nitre and a little salt of tin added, with some rubifying ingredient to give it the distinctively red color by which rubilia became known.”¹⁰³ Antimony, a semi-metal chemical element, was commonly used by physicians who followed the Paracelsian system, which regarded both minerals and plants as potential ingredients in medicine. Alchemists prepared the antimony to “separate its impurities from its active healing agent,” for antimony in its unpurified form was a “Venome and a most swift poyson.” Winthrop employed six antimonial preparations, each of which was a “powerful cathartic and potentially dangerous.” Winthrop commonly used antimony as a powerful purgative. Nitre, often recognized as saltpeter, was considered a “vivifying spirit” used by Winthrop for complaints such as toothaches, stomach problems, and urinary blockages, and was often prescribed alongside antimony.¹⁰⁵

Leete also kept Winthrop informed about the health of his daughter Graciana, born in 1653.¹⁰⁶ This was perhaps in part because Leete respected the opinion of Winthrop as a physician, but also perhaps because he wanted to keep his friend informed of the progress of his daughter. On June 22, 1658, Leete’s daughter, then five or six years old, was ill, in part with “trembling leggs,” which historian Rebecca J. Tannenbaum has proposed was possibly cerebral

¹⁰¹ Andrew Leete lived through his convulsion fits. He married Elizabeth Jordan in 1669, had six children, and died in 1702 at the age of fifty-nine. William Leete to John Winthrop Jr., February 19, 1660, *The Winthrop Papers*, 546;

¹⁰¹ Joseph Leete, *The Family of Leete*, 2nd ed. (London: East & Blades, 1906), 163.

¹⁰² Watson, *The Angelical Conjunction*, 121.

¹⁰³ Woodward, *Prospero’s America*, 195.

¹⁰⁵ Woodward, *Prospero’s America*, 194-5.

¹⁰⁶ Joseph Leete, *The Family of Leete*, 2nd ed. (London: East & Blades, 1906), 163.

palsy.¹⁰⁷ Though another physician, John Crane, gave the family a “cordiall powder,” used often to stimulate circulation or provide comfort, he left no direction on how to administer the medicine and the Leete family needed direction as to how “to make her willing and apt to take it; for though it seemes very pleasant of itself, yet is she grown marvailous awkward and averse from taking it in beer.”¹⁰⁸ Being a father frustrated that his daughter would not take her medicine, Leete asked his friend to “perscribe to us the varyety of wayes in which it may be giuen soe effectually.”¹⁰⁹ Perhaps due to an effective administration of the medicine, William Leete proudly reported to Winthrop that his “daughter Graciana begins to slide a chaire before her, and walke after it, after her feeble maner.”¹¹⁰ While Graciana’s death date is unknown, she lived, “long infirm in body and mind,” to be at least eighteen.¹¹¹

In a letter from 1659, Leete informed Winthrop Jr. about the “more than ordinary painfull breeding teeth” of his youngest son, Joshua, who was less than a year old.¹¹² He noted that the child was “full of moist and grosse humors also, for which we have giuen him some physick, and doe hope he findes good thereby; yet if any thing you may please to thinke further I to be done, we should gladly haue your advice, and readily to obserue accordingly. His eyes are very often sore, which caused us to use all the glasse of eye watter upon one and other of our children.”¹¹³ Medical literature of the time suggests that bowel distress was seen as “an effort of nature to carry off some offending matter,” which may be what Leete implied when he described his son’s “grosse humors.”¹¹⁴ It was also considered a common comorbidity of teething but was seen as

¹⁰⁷ Tannenbaum, *The Healer’s Calling*, 10.

¹⁰⁸ William Leete to John Winthrop Jr., June 22, 1658, *The Winthrop Papers*, 540.

¹⁰⁹ William Leete to John Winthrop Jr., June 22, 1658, *The Winthrop Papers*, 540.

¹¹⁰ William Leete to John Winthrop Jr., April 5, 1659, *The Winthrop Papers*, 542.

¹¹¹ James Savage, *A Genealogical Dictionary of the First Settlers of New England*, vol. 3 (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1861), 75.

¹¹² ¹¹² Joseph Leete, *The Family of Leete*, 2nd ed. (London: East & Blades, 1906), 163.

¹¹³ William Leete to John Winthrop Jr., April 5, 1659, *The Winthrop Papers*, 542.

¹¹⁴ Buchan, *Domestic Medicine*, 218.

dangerous when it caused extreme pain.¹¹⁵ It is significant that although Leete asked Winthrop for advice on the medication of his children he did not trouble his friend for advice regarding his own ailments in his letters. In a letter from 1663, Leete begins by apologizing for not writing due to pain in his face and teeth, but does not ask for any advice or detail his affliction much further.¹¹⁶

William Leete was not the only concerned father who wrote to John Winthrop Jr. concerning the health of his children. Theophilus Eaton (1590–1658), the first Governor of New Haven Colony, updated Winthrop on the health of his children and sought medical advice. Eaton wrote in 1654/5 to thank Winthrop on both his and his wife's behalf for the directions Winthrop gave "both in refference to my daughter Hopkins, and my daughter Hannah, who hath bin exercised these 4 or 5 dayes with vapours rising (as we conceive) our of her stomack into her head, hindering both her sleepe and appetite to meate, and apt to put her into fainting fitts."¹¹⁷

In another example of Eaton's documentation of his children's progress, Eaton wrote his daughter's "distemper did sadly increas^e the 14th of this month. My son sent Edward Preston the 16th, to intreate your presence or counsell, but he informed us that your owne family, or some part of it, were ill, and yourself from home." Eaton's daughter died shortly after, and his son, "partly with greife, and partly with this distemper, is also cast upon his sick bed."¹¹⁸ Eaton observed his son's illness became "more violent since [Hannah's] death" being so specific as to note that he vomited with blood "three or four times in the night."¹¹⁹ This letter illustrates a father grieved by the death of his daughter who then had to grapple with his son becoming ill

¹¹⁵ Buchan, *Domestic Medicine*, 218.

¹¹⁶ William Leete to John Winthrop Jr., June 25, 1663, *The Winthrop Papers*, 550.

¹¹⁷ Theophilus Eaton to John Winthrop Jr., February 3, 1654/5, *The Winthrop Papers*, 473.

¹¹⁸ Theophilus Eaton to John Winthrop Jr., July 19, 1655, *The Winthrop Papers*, 475.

¹¹⁹ Theophilus Eaton to John Winthrop Jr., July 19, 1655, *The Winthrop Papers*, 475.

with presumably the same illness. Not only was Eaton concerned with the physical health of his son, but also feared that his son's grief at the loss of his sister contributed to his declining health. His son's illness "is grown more violence since her death."¹²⁰ Eaton recognized his son's distress and wanted to help relieve his physical complaints. Consequently, despite Winthrop's preoccupation with his own sick family and daily affairs, Eaton pleaded to his friend, "We much desire your presence here, if your family can spare you; if not, such directions, as you judge meete."¹²¹

The Second Generation

While first-generation Puritan fathers documented their children's illnesses, and sought expert advice when they could, second-generation Puritan fathers in the late-seventeenth to the early-eighteenth century often employed a more hands-on approach to caring for them. Rather than illustrate a drastic change over time in the way fathers cared for their children, this shift may be a consequence of available sources. The sources used to analyze the first generation were primarily letters, whereas I had access to more diaries written by second generation fathers. This may be the reason behind the more hands-on approach to fatherhood for second-generation fathers. The sources also suggest second-generation Puritan fathers exhibited knowledge of how to cure their children's common ailments and treated them accordingly. Men such as Peter Thacher and Samuel Sewall exhibited a rather "worldly" and practical approach to disease as opposed to other ministers who leaned upon the spiritual connection between physical and spiritual health. This shared approach to medicine could be attributed to their shared education, both Thacher and Sewall graduated from Harvard in 1671, and their close friendship the two men maintained throughout their lives.

¹²⁰ Theophilus Eaton to John Winthrop Jr., July 19, 1655, *The Winthrop Papers*, 475.

¹²¹ Theophilus Eaton to John Winthrop Jr., July 19, 1655, *The Winthrop Papers*, 476.

The majority of New England's early iatrochemists, those who studied medicine based on chemical theories, studied at Harvard and went on to become minister-physicians. George Starkey claimed he began to study "*Chymical Philosophy*" at Harvard in 1664 and received encouragement from John Winthrop Jr. Harvard president, medical practitioner, and minister Charles Chauncy also taught alchemical medicine. One of his more notable pupils was Thomas Thacher, a prominent minister-physician and the father of Peter Thacher.¹²² Peter Thacher studied medicine throughout his life and traveled to England in 1677, likely to study medicine, and continued to study medicine during the time he was writing in his dairy. For example, in August 1679 he "read a little physick and mended the garden gate."¹²³

This shift toward a more scientific approach to illness coincided with the rising uncertainty of the minister profession and the tensions in the church gathered momentum, especially at the turn of the eighteenth century. New England communities more frequently disagreed on matters relating to the church structure such as church membership requirements and baptism. These disagreements led to churches dismissing pastors of their positions more frequently. This job instability drove students of Harvard and Yale to study medicine "as a second occupation in case their first choice, divinity, proved to be untenable."¹²⁴ Samuel Sewall serves as an early example of a trained minister who entered a secular profession. Sewall graduated from Harvard in 1671, but instead of entering the ministry, Sewall became a merchant and eventually a prominent judge, known for his role in and subsequent apology for his involvement in the Salem witch trials.

¹²² Watson, *The Angelical Conjunction*, 5, 108.

¹²³ Edward Pierce Hamilton, "The Diary of a Colonial Clergyman Peter Thacher of Milton," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 71, (Oct., 1953–May, 1957): 52.

¹²⁴ Watson, *The Angelical Conjunction*, 68.

The actions of the second generation of Puritans challenge the narrative presented by historians such as Rebecca Tannenbaum that “women performed the intimate tasks of the birth chamber and sickroom, while men ensured that they could perform these tasks by dealing with the outside world.”¹²⁵ The documents left by Puritan ministers in the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries indicate that men directly tended to their children and documented their health in great detail. In addition to illnesses, second-generation fathers recorded their children’s developmental milestones and injuries. This difference may be due to the number of and differences in the sources available for the first and second generations. The sources for the first-generation of fathers examined was limited and was largely based on letters written to Winthrop. The source-base for second-generation Puritans was largely their personal writings where they frequently recorded their daily actions. This difference may also explain why second-generation fathers appear to have provided more hands-on attention to their children.

Peter Thacher (1651–1727), Milton, Massachusetts’ first pastor, was a second-generation minister educated in medicine who discussed the health of his children at length in his private writings. Thacher took detailed notes of his children’s illnesses and resulting moods and was very involved in seeing to their recovery. Thacher was not the “resident physician” of Milton, and when warranted he sought advice from doctors outside of Milton, but he still took on some responsibility as the town’s preacher-physician, having been educated at Harvard. Thus, Thacher’s attention was not limited to the health of his own children. He often took care to see other sick children in his community. It is evident that parents in Milton frequently relied on Thacher for spiritual comfort when their children grew ill. Thacher often prayed for suffering children at their parents’ request.

¹²⁵ Tannenbaum, *The Healer’s Calling*, 62.

In addition to spiritual comfort, Thacher provided medication for sick members of his flock. Though he also prayed for adults, more frequently Thacher went to pray over sick children, in response to parents' requests. On February 18, 1679/80 Thacher recorded that "Mr. Barnabas Lawthrope was with me to git mee to goe with him to see his Daughter who hee feared was near her End which I did and prayed with them and gave her some Elixerate Balsam," an aromatic distillation of tree resin used to reduce pain and soothe the afflicted.¹²⁶ The next day Thacher gave her a "cordiall" and "she was something revived."¹²⁷ Finally, on February 20, Thacher gave Lawthrope's daughter "a dose of the black Pill for her to take at night." After tending the child, Thacher went home to find his own daughter, Theodora, "ill and feaverish," and tended to her by giving "her four drops of the Balsam Samack."¹²⁸ In *The History of Milton*, Thacher is celebrated for his caring nature, "it is said no small part of his salary in providing medicines for the sick and needy of his people." It is no wonder why Cotton Mather described Peter Thacher as "a universally serviceable pastor."¹²⁹ Thacher embodied the duties of the preacher-physician. He tended to the spiritual and physical health of his congregation.

Second-generation Puritan fathers not only took note of the health of their children but were often actively involved in seeing that they returned to health. They took note of their symptoms, the medicine administered to them, and their progress. Historians have previously concluded that fathers distanced themselves from the intimate responsibilities of caring for their infants and toddlers and only became involved in their children's lives as they grew older. Ann S. Lombard in *Making Manhood: Growing Up Male in Colonial New England* writes that "a

¹²⁶ February 18, 1679/80, *Peter Thacher, journal, 1678-1681*; "Balsam, Balsamics (unspecified)," *The Cullen Project*.

¹²⁷ February 19, 1679/80, *Peter Thacher, journal, 1678-1681*.

¹²⁸ February 20, 1679/80, *Peter Thacher, journal, 1678-1681*.

¹²⁹ *The History of Milton, Mass., 1640 to 1887*, ed. A.K. Teele (Boston: Press of Rockwell and Churchill, 1887), 526.

child's primary parent in the early years was always the mother, who had the major day-to-day responsibility for the care of infants and toddlers."¹³⁰ She continues, "the absence of details in men's personal writings about their infants as individuals suggests that, at least until babies were weaned, fathers did not become very involved with them."¹³¹ The frequent entries found in Puritan fathers' diaries regarding their children's health contradict these claims. Puritan fathers recorded intimate and precise details of their young children's milestones in their diaries and other personal writing, such as their children's heights, teething, and first words. Second-generation Puritan fathers' actions complicate the narrative presented by historians that there were clear-cut duties expected of fathers and mothers in Puritan New England. The fathers under consideration here begin documenting the health of their children while still in the mother's womb.

Puritan fathers began displaying concern for the health of their wives and children during pregnancy and childbirth. Peter Thacher expressed worry and concern for the health of his unborn children and wife, Theodora Oxenbridge (1659–1696), the daughter of Reverend John Oxenbridge of the First Church of Boston, during each of her nine pregnancies. Thacher appears to have been very fond of Theodora. He often referred to her as "my dear" in his diaries, recorded their trips together, tended to her when she faced anxiety or fear, and prayed for her well-being.

Thacher frequently demonstrated his familiarity with common medical knowledge in his diary. Thacher made note of his wife's physical and emotional health throughout her pregnancy with their second child, Bathshua, in 1679 and 1680. Thacher not only noted her symptoms but

¹³⁰ Anne S. Lombard, *Making Manhood: Growing up Male in Colonial New England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 20

¹³¹ Lombard, *Making Manhood*, 19.

also appears to have tended to them himself. A week before their daughter was born, on May 10, 1680, Mrs. Thacher was faint and feeling ill, so Thacher gave her some “cordial water” and “Elixerate Balsome,” and put her on bed rest.¹³² Cordial water was a medicinal liquor often used to stimulate circulation and “strengthen the heart.”¹³³

Thacher continued to comfort and tend to his wife in the remaining days of her pregnancy and was acutely aware of her emotional needs. Just two days before Bathshua was born there was a thunderstorm in the morning. Mrs. Thacher was afraid of thunder, as Thacher notes numerous times in his diary, so when this storm frightened his heavily pregnant wife he laid with her in bed and prayed with her.¹³⁴ Perhaps this was due to a medical understanding that stress can lead to complications for a mother and child. A popular domestic medical guide, which Thacher could have been familiar with, lists one of the most common causes of “abortion,” or miscarriage, as “affections of the mind, as fear.”¹³⁵ The guide further suggested that “Every woman with child ought to be kept cheerful and easy in her mind.”¹³⁶ In addition to any medical fears, this indicates Thacher simply loved his wife and cared about her well-being. Thacher’s love for his wife explains why he comforted her during a storm on many occasions, not just when she was pregnant.

Thacher was also aware of the other dangers presented to a pregnant woman and her baby. Several months prior, on February 1, 1679/80, Mrs. Thacher fell down “upon the knobs of the childs chaire.”¹³⁷ Mrs. Thacher landed on her stomach and feared that she had hurt her

¹³² Dr. William Cullen to unknown, January 25, 1776, *The Cullen Project*.

¹³³ Nicholas Culpeper, *A Physicall Directory or A Translation of the London Dispensatory* (London: Peter Cole, 1649), 86.

¹³⁴ May 14, 1680, *Peter Thacher, journal, 1678-1681*, reel 9, Pre-Revolutionary Diaries, microfilm edition, Massachusetts Historical Society.

¹³⁵ Buchan, *Domestic Medicine*, 335-6.

¹³⁶ Buchan, *Domestic Medicine*, 335-6.

¹³⁷ February 1, 1679/80, *Peter Thacher, Journal, 1678-1681*.

unborn child. Thacher shared in his diary that Mrs. Thacher was so frightened he thought she would faint at the thought of injuring their child. He hoped the child was unharmed and his wife's fears would prove false, "pray god it may prove otherwise."¹³⁸ Thacher displayed his prenatal medical knowledge again on February 9, 1681/2. Mrs. Thacher was ill and she and Thacher "were afraid shee would miscarry if with child."¹³⁹ This fear was warranted considering the medical literature at the time considered illness a common cause of miscarriage.¹⁴⁰

Thacher also exhibited an acute awareness of the birthing process and the dangers of in-utero complications. On March 6, 1682/3, seeing that his wife was increasingly ill, Thacher sent for Midwife Clark at around four o'clock p.m. Soon after, Mrs. Thacher's water broke, and the midwife arrived at seven p.m. Well aware of the workings of childbirth, Thacher expressed fear that both his wife and his child were in "great hazard" because "the child purged much while in the wombe."¹⁴¹ The presence of meconium, the initial substance present in the digestive system of a fetus, in the amniotic fluid is still dangerous for babies in the twenty-first century. Thankfully, at 9:45 p.m., Thacher's daughter Elizabeth was born and both she and Mrs. Thacher were healthy.

Puritan fathers additionally often documented the breastfeeding and weaning process. Samuel Sewall (1652–1730) exhaustively documented the health of mother and child during and after childbirth. Sewall was especially involved in the weaning and feeding process of his children. He often noted the first time and last times his children breastfed and appears to have had some influence on the weaning process.

¹³⁸ February 1, 1679/80, *Peter Thacher, Journal, 1678-1681*.

¹³⁹ February 1, 1681/2, *Peter Thacher, Journal, 1678-1681*.

¹⁴⁰ Buchan, *Domestic Medicine*, 335.

¹⁴¹ March 6, 1682/3, *Peter Thacher, Diary, 1682-1698/9*.

Sewall documented the arrival of his first child, Samuel, and his remaining children, meticulously. Sewall and his father, “heard the child cry” at “a quarter of an hour after ten at night,” on April 2, 1677. This suggests that he was not in the room with his wife, which was standard for the time.¹⁴² He wrote also that his son Samuel first breastfed from Bridget Davenport, one of Mrs. Sewall’s nurses, “The first Woman the Child sucked was Bridget Davenport.”¹⁴³ On April 7th, he proclaimed, in a way that only a father can boast of his son when Samuel first breastfed from Mrs. Sewall. Sewall proudly recorded that his son “sucked the right Breast bravely, that had the best nipple.”¹⁴⁴ Considering how humorous this is, this is either a joke or a genuine moment Sewall had as a father where he determined that he witnessed the first intelligent decision his son would ever make as his newborn son chose the obviously superior nipple. Regardless of Sewall’s motivations for recording which nipple was his wife’s “best,” he was clearly thankful that his son was able to eat.

Sewall was intimately engaged in raising his children from birth. In another entry from April 20, 1685, Sewall documented the weaning of his son, Hull, and indicated the medical motivations behind the weaning process. Sewall purposefully prompted the weaning of his son Hull “to see if that might be a means to free him of Convulsions.”¹⁴⁵ Years later, in 1689, Sewall noted the last time that his son Joseph breastfed, “Little Joseph sucks his last as is design'd, his Grandmother taking him into her Chamber in order to wean him.”¹⁴⁶ Sewall was consistently mentally and physically present throughout the weaning process. The desire to keep his children

¹⁴² Graham, *Puritan Family Life*, 36.

¹⁴³ Samuel Sewall, *Diary of Samuel Sewall, 1674-1729*, vol. 1 in Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society 5, vol. 5 (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society), 40.; Graham, *Puritan Family Life*, 37.

¹⁴⁴ As quoted in Graham, *Puritan Family Life*, 37. Curiously, many online and published editions of Sewall’s diary omit the section discussing his wife’s nipple. Perhaps quotes about nipples made the publishers uneasy, but it was certainly a part of the diary that was perceived as unessential to Sewall.

¹⁴⁵ Sewall, *Diary*, 70.

¹⁴⁶ Sewall, *Diary*, 310.

nourished and in good health as well as the emotions that arise at significant moments in a child's life drove Sewall's involvement. While women outside the immediate family often assisted pregnant and post-partum women, fathers engaged in the traditionally women's realm when it came to the health of their own infants.

Men additionally noted the health of their wives after childbirth, often as it related to breastfeeding. Peter Thacher wanted to ensure his wife's comfort during and after her pregnancy. Thacher tended to 'is wife's pains himself.¹⁴⁷ The week following Bathshua's birth, Thacher noted that "my dear was ill and in much paine with her breasts" and as a result assisted in plastering her breasts with nutmeg, beeswax, and butter. Beeswax was commonly used when "nipples were fretted or chapt" and butter was used "when an inflammation happens in the breast."¹⁴⁸ Another at-home physician guide suggests nutmeg for "pain in the head, or breast."¹⁴⁹ He further documented that all day he remained "with her and read to her."¹⁵⁰

As evidenced thus far, fathers were very involved in their children's lives before they were born and shortly after birth. This pattern continues in Puritan fathers' tendency to document their infant and young children's illnesses in great detail. Not only did they document their symptoms, but the fathers investigated in this study nursed them back to health.

The days immediately following birth were uncertain and dangerous, and the likely death of their infants frightened Puritan fathers. The unrelenting threat of death persisted throughout a child's first year of life—Between 10% and 30% of New England infants did not survive to their first birthday.¹⁵¹ The risk of death was "very high in infancy, high in early childhood (ages one

¹⁴⁷ This was not always the case, Parkman often had nurses, midwives, or his older daughters tend to his wife's needs.

¹⁴⁸ Buchan, *Domestic Medicine*, 339.

¹⁴⁹ John Tennent, *Every Man His Own Doctor*, 10.

¹⁵⁰ May 19, 1680, *Peter Thacher, Journal, 1678-1681*.

¹⁵¹ Mutchler, *The Province of Affliction*, 11; Richard Archer, "New England Mosaic: A Demographic Analysis for the Seventeenth Century," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (Oct., 1990): 488.

through four), declining to a minimum at the beginning of the teenage years.”¹⁵² Scholars suggest that half of the deaths in colonial New England were children under the age of eleven.¹⁵³ Fathers were aware of these dangers. When their young children faced illness, they often feared their children wouldn’t make it through the night. The first few nights were terrifying for the family, especially if there were any anomalies with their children’s health at birth.

After a difficult pregnancy, Peter Thacher must have felt relieved when his daughter Bathshua was born at nine in the evening on May 16, 1680, fifteen minutes after he had finished praying with his wife for safe deliverance. Thacher rejoiced that God had “answered by giving mee a liveing daughter and makeing my wife a liveing mother.”¹⁵⁴ Though the delivery was immediately successful, Bathshua was troubled by constipation. In attempts to comfort his daughter, Thacher gave Bathshua “some Salit [salad] oile,” and borrowed a cradle from Mr. Job Crockers.¹⁵⁵ Salad oil, presumably a laxative, was often administered to help with intestinal distress.¹⁵⁶

Thacher demonstrated his attention to his young children’s health when his son, Oxenbridge, was ill as an infant. Oxenbridge, who was named after Mrs. Thacher’s maiden name, was born May 17, 1681. Just two days after his birth, Thacher described him as “much troubled” by a “sore mouth.”¹⁵⁷ Oxenbridge was frequently ill for the first few years of his life. In January and February 1682 Oxenbridge and Thacher’s daughter Theodora, his oldest child, had a sickness for which Thacher “gave Each of them a Pil of Pill-rufi.”¹⁵⁸ Pill-rufi, known as

¹⁵² Daniel Scott Smitt and J. David Hacker, “Cultural Demography: New England Deaths and the Puritan Perception of Risk,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 26, no. 3 (Winter, 1996): 369.

¹⁵³ Mutchler, *The Province of Affliction*, 71.

¹⁵⁴ May 16, 1680, *Peter Thacher, Journal, 1678-1681*.

¹⁵⁵ May 17, 1680, *Peter Thacher, Journal, 1678-1681*.

¹⁵⁶ Buchan, *Domestic Medicine*; John Hill, *The Old Man's Guide to Health and Longer Life* (Philadelphia: John Dunlap, 1775).

¹⁵⁷ May 19, 1681, *Peter Thacher, Journal, 1678-1681*.

¹⁵⁸ January and February 1682, *Peter Thacher, diary, 1682-1688/9*.

“Rufus’s pill,” was a common mild purgative or laxative pill containing aloe, saffron, and myrrh.¹⁵⁹ Thacher not only noted the medication he administered to his children but also recorded their moods. Thacher noted that Theodora was “cheerly” the next day, both children had “a very sad night.”¹⁶⁰ Again, though this may have been a strictly practical inclusion, the fact that Thacher attributed emotions to his very young children illustrates that he saw them as individuals.

Despite his status as the town’s minister and unofficial physician, Thacher specifically named the doctors that he fetched when his children were particularly sick. He referenced several doctors by name including Doctor Winthrop, Doctor Swan, and Doctor Avery. On November 10, 1683, Thacher’s children Theodora and Oxenbridge were ill, so Thacher sent someone to fetch Doctor Jonathan Avery who examined the children and determined that Thacher’s son Oxenbridge’s fever threatened his life, but his daughter Theodora would likely recover.¹⁶¹ That night Thacher “laid fowle to Oxenbridges feet for four houres, and gave him Doctor Winthropes night-cordiall powder [and] gaskin (the muscular part of the hind leg of a horse) powder” which finally gave his son rest. The night-cordiall, cordial being a sweetened spirit used to administer medicine, was administered to help Oxenbridge sleep. Animal flesh, such as horse parts, fowl and gaskin, used by Thacher, were common elements in medicines.¹⁶² The next day Thacher reported that Oxenbridge was a bit better, and his fever subsided.

Thacher again displayed his attention to detail regarding his children’s symptoms. On April 14, 1684, when Oxenbridge was ill, Thacher noted that his wife and Lidea, a live-in cousin,

¹⁵⁹ “Rufus’s Pills,” *The Cullen Project*.

¹⁶⁰ January 24, 1682, *Peter Thacher, diary, 1682-1688/9*.

¹⁶¹ November 10, 1683, *Peter Thacher, diary, 1682-1688/9*.

¹⁶² Several references to using animal flesh and bones, including the use of the bone marrow of the hind leg of an animal, in medicines are found in *The Husband-man's Guide, in Four Parts* (Boston: Elea Phillips, 1712), 24.; Woodward, *Prospero's America*, 197.

went to Boston to consult Doctor Winthrop and Doctor Avery about Oxenbridge. The next day Oxenbridge “took a vomit” given to the family by Winthrop which “wrought very kindly six times upward and five downe ward, the child was very chearly after it had done working.”¹⁶³ Thacher took the time to record the intimate details of the number of times his son purged. This was not the only time Thacher observed and recorded the frequency of his children’s bodily functions. On June 1, 1680, Thacher recorded “Theodora took a vomit of Doctor Averys... which gave her 5 or six vomits and two stools after which shee slept and was finely chearly.”¹⁶⁴

John Winthrop Jr. died in 1676 and Thacher does not ever refer to doctor “Winthrope” by a first name. It is possible that Thacher treated Oxenbridge with medication prescribed by Wait Winthrop, John Winthrop Jr.’s son. The letters exchanged between Wait and his older brother Fitz-John unveil Wait’s proficiency in medicine. On several occasions, Wait offered advice to his brother who appears to have had recurring health problems throughout his life. On October 2, 1682, Wait expressed sadness after hearing of Fitz-John’s “indisposition” and send along with his letter “a paper of rubella and black powder in the breeches pocket...I know no better antidote in fevers than the black powder, niter, snakeweed, lignum vitae, white cordial powder, unicorns horn, all which you know the use of.” He gave directions on how to mix the ingredients and reminded his brother that “rebula be taken at the beginning of any illness.”¹⁶⁵ The proposition that Thacher was referring to Wait Winthrop is also likely because Wait conversed with James Avery on medical manners. In 1683, Wait wrote a letter to his brother during a “very sickly time” in

¹⁶³ April 14 & 15, 1684, *Peter Thacher, diary, 1682-1688/9*.

¹⁶⁴ June 1, 1680, *Peter Thacher, Journal, 1678-1681*.

¹⁶⁵ *The Winthrop Papers*, in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 5th series, vol. 8 (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1882), 429.

Boston. “I am makeing som medisinal matters, otherwise had set forward yesterday with James Avery.”¹⁶⁶

Wait Winthrop himself seemed to be a very hands-on father when his children were ill.

On September 29, 1684, Winthrop wrote to his brother Fitz-John:

I found my [little] boy newly taken with a bloody flux, [whic]h is of late a very prevalent distemper [in thi]s towne. He was for about a weeke [very] bad, but has since bin recovering, and [is no]w (I hope) prety well got over it; for [whi]ch I desire to return thanks to God, and giue him the prayes of his mercy and goodnesse to us in that he apeared to answer our requests and spared our only son when hope had almost failed.

Years later, in 1699, the illness of his daughter prevented Winthrop from traveling to his brother. He wrote, “my daughter, not being very well yesterday, was this morning very ill, and would by no meanes suffer me to goe from her.” Winthrop could not travel until “Anna is better.” He documented Anna’s medicines. “She has taken 3 graines, and works well, and hopes she will be better.”¹⁶⁷ Winthrop refused to leave his daughter behind when she was feeling sick. Whether this inclusion indicates that Anna did not want her father to leave, that Winthrop did not want to leave his sick daughter, or both, it illustrates a strong relationship between father and daughter and suggests that Winthrop took care of his daughter and provided her comfort when she was ill.

Samuel Sewall also documented his children’s illnesses in detail. On December 22, 1692, his daughter Betty, then almost eleven years old, “lyes abed and sweats.”¹⁶⁸ Sewall documented her progress in meticulous, disgusting detail. He carefully noted, “She takes a vomit, and brings up two Worms; one above six inches, and the other above eight inches long; a third about eleven

¹⁶⁶ *The Winthrop Papers*, in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 5th series, vol. 8 (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1882), 436.

¹⁶⁷ *The Winthrop Papers*, in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 5th series, vol. 8 (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1882), 559.

¹⁶⁸ Sewall, *Diary*, 371.

inches in length.”¹⁶⁹ Scientific fascination alone may have prompted Sewall to document the lengths of Betty’s purged worms, but it is significant he was recording this for his daughter’s potentially life-threatening ailments. This attention to detail suggests Sewall was often the one who tended to his children when they faced alarming physical threats.

Despite his interest in the scientific aspects of his children’s illnesses and his knowledge of treatments, Sewall, like Thacher, sought the advice of physicians when his family’s illnesses surpassed his medical abilities. In May 1690, smallpox struck Sewall’s entire family. The affliction first took his children Betty and Joseph, Sewall noted “Betty very delirious.” A week later, “Joseph hath a very bad night, as also the night before.” The next day Joseph, “grows better and the Small Pocks doe aparently dye away in his face.” When his son Sam became ill, he figured it was smallpox, “as the Physician and we judge.”¹⁷⁰

The Sewall family appears to have frequently consulted physicians for their children’s illnesses. After Sewall’s son Henry died from an illness in 1685, Sewall wrote that “Mr. Tho. Oakes our Physician for this Child. Read the 16th Chap. of the First Chronicles in the Family.”¹⁷¹ The Sewall family clearly respected their physicians. Five years later, Sewall solemnly reflected “This morning we have the sad news of the death of Mr. John Clark, our beloved Physician, between 4. And 5.”¹⁷²

Like Thacher and Sewall, second-generation minister, Joseph Green (1674–1715) sought the help of both physicians and God when several of his children got sick during May and June 1714. When Green’s son, Ben, first fell ill, Green wrote, “Ben: very ill—our hope and help is in our God.” Two days later, though, he reported that he sent for “Dr. Hale—he came at noon.”

¹⁶⁹ Sewall, *Diary*, 371.

¹⁷⁰ Sewall, *Diary*, 322.

¹⁷¹ Sewall, *Diary*, 113.

¹⁷² Sewall, *Diary*, 338.

Doctor Hale lodged at the Green home at least one night and tended to Ben for at least a week until Ben felt better. On June 4, his daughter was “taken very sick,” and the next day she “took [a] physick.”¹⁷³ Later in the month, Green presumably tried to pay Doctor Hale when he visited, “Dr. Hale here—I paid him...in full. He was not forward to take any.” Green documented the medications his children took even when a doctor’s visit was not warranted. On several occasions, he recorded when his children “took a vomit” or “took a physick.”¹⁷⁴

Even fathers who likely had minimal medical training paid attention to the illnesses of their children and helped them in any way they could. John Marshall, a stonemason living near Boston, recorded his children’s illnesses and epidemic patterns in Boston. In September 1706, Marshall’s son, was sick. In September “The small pox haveing been in Boston some months wherof a few only dyed. But in thee...month of september it grew very mortall, several dyed of it. It was attended with a sort of feaver called the scarlett feaver...all sorts old and young: male and female fell by it.”¹⁷⁵ On September 20, Marshall “went to boston to get some things for John he being very sick...at home idle.”¹⁷⁶ John did not recover, but Marshall stayed home comforting his dying son. Though Marshall does not write what he suspected his son died of, he recorded the illnesses which ravaged Boston. On October 5 he “was at home John being sick and dying.”¹⁷⁷ The next day his “dear son dyed” “about 3 in the afternoon.”¹⁷⁸ The epidemics persisted in October “many dyed in boston of the feavor and small pox. so that it was a time of [such] distress.”¹⁷⁹ Although he had no evident medical training, Marshall had an interest in

¹⁷³ Joseph Green, *Joseph Green diary, 1700-1715*, manuscript, DIA 72, Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Rowley, Mass, scan 176.

¹⁷⁴ Green, *Joseph Green diary, 1700-1715*, 155,184.

¹⁷⁵ John Marshall, September, 1706, *John Marshall, diary, 1689-1711*, reel 6, Pre-Revolutionary Diaries, microfilm edition, Massachusetts Historical Society.

¹⁷⁶ September 20, 1706, *John Marshall, diary*.

¹⁷⁷ October 5, 1706, *John Marshall, diary*.

¹⁷⁸ October 6, 1706; October 1706, *John Marshall, diary*.

¹⁷⁹ October 1706, *John Marshall, diary*.

medicine, tended to his children when he could, and reached out for medical expertise when needed. Marshall clearly respected the work of physicians. On April 8, 1703, “Mr James Oliver physician [died], a man beloved pious and useful above many.”¹⁸⁰

Whether second-generation Puritans consulted trained physicians or nursed their children’s ailments themselves, fathers were acutely aware of the state of their children’s health. Documenting their illnesses in such detail counters the propositions that fathers distanced themselves from their sick children and instead delegated sick room duties to woman healers.

In addition to disease, Puritan fathers were aware of the threat of injuries on the lives of their children, documented their progress, and assisted in seeing they returned to health. Like the documentation of children’s illnesses, fathers documented the physical injuries and developmental milestones with very specific details. These proto-scientific methods in the level of detail in their diaries first indicate an obvious interest in science and numeracy for educated Puritan fathers. Second, the level of detail suggests that fathers were physically interacting with their children to record these measurements.

Second-generation Puritan ministers recorded specific details of their children’s injuries in their diaries. Though Samuel Sewall was not a minister, he was educated at Harvard, where he received his M.A. in 1671—the same year Peter Thacher graduated—which usually led to a life of ministry. Thus, Sewall received the education of most ministers.¹⁸¹ In her book, *Puritan Family Life: The Diary of Samuel Sewall*, Judith S. Graham explains Samuel Sewall often wrote about the non-fatal accidents of his children. She discusses Sewall's habit of chronicling children’s illness and injury to argue that Puritans saw childhood as a distinct period of life,

¹⁸⁰ April 1703, *John Marshall, diary*.

¹⁸¹ Graham, *Puritan Family Life*, 18; *History of Milton*, 241.

rather than their children as “miniature adults.”¹⁸² While this is certainly the case, the level of detail in the writings of Puritan fathers as it relates to children’s physical health in the documentation of their children’s injuries and the process of recovery in Sewall and other Puritans’ diaries also suggests they were directly involved in treating their children.

Sewall documented his children’s many injuries, not only the ones that threatened their lives. For example, on January 10, 1690/1, his daughter Betty was hit with a “goad,” the stick used to spur livestock on a sled, on the side of her head “so as to make it bleed pretty much and swell, but thanks be to God, no danger now the fright is over, and heals.”¹⁸³ In another incident, his son Joseph fell and “breaks his forehead so as bleeds pretty much.”¹⁸⁴ Sewall felt inclined to keep a record of these injuries, even though Betty’s head healed quickly after the incident and Joseph’s cut does not appear to have needed further attention.

More serious injuries prompted greater detail. One morning, his daughter Hannah, then six years old, fell from a chair and “breaks her forehead grievously just above her left Eye: ‘twas the morn.”¹⁸⁵ On July 26, 1695, his daughter Mary, almost four years old, fell into Mattias Smith’s cellar and “cuts her head against the Stones, making a large orifice of more than two inches long; ‘twas about 6 post meridiem.”¹⁸⁶ For both Hannah and Mary’s head injuries, Sewall was careful to note the time of day and recorded the size of Mary’s cut.

On another occasion, Sewall documented details of his daughter Betty’s injury and the punishment and reaction of his child, Joseph, who caused it. Sewall wrote on November 6, 1692, that Joseph, “threw a knop of Brass,” an ornamental knob often found at the stem of a chalice or

¹⁸² Graham, *Puritan Family Life*, 98.

¹⁸³ Sewall, *Diary*, 339.

¹⁸⁴ Sewall, *Diary*, 424.

¹⁸⁵ Sewall, *Diary*, 153.

¹⁸⁶ Sewall, *Diary*, 409.

candlestick, “and hit his Sister Betty on the forehead so as to make it bleed and swell.”¹⁸⁷ For this, in addition to Joseph playing at prayer-time and “eating when Return Thanks, I whipt him pretty smartly.”¹⁸⁸ Sewall also documented Joseph’s emotional response to his impending punishment, “he sought to shadow and hide himself from me behind the head of the Cradle: which gave me the sorrowful remembrance of Adam’s carriage,” Adam’s shame in Eden when God discovers him, and he realizes he is naked and hides.¹⁸⁹ Significantly, Sewall recorded this incident with details both of Betty’s injury and Joseph’s reaction as a fearful four-and-a-half-year-old who threw something at his eleven-year-old sister. Additionally, Sewall felt Joseph’s behavior warranted a punishment as serious as a whipping. Peter Thacher had a similar reaction to the injury of his daughter Theodora when she was nine months old. On August 18, 1679, he found that his “Indian girl,” Peg, one of the servants he brought to Milton, “had like to have knocked my Theodora in the head by letting her fall wherefore I took a good walnut stick and beat the Indian to purpose till shee promise never to doe soe any more.”¹⁹⁰

Cotton Mather also documented the injuries of his children, though he often focused on the spiritual consequences of these incidents alongside the physical dangers. On January 2, 1698/9, Mather’s daughter Nanny fell into the fire in Mather’s study while he was not there, and “the right Side of her Face especially, and her right Hand and Arm, were sorely burned.” Cotton Mather blamed himself for his accident, “Alas, for my Sin, the just God throwes my Child into the Fire!”¹⁹¹ A month later, on February 17, 1698/9, Mather’s oldest daughter Katy, when she was about ten years old, went into the cellar and had her “her musslin Ornaments, about her

¹⁸⁷ Sewall, *Diary*, 369.

¹⁸⁸ Sewall, *Diary*, 369.

¹⁸⁹ Sewall, *Diary*, 369.

¹⁹⁰ August 18, 1679, *Peter Thacher, journal, 1678-1681*; Hamilton, “The Diary of a Colonial Clergyman Peter Thacher of Milton,” 55.

¹⁹¹ Cotton Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather, 1681-1724*, in *Massachusetts Historical Society Collections* 7, vol. 7, (Boston: Published by the Society, 1911), 283.

Shoulders,” catch fire, which spread to her “head-gear.”¹⁹² Katy’s clothing that caught fire was most likely a cap and neckerchief. Mather refers to Katy’s neckerchief as having “musslin Ornaments.” Ornaments, or any unnecessary embellishments, were considered prideful and unnecessary, but John Winthrop wrote in 1616 that ornaments “may be comly and tollerable” for virgins.¹⁹³ The Mathers heard Katy’s screams from the cellar and put the fire out, but “her Neck and he Hand were horribly burnt, and shee was thrown into Exquisite Misery.”¹⁹⁴ Due to this disaster occurring “soon after [Nanny] had suffered the like disaster, it threw mee, into extreme Distress.”¹⁹⁵ Mather spent the day pondering “*What use ought Parents to make of Disasters befalling their Children.*”¹⁹⁶

Additionally, in March of 1700, Cotton Mather recorded an injury his child sustained from feeding from a bottle. The night before the accident, his “lovely and only *Son*,” was “arrested with Convulsions, and the Life of the Infant is exceedingly in Danger.”¹⁹⁷ The convulsions that threatened his son’s life had already, “brought mee, on my Knees,” when the next day “the Child received almost a miraculous Deliverance from Choaking, by a Pin, which he suck’d out of the silver Nipple of his Bottel, tho’ wee know not how it came there.” While Mather clearly paid attention to the physical consequences of injury and illness, unlike fathers who documented the remedies given to their children, Mather often attributed a return to health to God’s will. He joyfully reported that “the Lord send help from Heaven against [the convulsions].”¹⁹⁸

¹⁹² Mather, 293; E. Jennifer Monaghan, “Family Literacy in Early 18th-century Boston: Cotton Mather and His Children,” *Reading Research Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (1991): 353.

¹⁹³ As quoted in Alice Morse Earle, *Two Centuries of Costume in America*, vol. 1 (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1903).

¹⁹⁴ Mather, *Diary*, 293.

¹⁹⁵ Mather, *Diary*, 293-4.

¹⁹⁶ Mather, *Diary*, 294.

¹⁹⁷ Mather, *Diary*, 339.

¹⁹⁸ Mather, *Diary*, 340.

Similarly, Reverend Joseph Green (1675-1715) reflected on the physical and spiritual consequences of his children's injuries. Green graduated from Harvard in 1695 and was ordained in 1698, becoming minister of Salem Village church. In 1712/3, during his ministry in Salem Village, Green rejoiced for the "Compassion of God In spareing the life of our son Edward whom we have (as it were) received from the dead."¹⁹⁹ Following his two older brothers who climbed over the fence near their house, Edward, then almost nine years old,²⁰⁰ fell backward after "going over a gap in the wall."²⁰¹ Green carefully documented that this occurred "about 40 poles from the house."²⁰² After hearing the news from one of the brothers who cried that "Nedde was dead," the Green family "all ran crying" to Edward. A quick look at his child led Green to conclude that he "perceived life in [Edward] but no sense," and quickly brought him home. Green continued to document Edward's physical symptoms, he wrote that Edward soon vomited, and they put him to bed, and "it was almost an hour before he could take anything."²⁰³ Green may have given his son some sort of medication—this is perhaps what he implied when he recorded that it was nearly an hour before Edward "could take anything"—though he does not specify any. After his son's condition stabilized, Green reflected "I doe not remember that I was ever in greater distress than at this time."²⁰⁴ Similarly to Mather's reflection that God might punish his children for his own sins, Green cried to god "for mercy, and for grace to be more holy and carefull to discharge my Duty...and neglecting to pray so particularly and earnestly for my children."²⁰⁵ His education and religious devotion may explain his inclination to document

¹⁹⁹ Joseph Green, *The Commonplace Book of Joseph Green, 1675–1715*, in *Publications of Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, vol. 34, Transactions, 1937-1942, 253.

²⁰⁰ Born December 1, 1705

²⁰¹ Green, *Commonplace Book*, 294.

²⁰² Green, *Commonplace Book*, 294.

²⁰³ Green, *Commonplace Book*, 294.

²⁰⁴ Green, *Commonplace Book*, 294.

²⁰⁵ Green, *Commonplace Book*, 253.

details of the physical ailments of his children while also reflecting on the religious implications of these matters.²⁰⁶

Along with documenting illnesses and injuries, second-generation fathers documented their children's developmental milestones, such as their children's heights and weights, teething, and first words. Samuel Sewall was attentive to other details of his children's developmental progress. For example, in 1684/5, Sewall recorded the proud moment when he heard his son, Hull, say his first word at seven months old. Sewall writes, "Little Hull speaks *Apple* plainly in the hearing of his Grand-Mother and Eliza Lane; this the first word."²⁰⁷ On July 8, 1687, Sewall recorded that "Little Stephen hath a Tooth cut two or three dayes agoe."²⁰⁸ Just over a week later, on July 26, 1687, at just thirteenth months old, Stephen passed away. After Stephen's death, Sewall included several important pieces of information about Stephen. First, he, "died in his Grandmother's Bed-Chamber in Nurse Hill's Arms." Second, he "Had two Teeth cut, no Convulsions." The next day, Sewall recounted moments from his son's funeral. He begins, "Between 6. And 7. after Noon, The Body of my dear Son Stephen is carried to the Tomb." The family arrived home between seven or eight o'clock. Sewall noted that his son and daughters "cryed much coming home and at home, so that [I] could hardly quiet them." He theorized that this outburst of emotions may have been prompted because they, apart from losing their brother, "look'd into the Tomb, and Sam said he saw a great Coffin there, his Grandfathers."²⁰⁹

Peter Thacher also carefully recorded the milestones of his children. For example, he documented over a three-day period a bout of what must have been an especially painful period of teething for his daughter, Theodora. He first noted in August 1681, when Theodora was two

²⁰⁶ Samuel E. Morison, "Introduction" to *The Commonplace Book of Joseph Green*, 194.

²⁰⁷ Sewall, *Diary*, 122.

²⁰⁸ Sewall, *Diary*, 181.

²⁰⁹ Sewall, *Diary*, 184.

and a half years old that she “was very ill of a fever shee was breeding a great tooth.” The next day “Theodora was something better” and two days later “Theodora was something better but had a very bad night.”²¹⁰ He also noted when his son Oxenbridge was almost two years old, on March 26, 1683, that he was very ill because one of his canines, his “eye tooth,” was coming in.²¹¹

Fathers tracked social milestones in addition to the developmental milestones of their children. Peter Thacher frequently documented the social milestones of his first daughter, Theodora, born November 1, 1678. On February 26, 1678/9 Thacher reported, “This was the first day that Little Theodora saw Boston it was a Weensday.”²¹² Similarly, on June 4, 1680, he wrote “Theodora was carried to Mr Allens; this was the first time of her being carried abroad this summer.”²¹³ It should be noted, Thacher recorded his oldest child Theodora’s milestones more frequently and in more detail than other children. Thacher likely had progressively less time to document each child’s individual developmental milestones as more children filled up his home and demanded his attention. Regardless of the circumstances which granted fathers the opportunity to document their children’s lives in detail, unlike many of the other medical and possibly pragmatic recordings in men’s diaries related to their children’s health, these entries may just be prompted by the sense of pride that fills a father’s heart when he sees his children reach various social milestones.

The Third Generation

Like earlier generations, later generations of Puritan fathers documented their children’s illnesses, development, and injuries. Unlike some of the second-generation fathers, who were

²¹⁰ August 1680, *Peter Thacher, journal, 1678-1681*.

²¹¹ March 26, 1683, *Peter Thacher, diary, 1682-1688/9*.

²¹² February 26, 1678/9, *Peter Thacher, journal, 1678-1681*.

²¹³ June 4, 1680, *Peter Thacher, journal, 1678-1681*.

actively involved in nursing their children back to health, Puritan fathers in later generations more often sought out the medical advice of professionals when their children fell ill. Ben Mutschler in *Province of Affliction: Illness and the Making of Early New England* remarks that by the 1760s, few preacher-physicians remained practicing in New England. Ministers who practiced medicine in the earlier colonial period could do so in part because of the “broader cultural authority of men who could command the Word.”²¹⁴ Preacher-physicians certainly commanded respect in part because of their religious authority. Peter Thacher, as the town’s unofficial physician, often treated the sick through prayer. It was not until decades after Thacher’s ministry that Milton, Massachusetts appointed Doctor Samuel Gardner as the town’s official resident physician in 1753.²¹⁵ By 1770, nearly five-hundred “doctors,” whom Mutschler characterizes as “one who undertook the practices, either singly or in combination, of a physician, surgeon, or apothecary,” practiced in Massachusetts.²¹⁶ This does not mean that fathers were not documenting their children’s illnesses in detail, only that many sought the medical advice of doctors.

In his expansive diary, written from 1724 to 1782, Reverend Ebenezer Parkman (1703–1782), a minister and farmer in Westborough, chronicled many of his family’s illnesses. Parkman graduated from Harvard in 1721, but unlike previous graduates who practiced as “preacher physicians” Parkman relied on the advice of physicians during times of crisis. The Parkman family frequently reached out to physicians for advice, some of the most frequent physicians consulted were Dr. Chase, Dr. Crosby, and Dr. Willis.²¹⁷ Despite frequently reaching

²¹⁴ Ben Mutschler, *The Province of Affliction: Illness and the Making of Early New England*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 25.

²¹⁵ *History of Milton*, 526.

²¹⁶ Mutschler, 25.

²¹⁷ Mutschler, 48n4.

out to physicians for guidance, Parkman still educated himself regarding medical practices and remedies. On February 13, 1752, Parkman studied the work of the “English Hippocrates”

Thomas Sydenham. Parkman recorded he “Read Sydenham on smallpox.”

Parkman often documented the health of his wives and the health of his young children.²¹⁸ Parkman fathered sixteen children, fourteen of whom survived into their twenties, with two wives, Mary, who passed away in 1736, and Hannah who survived Parkman. His children were born over a span of thirty-six years, his first child, Mary, was born in 1725 and his youngest child, Elias, was born in 1761.

At the birth of his seventh child, Elizabeth, on December 28th, 1738, Ebenezer Parkman dreaded the possibility that Elizabeth would not survive the night since she was an “An exceeding Small Child,” though Parkman was sure to report that thankfully his wife was “in a good State, through the wondrous Goodness and Mercy of God.”²¹⁹ Though his wife was well after the birth, Parkman revealed on December 3rd that she was “exceedingly pained under her Breasts – thought to be the Coming of her milk.”²²⁰ While Parkman’s wife was in pain, Elizabeth was in danger, as she suffered from a “sore mouth.” The Parkman family stayed up watching over Elizabeth all night on Tuesday, January 9th, out of fear that any breath might be her last. Parkman was obviously concerned about this possibility and “All night distress’d about it and expecting its last Gasp.” While Elizabeth survived that treacherous night, five days later Elizabeth perished. On January 14, 1739, Parkman reported that “The Childs soreness of Mouth had return’d for Two or Three Days, but we did not judge it immediate Danger.”²²¹ At “about

²¹⁸ The edition of Ebenezer Parkman consulted is the online transcription of Parkman’s diary through the Ebenezer Parkman Project, <http://diary.ebenezerparkman.org/about-this-project/>. The remaining quotes from Parkman’s diary are quoted as transcribed by the online project and will be referenced by the date of the entry.

²¹⁹ Parkman, December 28th, 1738.

²²⁰ Parkman, December 30th, 1738.

²²¹ Parkman, January 14, 1739.

nine o’Clock” Ebenezer was “call’d down from my Study with the Alarm that the Child was dying! About 10 She ceas’d to breath! The will of the Lord be done!”²²²

Parkman also chronicled the course of his wife’s sore breast beginning July 17th, 1758, after the birth of their daughter, Hannah. Parkman worried about the pain causing his wife “a great deal of Trouble,” and, rather than tend to the condition himself, he called for a doctor on July 30th who bled his wife’s breast which drained “corrupt Matter and Blood.”²²³ While Parkman did not bleed his wife’s breast himself, the ailment took an emotional toll on him and he still recorded her symptoms in her diary. The weight of these ailments on his family, along with other affairs of the week, worried Parkman. He wrote, “Troubles of my Family by my Wife’s sore Breast, prevent my preparing a second Sermon for the ensuing Sabbath.”²²⁴ This suggests that Parkman either helped comfort his wife emotionally and physically, which took up the time he would normally use for preparing, or he was emotionally drained with worry for his wife and little Hannah. Either way, his wife’s infirmity consumed his week enough to document it in detail in his private writings.

During the time of his wife’s condition, he also expressed worry for his infant child and appears to have tended to her needs himself. First, probably from relief that his infant child could get food, he wrote, “Miss Patty Dunlop here, and very Seasonably for my Wife’s Breast is grown very bad, and Patty can tend the Child better than any one; as She also takes a Singular pleasure and Delight in it.”²²⁵ By documenting this, Parkman shows that he was attentive to the needs of his newborn child, besides noting that Miss Dunlop apparently enjoyed the act of breastfeeding.

²²² Parkman, January 14, 1739.

²²³ Parkman, July 30, 1758.

²²⁴ Parkman, July 29, 1758.

²²⁵ Parkman, July 25, 1758.

Just four days later Parkman appeared to have tended to his young daughter's needs himself, without fetching a doctor. He wrote, "Our Child so ill with a Cough (which Seems epidemical) that we give her a Vomit." He followed by writing, "Capt. Maynards Infant ill and near her End as they think."²²⁶ This communicates that Parkman understood how the disease spread and likely concluded that his daughter had contracted this disease. Additionally, he wrote that "we gave her a Vomit," which implies that he participated in the curing of his daughter.

By prescribing something to make his daughter vomit, Parkman followed the medical literature he would have been familiar with. Patricia Watson suggests that Parkman was involved in the "remedy-exchange network." Individuals exchanged medical instructions and recipes from ministers, family members, partitioners, and physicians. Parkman received instructions from Timothy Briant on remedies and treatments for the "Throat Distemper," theorized to be diphtheria or scarlet fever. Watson also found that eighteenth-century ministers, including Parkman, copied medical advice published by newspapers that circulated during community medical crises.²²⁷ Entries in Parkman's diary further evidences his involvement in this exchange. On June 26, 1752, Parkman received "Dr. Nathaniel Williams...Method of Practice in the Small Pox." Eight years later, Parkman recorded "Mrs. Maynard was glad of a Pamflet I Sent containing Directions published by Mr. Prince from Dr. Williams of Boston's Manuscripts, about the manner of managing the Small Pox."²²⁸

Purgatives were thought to aid those who caught an infection involving fever and cough, for "cure of this cough depends chiefly upon cleansing and strengthening the stomach; for which purpose gentle vomits and bitter purgatives are most proper."²²⁹ Additionally, people knew that

²²⁶ Parkman, July 29, 1758.

²²⁷ Watson, *The Angelical Conjunction*, 83.

²²⁸ Parkman, December 13, 1760.

²²⁹ Buchan, *Domestic Medicine*, 197.

epidemic coughs, such as “chin-cough,” commonly known as whooping cough, “seldom affect adults, but is often epidemical among children.”²³⁰ It was known that the cough spread across “a small distance.” For children, vomiting was a “favorable symptom” because it “cleans the stomach, and greatly relieves the cough,” thus it was advised to “promote the discharge, either by camomile tea, or lukewarm water.”²³¹ Perhaps Parkman did not seek a doctor’s opinion for his daughter’s ailment because whooping cough was such a common illness and medical literature that provided a straightforward treatment for the illness were available whereas bleeding his wife was a more complex procedure. Regardless, Parkman sometimes treated his children’s illnesses himself and at other times consulted doctors.

While Parkman appears to have given his daughter a purgative when he had whooping cough without consulting a doctor, this was not always the case. On September 24, 1759, Doctor Wilson dined at the Parkman house and found Parkman’s daughter Sarah “bordering on Consumption. He gives her a Vomit which works while he is here.” While Parkman was careful to note when Sarah purged, he wrote that night that his wife stayed with Sarah through the night.²³² Sarah remained ill and Parkman continued to take note of her symptoms when they gave her medication, and when Sarah felt “chearfull and lively” or ill.²³³ Regardless of whether or not he tended to the illness of his family himself or whether he sought the advice of a doctor, Parkman documented the illnesses of his family in detail on a day-to-day basis.

Similar to second-generation fathers, later generations of Puritans also recorded their children’s injuries. On August 2, 1749, Parkman’s son Billy, eight years old at the time, “had accidentally cutt his Legg with a Scythe.” The next day Parkman had Dr. Smith “Dress Billys

²³⁰ Buchan, *Domestic Medicine*, 198.

²³¹ Buchan, *Domestic Medicine*, 199.

²³² Parkman, September 24, 1759.

²³³ Parkman, September 27, 1759.

Legg.” Billy’s leg was still unhealed a week later so Parkman “Rode up to Shrewsbury in my Chair, with Billy to have his Leg dress’d.”²³⁴ Parkman documented Billy’s injury and either called for a doctor or brought Billy himself to a doctor to have his leg examined and treated. Later, on August 20, Parkman gladly reported, most likely because Billy’s leg had healed to the point where he regained enough mobility to get “out to meeting to Day.” Happy that his son recovered, he reflected “Blessed be God for all his Goodness toward us!”²³⁵

Eighteenth-century Puritan fathers continued their commitment to documenting their children’s physical development. Third-generation Puritans documented their children’s physical features quantitatively—they often measured and weighed their children—but also conveyed a sense of emotional connection to watching their children grow up.

In 1739, when his wife gave birth to a stillborn, “Immature” child, presumably at five months gestation, Parkman recorded a physical description of his child: “The Measure of which was 13 1/2 Inches long. Immature for Birth, Yet with all its parts perfect.”²³⁶ Perhaps Parkman recorded these details for some pragmatic reason such as simply the study of medicine, but I suggest there is a much more tender explanation to this entry. Having been stillborn, these physical details were all Parkman knew about his son and he wanted to remember him and what he looked like.

Another possible explanation lies in a connection between the physical and spiritual health of his child. Following the physical description, Parkman writes “See Ps. 139... 10.13.15.16. (Tate and Bradys Version)” which reads:

²³⁴ Parkman, August 9, 1749.

²³⁵ Parkman, August 20, 1749.

²³⁶ Parkman, December 25, 1739.

1' Thou know'st the texture of my heart,
my r'ins, and ev'ry vital part;
Each single thread in nature's loom
by thee was covered in the womb.

15 Thine eyes my substance did survey,
while yet a lifeless mass it lay;
In secret how exactly wrought,
ere from its dark enclosure brought.

16 *Thou didst the shapeless 'embryo see,*
its parts were registered by thee;
Thou saw'st the daily growth they took,
formed by the model of thy book.²³⁷

Although his son died before he was baptized, he was still a child of God and all 13 ½ inches of his body was weaved by God “in nature’s loom” in the womb. Additionally, Parkman was sure to include that although even “shapeless embryo” were formed by God, his son had “all its parts perfect.”

While his son’s death prompted Parkman to measure him, some men also documented the heights and weights of their living children as they grew. Not only did men record their children’s progress for themselves in their private diaries, but they informed their relatives about the health of their dear children. In several letters, Reverend Mather Byles Jr. (1735–1814) updated his father on the progress of his firstborn child, Becca (1762–1853).²³⁸ In 1763 Byles informed his father that his “little *Becca*” “grows finely.”²³⁹ Not only did Byles consider this an

²³⁷ Emphasis added by the author. Parkman specifically wrote to see the Tate and Brady edition of the psalm, coming from *New Version of the Psalms of David*. The first edition was published in 1696.

²³⁸ Byles Family Papers: Guide to the Collection,” Collection Guides, Massachusetts Historical Society, January 2009.

²³⁹ As quoted in Lisa Wilson, *Ye Heart of a Man: The Domestic Life of Men in Colonial New England* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1999), 124.

important enough piece of information to record for himself, but he also found it notable enough to include in a letter to Becca's grandfather.

Similarly, Eliphalet Pearson informed his relative, "My *dear babe* is well, and grows finely—the day she was three months old she weighed 15 lbs." Six months after this, Pearson wrote to his sister that "my dear babe is a little indisposed by cutting teeth, one is thro' and another is soon expected."²⁴⁰ Because Pearson documented this progress with pride and relief suggests that he had a knowledge of developmental milestones. Seeing his child grow may have given Pearson reason to believe his daughter was healthy and her progress would continue.

Ezra Stiles, minister and future president of Yale, was especially interested in numeracy. Stiles was keen to document numbers and figures in his private writing. He frequently measured figures related to weather patterns, such as the depth of snowfall, and other natural curiosities, such as the length and weight of found teeth. Stiles was especially engaged in demography, he documented each of the towns he visited and often observed the patterns of disease.²⁴¹ His scientific interests manifested in his interactions with his children. Stiles documented his children's heights on his daughter Polly's tenth birthday, August 25th, 1777.²⁴²

Betsey— 5 feet $\frac{1}{4}$ inc

Ezra— 5—9

Kenzia T.— 5—1 $\frac{1}{2}$

Emilia— 5—1 $\frac{3}{4}$

Isaac— 4 feet 11 $\frac{1}{2}$

Ruth— 4 10 $\frac{1}{4}$

Polly— 4 1

²⁴⁰ Eliphalet Pearson to Doctor Edward A Holyoke, 10 June 1782, as quoted in Wilson, *Ye Heart of a Man*, 124.

²⁴¹ James H. Cassedy, *Demography in Early America: Beginnings of the Statistical Mind, 1600-1800* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 288.

²⁴² Wilson, *Ye Heart of a Man*, 124; Ezra Stiles, *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles, D.D. LL.D.*, ed. Franklin Bowditch Dexter, vol. 2 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), 200.

While this could be out of a father's concern that his children were growing at healthy rates, there may have been a simpler reason that Stiles indicated in his own words. Perhaps he measured his children because of a rare occurrence that "all of [them] were at home with me."²⁴³ One can imagine the disorder in the Stiles household as he rounded up his seven children as he meticulously marked each of their heights down to the quarter inch, perhaps through their protests. Less than a year later, on March 11, 1778, Stiles records the height of his son, Ezra, on his nineteenth birthday, "he measured five feet nine inches."²⁴⁴ Since his son was off at school, Stiles may have wanted to record these figures when he had the chance to see his son. It should also be noted there was likely not an urgent need to measure his son, for his son was nineteen at this point and had been measured less than a year prior.

Like Peter Thacher recording the first time his daughter saw Boston in 1678/9, later generations of Puritans recorded their children's social milestones alongside their physical development. Fathers frequently recorded their children's playing as a way to reflect their children's accomplishments in their social and physical development. Lisa Wilson discusses in her book *Ye Heart of a Man* several cases of fathers who recorded this. Selleck Silliman wrote to his in-laws in 1778 that "Our Dear little [son] has got a Go:Cart (as they are called) in which he runs about the House out of one Room in another like a Spirit; and where I made the Pause [in this letter] he came runing out of the Kitchen to his Mamma; and lookeing and seeing Papa writeing at the Desk, nothing would do but that he must have his little high Great Chair (in which he commonly sits up at Table & Breakfasts with us, with as much Decency as most People do) and sit up at the Desk with Papa, and have some Papers to play with."²⁴⁵ Silliman took pride in

²⁴³ Stiles, 200.

²⁴⁴ Stiles, 263.

²⁴⁵ As quoted in Lisa Wilson, *Ye Heart of a Man: The Domestic Life of Men in Colonial New England* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1999), 125.

both his little boy's physical ability to race across the house as well as his social skills. He bragged about his son's ability to eat breakfast with the same manners as an adult would and his son's imitation of his own behavior of sitting at a desk rifling through papers.

Mather Byles Jr. often wrote to his father in a candid manner about his children's well-being and development. In one letter, he thanked his father on his less than one-year-old daughter Becca's behalf. He wrote "My little Becca sends her Duty to her Grand-Pappa and thanks him for her gold Buttons: at least, when I asked her just now about the matter, she did not deny it." Byles continued and updated his father on her physical health, "She grows finely, and is in perfect health."²⁴⁶ In another heartwarming letter, Byles informs his father about Becca's progress. He wrote:

My Daughter grows remarkably fast and is universally allowed to be a fine Baby. She is in charming Health and Spirits; this Instant crowing in her mama's Lap, and using every little Artifice to interrupt me, and attract my Notice. (I wish sir you could see what a Beauty she is).²⁴⁷

Conclusion

Throughout the colonial period, fathers in New England cared deeply about their children's physical well-being. They documented their illnesses, injuries, and developmental milestones. Fathers with medical training took their children's care into their own hands, and those with less knowledge of medicine reached out to physicians personally to ask for assistance. It is clear that the sick room was not strictly a place for women.

While the fathers who have been the focus of this analysis had the chance to watch their children grow up and were present throughout times of physical distress, not all fathers had these

²⁴⁶ Mather Byles Jr. to Mather Byles Sr., February 21, 1763, reel 1, "Byles Family Papers," microfilm edition, Massachusetts Historical Society.

²⁴⁷ Mather Byles Jr. to Mather Byles Sr., January 10, 1763.

opportunities. Though George Thacher, a member of the Continental Congress and eventual judge on the supreme court of Massachusetts, wrote after the American Revolution, his words are poignant and speak to fathers' care for their children. Though far from home, George Thacher wanted to be updated about his children's health and expressed sorrow that he was not there during his children's early years. In April 1789 George Thacher responded to his wife Sarah's letter which informed him about the development of his daughter. He offered his wife some comfort, "Am sorry to hear our little Sally is unwell; but hope nothing more is the matter than what is usual to children when they are breeding their teeth."²⁴⁸ He ends the letter with a set of affectionate instructions for his wife, "Kiss the Children, tell them their papa loves them, and will come and see them in three or four months—and make them good & amiable."²⁴⁹

Another letter to his wife confirms Thacher's exceptional fascination with the growth of his children, perhaps the long periods apart from his children spurred this. While other fathers may take these milestones for granted, Thacher lamented he was not there to witness them:

Yesterday I recieved the profile of our dear baby [*Anner Lewis*], it is a beauty—every one sais it looks like her daddy—The old story on such cases—It hurts me that she is growing up before I can see her—That delicious period of childhood, most pleasing to me, will be passed or nearly passed by the time I shall see her—When they are eight or nine months old they begin to have pleasures and motions of their own—they are too big to be kissed—I lament my absence at this time, on this account as well as many others—But I hope to be at home in a month or six weeks at the furthest—perhaps before—Keep as many of the children to school & meeting as you can...

Kiss all the dear children—& tell them I am always thinking of them—
Yours. most affectionately²⁵⁰

²⁴⁸ George Thacher to Sarah Savage Thacher, April 26, 1789, *The Insurgent Delegate: Selected Letters and Other Writings of George Thacher*, in *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, vol. 89, ed. William C. diGiacomantonio (Boston: The Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 2019), 83.

²⁴⁹ George Thacher to Sarah Savage Thacher, April 26, 1789, 85.

²⁵⁰ George Thacher to Sarah Savage Thacher, June 12, 1798, 433.

The physical well-being of their children consumed seventeenth and eighteenth-century fathers' minds. The fathers examined in this study did everything in their power to help their children in times of physical distress. Medical care created opportunities for fathers to engage with their families in the private sphere in intimate, caring ways.

Fathers tried many different types of medicine to help their children get better. Fathers wanted to protect their children from harm and keep them alive, and they did everything they could do to do this. This chapter covered the remedies fathers gave to their children to prevent their deaths, but this was not the only weapon in their medicinal arsenal. In conjunction with medicine, fathers did whatever they could to help cure their children through spiritual means. Despite the Puritans belief that God ultimately decided everyone's fate, fathers did not entirely relinquish control and leave their children's fates up to God. They fought however they could to protect them, even trying to sway God's will.

Chapter 3 – “God Sanctifies the Condition of That Pretty and Lovely Child”: Spiritual Responses to Afflicted Children

While chapter two displayed the ways in which fathers formed intimate bonds with their children by tending to their needs during physical ailments, this chapter explores how religion influenced the way fathers perceived the spiritual significance of their children's ailments and responded to these threats to their children's spiritual and physical health. For Puritans, spiritual and physical health were closely intertwined. This is in part because it was often physical distress or a threat to their children's lives that prompted a father to worry for their children's souls and salvation.

Chapter two explored Puritan fathers and minister-physicians' understanding of the scientific etiology of disease and displayed the variety of physical cures fathers administered. The narrative largely unfolded in the physical world, the world of crying children, sick with fevers and in distress. Though this chapter continues to discuss the physical ailments of children, instead of detailing the medicines fathers administered to children it will explore the ways fathers reckoned with the spiritual aspect of disease. This chapter will explore how Puritans conceptualized the body and soul, how fathers spiritually interpreted their children's illnesses, and their public and private actions to preserve their children's health and sanctification.

Other scholars have commented on the Puritan fathers' spiritual reactions in response to illnesses. In some respects, this chapter will cover common themes addressed by other scholars, especially those related to the Puritan perception of the body and soul, and the connection between illness and sin. In light of my developing argument about building relationships through attempts at medical cures, we need to reflect on this concern for the spiritual health of both fathers and their children. Several scholars have framed Puritan men's concept of ideal manhood

as being guided by reason, attaining control of their emotions, and recognizing the ultimate power of God's will. The responses of fathers to their children's illnesses through medical intervention and spiritual methods, which will be explored in this chapter, were not guided strictly by reason and submission. Rather, fathers' reactions to their children's suffering were a passionate expression of a desperate desire to save their children's lives and eternal souls by any means necessary. Ideal Puritan manhood, as it was conceptualized in public, such as in sermons, did not mirror what unfolded in the home or in fathers' minds. It is much easier to preach the virtues of controlling one's emotions and submitting to God in theory than in practice.

It is natural for a parent to want to soothe their child during times of physical discomfort by using pain-relieving medicines or offering spiritual comfort. That said, Puritan fathers also wanted to put their own spirits at ease. They often accomplished this by convincing themselves that their children's pain served a larger purpose, either for their children's or their own salvation. Despite their parental desire to ease this pain, fathers eventually had to come to terms with their children's fates in any way they could, as parents often lost children in colonial New England. For example, only two of Samuel Sewall's children and one of Cotton Mather's children survived their fathers.

²⁵¹ Regardless of the frequency of the premature deaths of early American children, New England fathers were not hardened to their losses.

Joseph E. Illick argues that "religion served the very necessary function of rationalization, a meant to dealing with feelings of helplessness and consequent outrage, is almost too obvious an observation to need stating." Illick figured that the ways Puritans sought

²⁵¹ Joseph E. Illick, "Child-Rearing in Seventeenth Century England and America." in *The History of Childhood*, ed. Lloyd deMause (New York: The Psychohistory Press, 1974), 325.

religious comfort was “clearly not parental indifference but self-control.”²⁵² Yes, parents employed religion to control themselves in situations that could cause serious internal upset, but they also used physician-recommended medications in conjunction with religious remedies in their attempts to control their outward situations. This paper has evidence that Puritan fathers, instead of singularly using religious ruminations to control their own emotions in the archetypal Puritan fashion, passion and love also drove Puritans’ actions. Rather than exercise self-resignation, Puritan fathers acted with urgency and with all the tools at their disposal when their children were sick.

The Puritan Body and Soul

Puritans viewed the body and soul as connected but distinct entities. The body and soul were both essential parts of the human constitution, therefore both body and soul suffered the consequences of sin. Historian Elizabeth Reis proposes that as “a consequence of original and subsequent sin, the body endured ill health as its punishment.”²⁵³ Patricia Watson mirrors this conclusion in her study on seventeenth and eighteenth-century Puritan minister-physicians. She concludes that Puritans believed that illness was “linked to original and personal sin, as well as the sinfulness of the body social.”²⁵⁴

Cotton Mather deconstructed the connection between body and soul in, *The Angel of Bethesda* (1722). In the work, he explained the spiritual causes of illness and provided some pharmaceutical remedies. He wrote, the “*Outward Man* is fram’d with Parts, obvious to *Sense*, thus the *Inward Man* does consist of a due *Series*, and as it were a *Fabric*, or *Spirits*, to be

²⁵² Illick, “Child-Rearing in Seventeenth Century England and America,” 326.

²⁵³ Elizabeth Reis, “The Devil, the Body, and the Feminine Soul in Puritan New England,” *The Journal of American History* 82, no. 1 (June, 1995): 19.

²⁵⁴ Patricia Ann Watson, *The Angelical Conjunction: The Preacher-Physicians of Colonial New England*, (Knoxville, The University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 18.

view'd only by the Eye of Reason: And as this is united with the Constitution of the *Body*, so the *Frame* of it is more or less easily Disordered, by how much the *Constitution of the Spirits* is more or less firm within us.”²⁵⁵ Mather believed that a weak spirit could lead to a diseased body.

Alongside a presumed union of the body and soul, Puritans believed God had a direct hand in disease and recovery and that God often inflicted physical ailments as a punishment for sinfulness. When illness struck Puritan adults or their children, they reflected on the likelihood that their own lapses in faith or moral inadequacies caused corporeal suffering. Additionally, many Puritans viewed illness and physical suffering as God's attempt to guide them toward salvation. While Puritans adhered to the doctrine that physical distress often had spiritual causes, minister-physicians still administered prescriptive cures to relieve physical symptoms but were always sure to call on God to bless their efforts.²⁵⁶

God's Role in Disease and Healing

In *The Alsufficient Physician*, a sermon preached in 1711, Peter Thacher concluded that “There is [an] invisible Hand-holding of God... ‘Tis the hold which Christ the Physician has of his Patient.” Though Thacher, as evidenced in the previous chapter, seemingly had faith in medicine, in the sermon he presented God as the “Alsufficient Physician,” a “Healer to the Sin-sick and Self-destroying People.” While he practiced the art of medicine and frequently consulted physicians during his children's sicknesses, he confessed that the skills of mortal physicians paled in comparison to God's almighty power. Not all diseases could be cured by a physician. Even the most “Excellent and Skilful Physician” who had a “perfect knowledge of the Nature and Malignity of the Disease” could not cure every disease. Sometimes diseases resisted

²⁵⁵ Cotton Mather, *The Angel of Bethesda* (New-London: Timothy Green, 1722),15.

²⁵⁶ Norman Gevits, “‘The Devil Hath Laughed at the Physicians’: Witchcraft and Medical Practice in Seventeenth-Century New England,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 55, no. 1 (January 2000): 10.

remedies, continued to worsen, or developed symptoms that “were more awfully threatening” even with medical attention. In cases such as these, where a disease persisted through treatment, one had to turn to “the Almighty Physician himself who can heal & help in an incontrollable way.”

Though Thacher accepted God’s influence on bodily well-being, he recognized the differences between diseases of the body and spirit. He distinguished between “a distemper upon the Soul, or upon the body, upon a Person or Province.” Despite this, Thacher preached that God had a role in healing all types of sickness, whether it was immediately “from Gods hand, or more Immediately by Second causes, inward or outward.”²⁵⁷

While to Thacher God was the ultimate physician, he also believed that reverends had the duties of “Spiritual Physicians.” By this he meant that physicians had the responsibility to cure the souls of the “diseased people” of his congregation. Though in this sermon Thacher acknowledged a minister’s duties as a spiritual physician, in his own practice Thacher appeared to have been committed to healing both the bodies and spirits of those in his congregation. When an individual was sick, he often comforted their spirits by praying by their bedsides and relieved their physical pain by administering medicines.²⁵⁸

Thacher was not the only Puritan to compare the Lord to a physician. Samuel Willard (1640–1707) in *A Compleat Body of Divinity* called “CHRIST the great Physician.” He proposed that Jesus was able to “heal the wounds and distempers which sin had procured.” Like Thacher, Willard believed in the power of mortal medicine when administered alongside prayer and an appreciation of God’s ultimate power. He acknowledged the benefits of herbal or alchemical medicines and believed that they had access to remedies because of God’s goodness. He

²⁵⁷ Peter Thacher, *The Alsufficient Physician* (Boston: B. Green, 1711), 14-5.

²⁵⁸ Thacher, *The Alsufficient Physician*, 40.

encouraged people to use these remedies against disease but accepted they would only work with God's grace. Willard wrote:

WE *out to make use of Remedies for the Preventing or Healing of [Maladies]*. God hath in His Providence provided us, not only with *Food*, but also with *Physick*; and there are things proper for the Ordinary Maladies which we are liable to; and tho' the Success depends on God's Blessing, yet we are not to Tempt Him by Omitting the Means, which He gives us Opportunity of Using."²⁵⁹

Cotton Mather furthered these ideas of the healing of the soul. Mather argued that one could only be cured in their body when they were cured in their soul. He wrote "Diseases are not mainly in the *Humours*; inasmuch as *Evaculations* do not Relive, but fearfully Produce & Increase the Diseases. Only indeed, when the Ataxy of the *Spirits*, has by its Continuance at last Considerably Vitiated the *Humours*—Then a little *Purging & Bleeding* may be allow'd of." Though Mather had faith that healing began in the soul, like Willard and Thacher he believed in the merit of physical cures. He listed various prescriptive cures for diseases, including "Anodynes," medicines that relieve pain and "bring a *New Strength* into [patients]," *peruvian bark* which gave a "Vigour to the *Blood*," and exercise.²⁶⁰ While most ministers recognized the benefits of symptomatic treatment, they agreed that God ultimately decided one's fate. For this reason, Puritan fathers had various spiritual responses to the ill health of their children and wielded various religious recourses when their children fell ill.

Medical Metaphors

It was common for Puritan ministers to use medical metaphors in their sermons. Puritans identified both literal and symbolic sickness as prominent themes in the bible. God promised

²⁵⁹ Samuel Willard, *A Compleat Body of Divinity* (Boston: B. Green, 1726), 661.

²⁶⁰ Mather, *The Angel of Bethesda*, 15-6.

health to those who devoted themselves to Him and punished wayward followers with pestilence and plague.²⁶¹

Beyond recognizing that health was a central theme in their religious text, since Puritan ministers were often highly educated it is unsurprising they often used medical metaphors in their poetry as well as their sermons. Michael Wigglesworth (1631–1705) frequently used galenic medical terminology in his poetry to discuss spiritual immorality. One of Wigglesworth's poems found in his collection of meditations and poems *Meat Out of the Eater* exemplifies this stylistic pattern perfectly:

[2]

Wee'll spend a few leaves more
Concerning Grief, th' Effect:
That so we may apply a Salve,
And no man's Sore neglect.
If then thou art a Saint
That languishest in Grief:
Got hath provided Cordial
To yield thy Soul relief

[9]

As oftentimes we see
In some acute Disease,
To cut a Vein and let him Blood
Will give him present ease:
Right so doth godly sorrow,
The bleeding of the Heart,
Asswage the most heart-killing Grief,
And wondrous ease impart.

²⁶¹ Watson, *The Angelical Conjunction*, 8.

[10]

Empty bad humours out;
First cool and cleanse the Blood:
And then a Cordial wil revive
And do the man more good.
So when thou humbled art,
And purged from thy sin:
The Lord himself will comfort thee,
And Cordials sweet give in.²⁶²

In addition to poems, ministers often used medical metaphors in their sermons. Thomas Walley's (1616–1678) 1669 sermon on the biblical text relating to the “balm in Gilead,” which compares Jesus to an all-healing metaphorical balm used to heal Israel, is also rich with medical metaphors. He discussed illness of both “Civill and Ecclesiasticall” natures, but the majority of the sermon detailed the spiritual illnesses which polluted New Englanders' souls. He determined that New England was sick in spirit, “the Country is full of healthful Bodies, but sick Souls.” He then described three diseases that plagued the souls of New Englanders. First, “Lethargy,” which he described as a sleepy disease that caused a lack of urgency in its victims to see that the presence of God in the colony was in decay. Second, “a Burning Feaver,” which he concluded was a “Fire of Contention” which caused social division driven by a lust for power. Finally, Walley observed the disease of “an Evil Spirit” which manifested as spirits of oppression, cruelty, covetousness, delusion, envy, jealousy, and pride.²⁶³

Cotton Mather also frequently employed medical metaphors. In one sermon from 1690, Mather declared that a man who does not turn to the Lord or Christianity in times of spiritual distress was as foolish as a man who refuses to see a physician when he is very sick. He reasoned

²⁶² Michael Wigglesworth, “Song 1,” in *Meat Out of the Eater: or, Meditations Concerning the Necessity, End, and Usefulness of Afflictions Unto Gods Children* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Samuel Green and Marmaduke Johnson, 1670), 162-5

²⁶³ Thomas Walley, *Balm in Gilead to Heal Sions Wounds* (Cambridge, Mass., Samuel Green and Marmaduke Johnson, 1669), 8-10.

that this was because the Lord, like a physician, has an abundance of remedies for an infected soul, “A patient will not Reason so Unreasonably as to say, I will not go to a Physician, because I am very Sick. Nor should we thus argue, I will not go to the Lords Table because I have most fearfull Diseases in my Soul. No, you are to come hither as unto a Glorious Dispensatory, where you may have Medicines for all your Maladies.”²⁶⁴

Given the frequency ministers rhetorically wielded medical metaphors to illustrate the possible spiritual diseases their congregations faced, it can be deduced that illness was an effective tool to convey the urgency of their message to the laity. Certainly, Puritan belief in the inseparable nature of physical and spiritual health contributed to the popularity of this rhetorical device. Cotton Mather reasoned that “a *Sickness* in the Spirit will *naturally* cause a *Sickness* in the Body.”²⁶⁵ Despite the control religion had on the Puritan mind, the power of the metaphor extended beyond the theological and theoretical.

Beyond the sacred significance of the connection between body and spirit, this was a powerful analogy because of the universal experience of illness and physical ailments for everyone in a congregation. Everyone experiences some physical discomfort or is condemned at some point to watch their loved ones suffer. Those who observe their loved ones' distress often feel powerless in the face of disease. Ministers used physical illness as a tool to communicate the severity of spiritual sin. Alongside this was the message that God had the power to intervene and restore his followers to health. Though God ultimately decided who was cured of physical or spiritual disease, the sick or their guardians should do what they could to appeal to God's mercy. When individuals or their families were ill and felt vulnerable and ineffective, ministers taught people that they could turn to God for answers and assistance. Thus, in times of spiritual or

²⁶⁴ Cotton Mather, *A Companion for Communicants*, (Boston: Samuel Green, 1690),133.

²⁶⁵ As quoted in Watson, *The Angelical Conjunction*, 13.

physical illness, people prayed for health, sought out a deeper meaning in their distress, and altered their actions to try to appease God and earn His favor.

Spiritual Responses and Cures for Children's Diseases

When Puritan fathers witnessed their children undergo physical pain, they responded quickly with medicine and prayer. Some scholars paint Puritans as a group who sought, and often obtained, mastery of self-control and a resignation to the will of God. For example, Joseph E. Illick figured that Puritan parents' reactions to their children's deaths were characterized by self-control, and they used religion to cope with feelings of helplessness.²⁶⁷ Similarly, though admittedly difficult in practice, Puritans were supposed to exhibit "an attitude of resignation" when their children were sick, and when grieving their losses Puritan parents were "required to keep such behavior well under control."²⁶⁸ Despite the historical literature depicting ideal men as emotionally composed and logical, when it came to threats to their families, Puritan fathers acted with urgency.

Fathers who personally medicated their sick children often also took care to employ any religious methods that may grant them God's mercy for their children. These methods included both public and private pleas. Public, often community-wide, responses to outbreaks of disease or individual children dying included days of fasting, thanksgiving, and prayer.

Ministers often facilitated public or private days of fasting or thanksgiving. For example, Samuel Sewall documented several public fast days prompted by smallpox outbreaks in New England. In 1686, the General Court of Massachusetts ordered the fast because they perceived

²⁶⁷ Joseph E. Illick, "Child-Rearing in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century England and America," in *The History of Childhood*, ed. Lloyd deMause (New York: Peter Bedrick Books, 1988), 326.

²⁶⁸ Peter Gregg Slater, *Children in the New England Mind: In Death and in Life* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1977), 35.

God was directly punishing the people of New England for their sins. Sewall recorded the court's reason for the fast:

considering how apparent the threatening Hand of God is, by reason of the spreading of that infectious Disease of the Small Pox in some Towns in the Countrey...together with other Evils impending our selves and the Churches of Christ abroad... the 25th Day of March next [is] to be kept as a Day of Solemn Humiliation and Prayer throughout this Colony; That we may obtain Favour from God for diverting these Tokens of his Anger, and his Smiles toward us in the Spring and Seed-Time approaching.

Peter Thacher mirrored these techniques when his family faced physical threats. Thacher appeared to have been most frightened by smallpox outbreaks. On November 8, 1689, Peter Thacher “kept a fast in my family...On the Account of the Smallpox to beg of god that my family might be preserved from the Infection or ther lives preserved.” A year later, on December 12, 1690, Peter Thacher and his “family kept a fast. To seek a pardon of our personall and family Sinnes.” They did this to bring “favour to be toward this family and Exemption from the Comon Calamity (the Small pox was in 11 familys in Milton.)”²⁶⁹

Ministers also held private or public days of thanksgiving and prayer to please God and show thanks for the preservation of their congregations or families. Reverend Israel Loring (1682–1772) often recorded these days of thanks in his diary. Loring’s children were adults while he was writing his diary, but he often documented and expressed concern for the health of his grandchildren, his own children, and his children’s spouses. In October 1750, A week before a “Publick Thanksgiving,” Loring recorded “an account of mercies of a more private nature.” This list included his thankfulness “For the Recovery of one of my grand children from

²⁶⁹ December 12, 1690, *Peter Thacher, Diary, 1682-1698/9*, reel 9, Pre-Revolutionary Diaries, microfilm edition, Massachusetts Historical Society.

sickness.”²⁷¹ In March 1751, there was an outbreak of the throat distemper and Loring held “a day of Public Fasting and Prayer.”

David Hall (1704–1789), minister of Sutton, Massachusetts, often employed these tactics when both his children and children in his community were sick. Many children were dying of the “throat disease” or “nervous fever” in Sutton in 1756. Though none of Hall’s children died during the epidemic, Hall fulfilled his duties as a minister to care for his congregation’s spiritual and bodily health and tended to the children in the community, and “was often with the sick.”²⁷² Many children died throughout February, March, and April. In just one week in February, twenty children died. Hall reported they were “buried in one coffin.” That same week a young man died and many others were sick.²⁷³ The epidemic continued and Hall viewed himself as “Poor and Sinful,” perhaps blaming himself for the epidemic that attacked his flock. Wanting to protect his congregation, he wished “to Dedicate my self [to] God and to his People.”²⁷⁴

On April 15, 1756, Hall took action against the calamity and declared a day of fasting. He hoped God would take mercy on his people and would hear their prayers:

it is a time of Great Difficulty with many in this place. Many Died...O that God would sanctify the [sickness] and mortality that Sutton has been visited of Late years with. And O that he would sanctify his hand to me and my family in respect to Every Trial under which I Labor. This is a Day set apart for fasting and prayer...Prayer [hear my] God would enable his People to keep such a Fast as the Lord hath Chosen. And hear Prayers for us and help us²⁷⁵

Hall often resorted to fasting when children became ill. Over a decade before, on December 17, 1749, Hall recorded that a “Healthy youth died suddenly this weak...the Lord Sanctify his hand

²⁷¹ October 30, 1750, *Israel Loring, diary, 1750-1751*, Pre-Revolutionary Diaries, microfilm edition, Massachusetts Historical Society.

²⁷² February 1, 1756, *David Hall, diary, vol. 1, 1740-1769*, Pre-Revolutionary Diaries, microfilm edition, Massachusetts Historical Society.

²⁷³ February 8 1756, *David Hall, diary*.

²⁷⁴ April 11, 1756, *David Hall, diary*.

²⁷⁵ April 15, 1756, *David Hall, diary*.

therein.” At this news Hall, seemingly blaming himself, decided “to afflict my soul with fasting.”²⁷⁶

Spiritual Causes of Children’s Illnesses

Publicly recognized events such as fast days were just one way that ministers and the laity aimed to help sick children. First and foremost, men prayed for sick children. Cotton Mather figured that above all their other wishes, parents desired for their children to live a “Long Life upon Earth!” He judged the best way to fulfill this hope was to pray for one’s children. He wrote, “Let it be our cry for every one of our Children; Oh! *That this Child may Live, as always in the sight of God! Our Children demand our Prayers.*”²⁷⁷

Puritan men all shared similar beliefs regarding the spiritual causes or religious purposes behind children’s illnesses. How Puritans viewed illness and sin shaped the way parents ruminated on their children’s maladies and acted in hopes of their recovery or in response to their death. When children developed an illness or died, Puritan men most often viewed the cause as a punishment for sin, an opportunity to strengthen their faith, or both.

Illness Caused by Sin

Whenever Thomas Shepard (1605–1649), a pastor of the First Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts, saw his children fall ill, he blamed himself. He discerned that the Lord punished him directly for his sins by plaguing his children with illness, suffering, and death. This tendency to blame himself for his family’s distress presents itself in his autobiography frequently, such as when Shepard lost his firstborn child, at only one year old, on Shepard’s first attempt to migrate to England around 1634. When his son first showed signs of sickness while at sea, Shepard believed it was the result of his sins. Despite the threats they already faced on their journey,

²⁷⁶ December 17, 1749, *David Hall, diary*.

²⁷⁷ Mather, *The Duty of Children*, 95.

namely a storm that threatened his family's lives, "the Lord saw that these matters were not sufficient to wash away my filth and sinfulness and therefore he cast me into the fire as soon as ever I was upon the sea in the boat, for there my first borne child very precious to my soule, and dearly beloved of me was smitten with sickness, the Lord sent a vomiting upon it."²⁷⁸ Shepard saw his son's sickness as a punishment severe enough to match his sins, one of which was loving his child with a might that rivaled the love he was supposed to feel for the Lord. Shepard saw his child's death as the Lord's demonstration of His power. The "Lord now showed me my weake faith, want of feare, pride, carnall content, immoderate love of creatures, and of my child especially, and begat in me some desires and purposes to feare his name."²⁷⁹ After two weeks of suffering, Shepard's firstborn son died. This was not the only occurrence when Shepard blamed his loved one's illnesses on his love for them. When his wife died, Shepard "resolved to delyght no more in creatures, but in the Lord to seeke him."²⁸⁰ Shepard blamed himself for his family member's fates. When his fourth-born son John, died, at just sixteen weeks old, Shepard cried that it was "heart-breaking to me that I should provoke the Lord to strike at my innocent children for my sake."²⁸¹

Like Shepard, Cotton Mather blamed himself for his children's ailments. Additionally, Mather often contemplated the larger purpose for these treacherous trials which tested his faith. There are several instances in Mather's diary when he feared that God punished others for his mistakes. In 1706 he begged that "the Wrath or God may not for Sin, break forth either against my Children, or against my People. I am afraid, I am afraid, lest by Sin may expose *them*, to the

²⁷⁸ Thomas Shepard, *The Autobiography of Thomas Shepard, the Celebrated Minister of Cambridge, N.E.* (Boston: Pierce and Parker, 1832), 52.

²⁷⁹ Shepard, 53.

²⁸⁰ Shepard, 80.

²⁸¹ Shepard, 66-7.

terrible Strokes of Heaven.”²⁸² A decade earlier Mather reflected on a specific sin that he believed could have caused his one-month-old daughter’s unexpected death. On February 28, 1695, Mather documented that his “Daughter *Mehetabel*, dyed suddenly, in its nurses Arms; not known to be dying, till it was dead; of some sudden stoppage by the Wind, *the Wind passed over the Flower, and it was presently gone!*” On little Mehetabel’s gravestone, he wrote “YOUR BONES SHALL FLOURISH LIKE AN HERB.”²⁸⁴

In the following diary entry, Mather pondered the possible cause of his daughter’s sudden death. He wrote “This morning, in my study, praying for each of my Children by Name (as I use to do) I left the Name of my *Mehetabel* unmentioned. I wondred at this Omission, in myself and blam’d and chid myself, that I should bee so sottish, as having but *three* children to forgett *one* of them.”²⁸⁵ Mather soon recognized that this was likely not the case—just as he finished his prayers he learned of his daughter’s death which occurred an hour before. Though he recognized his omission on this occasion was not the immediate cause of his daughter’s death, it provoked fear in his soul. In a published sermon, originally preached in 1703, Mather begged other parents to avoid making the same mistake as he did. “Yea, O *Parents*, Don’t leave so much as One of your *Children*, out of your *Prayers*. And count it not enough to *Pray* for them all in general, but particularize them every one by Name, and this every Day that comes over your Heads.”²⁸⁶ Mather saw a misstep in a parent’s prayers for their children as a possible cause of their loved one’s suffering.

²⁸² Cotton Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather, 1681-1724*, in *Massachusetts Historical Society Collections* 7, vol. 7, (Boston: Published by the Society, 1911), 559.

²⁸⁴ Mather, *Diary*, 185.

²⁸⁵ Mather, *Diary*, 186.

²⁸⁶ Mather, *The Duty of Children*, 99.

Years before, on October 3, 1693, Cotton Mather's two-year-old daughter Mary was "taken very dangerously sick of a *Feaver*, with a *Vomitting*, and with *Worms*." Perhaps recognizing the child would not survive, two days later Mather "*resigned* [Mary] unto the Mercy of God." Mather was comforted with thoughts of his daughter's salvation and that he and his daughter would spend eternity in Heaven together. He was assured that "*this Child*, shall be happy forever...Yea, *that I and mine should bee together in the Kingdome of God, World without End*."²⁸⁷ This inclusion is significant considering the fundamental Puritan belief that one could never know for certain who belonged to the elected group of individuals who would spend eternity in Heaven. This demonstrates the ways Puritan ministers' beliefs morphed when their own children were victims. As a theoretical and theological father, Mather preached no one can know for certain if they or their loved ones would be saved, as a literal father coping with a tragic loss, Mather found comfort in believing that his daughter and him would live in Heaven together forever. On Mary's tombstone, Mather inscribed, "GONE, BUT NOT LOST." Despite his vision that his child was happy in heaven, Mather "sett apart the Day, for prayer with Fasting." He contemplated the meaning behind the devastating death of his daughter, "both as to my *Sins*, as as to my *Sorrowes*; especially, in the Breaches made upon my Family."²⁸⁸

Mather wrote about God's love for little children in his sermon *Addresses to Old Men, and Young Men, and Little Children*. He compared God's love for young people to a mortal father's undying love for his children. He wrote that "A father loves his *Children* more than all his *Riches* in the world and so does God love these Children more than the whole world besides." Though it was still expected that children consciously devote themselves to God, it appears as though Mather believed God had a bit more leniency in children's chances at salvation, at least

²⁸⁷ Mather, *Diary*, 174.

²⁸⁸ Mather, *Diary*, 175.

in this sermon. He rejoiced at the “*privilege*, that God has the *Love* of a Father for them” and that it was also “their privilege, that God has likewise the *pity* of a *Father* for them. When a Child is in *sickness*, or *distress*...the heart of God moves with a more compassionate pity toward gracious little Children in all their Troubles.” Mather goes on to quote Psalm 103.12 “*As a Father pities his Children, the Lord pities them that fear him*. He feels sorrows with a most *parental Sympathy*; and if at any time he Chastise them with necessary Afflictions, he says upon it, *My Bowels are troubled for them. I Will surely have mercy upon them.*”²⁸⁹

Illness As An Opportunity

While most Puritan men recognized the horrors of their situations when their children were ill, many also reasoned that God gave them trials to strengthen their relationship with God. Ben Mutchler argues that even well into the eighteenth century, Puritans believed that “illness presented a challenge to faith, a special ‘trial’ in which the sick might examine the state of their soul, ask for forgiveness, and, with God’s grace, be restored.”²⁹¹ Here, Mutchler discusses illness as a religious trial for the individual suffering from the disease, but when children got sick, fathers often saw the event as a trial of their own faith rather than their children’s faith. He further proposes that “sickness was a call to turn inward and consider matters of the soul.” Mutchler gives the example of Ebenezer Parkman (1703–1782). Parkman, like many ministers in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, was instructed in the “school of affliction” which encouraged people to contemplate the personal significance and meanings of suffering.²⁹²

Patricia Watson suggests that when Puritan men could not determine a specific sin that prompted their own or their loved ones' illnesses they viewed their misfortune as an opportunity

²⁸⁹ Cotton Mather, *Addresses to Old Men, and Young Men, and Little Children* (Boston: R. Pierce, 1690), 113-4.

²⁹¹ Ben Mutschler, *The Province of Affliction: Illness and the Making of Early New England*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 26.

²⁹² Mutschler, *The Province of Affliction*, 27.

to demonstrate the strength of their faith. Watson indicates that according to the New Testament, Christians were supposed to embrace and rejoice when faced with physical afflictions for two reasons. “(1) God uses suffering as a means of producing spiritual maturity, if there is a right response to the affliction; and (2) the very fact that Christians endure suffering...is proof that they are the children of God.” Suffering helped refine a Christian’s character. Thus, illness could be a punishment for sin, but also a demonstration of God’s love, since illness could be an opportunity to grow closer to Him.²⁹³

Entries found in Puritan diaries prove that many fathers viewed the afflictions of their children as “loving punishments.” When Joseph Thompson (1640–1732), a schoolmaster and reverend in Billerica, Massachusetts, perceived that his children faced death he reasoned that it was God’s way of bringing him to the light of God. When Thompson’s life was peaceful and his family was happy, he figured his faith proved inadequate in the eyes of God. As a result, God gave Thompson dreadful challenges to his faith, since Thompson believed he did not respond to God’s blessings appropriately. Thompson wrote in 1674:

it please the Lord to shake his rod over my familie and the time of affliction brought my sin to remembrance so that when [mercies] did not allure me that chastizements did awaken me. For which I have cause to praise the name of the Lord. and to take a [strict] around of the frame of my spirit under all these the Lords...mercies and afflictions. I se that I have abundant cause to be humbled and abased before the Lord.²⁹⁴

Though he saw illness as an opportunity to grow closer to God, Thompson was also quick to attribute his children’s ailments to his own sins. When his wife birthed a stillborn child later that year Thompson blamed himself:

²⁹³ Watson, *The Angelical Conjunction*, 18.

²⁹⁴ Joseph Thompson, Diary: manuscript, 1666-1679, 1723, and 1726, *Colonial North America at Harvard Library*, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., seq. 55.

in taking away my dear babe. Whose life was gon before it came into the world. Looking to my owne hard and considering the frame of my spirit for sum time before; and in this time I saw what exceeding cause my pore soule had to lie in [the dirt] before the Lord...my own vilenes[s] and [wreched]-ness that still there is in me a nature so prone to depart away from the Lord...what a pore improvement I had made of the Lord...to wards me for both more mercies and chastizements. Both soule mercies and familie mercies.²⁹⁵

The mercies and chastisements which Thompson received referred to the fact that his wife survived the dangerous birth, but his son died. In his diary, Thompson expressed joy that his wife survived, but sorrowfully recounted his son's death. Though he recognized he was meant to face this trial with bravery, he could not ignore the tremendous loss of losing his child, his "sweet blossom that I had so much desired":

For which my soule has cause to blesse his holy Name in spareing my dear wife at that time all thow he was pleased to nip of that sweet blossom that I had so much desired. At the news of it I found my spirit Confused. Not afforded with the mercie suitable nor with the chastizement. Manie resonings I experienced in my own hart at that time.²⁹⁶

Like many fathers, Thompson strove to understand how to deal with the religious significance of his child's death and tried to see these trials as God presenting opportunities for growth as he grieved his child. His religion suggested that God ultimately decided who recovered from illness and who would succumb.

Reverend Israel Loring also often desired to find meaning in children's sicknesses. On April 26, 1751, he reflected on several hardships he and his family faced in a short span of time. On March 23, Loring reported that his "Little grandson Johnny Brown Died of the throat distemper," his son in law had been "greviously afflicted with the [rheumatism]," his "grandson Abel Loring has been indisposed" likely of the throat distemper, and his wife "complained of a

²⁹⁵ Thompson, Diary, seq. 52.

²⁹⁶ Thompson, Diary, seq. 50.

swelling in her neck [and] complained of her being Cold tho her flesh burnt like fire.” Regarding his wife’s illness, Loring recognized that God would ultimately decide her fate. He was still unsure “how it will please God to Deal with her.”

Loring contemplated God’s reasoning for his and his family’s suffering in response to his family being met repeatedly with deadly afflictions. With so many consecutive afflictions, Loring figured it must be God [sending him a message] and it was time he [investigated] the potential spiritual causes. He wrote “It becomes me to take a dire notice of the hand of an holy and righteous God in these afflictions and to humble my self under them to justify God and condemn my self. May it be in faithfulness that thou art afflicting of me!”²⁹⁷ While here Loring hoped he could learn something from his own family’s afflictions, he also prayed that other families found comfort spiritually after a tragedy. On November 29, 1751, Loring reported that Mr. Plymton’s infant child died of throat distemper. The next day, “between twelve and one o’clock at night Dyed another Child of Mr Plymtons of the throat distemper.” Loring recognized how devastating this was for the family, but hoped they could persevere through their grief. He prayed that “The Lord sanctify the repeated Broaches which he has made upon that family, and support under them. May they bear their heavy affliction well and improve them well.”

David Hall often contemplated what his family could learn through illness, especially when they were spared from death during times when children were especially vulnerable. Throughout the many epidemical illnesses that came to Sutton, Hall’s children were often spared. In an entry from February 15, 1776, Hall recorded “Last week Died 20 children buried in one coffin.” Hall’s children had so far been spared of the disease and Hall thanked the Lord and wondered how he earned this mercy. He reflected “What Mercy Do I enjoy in that I have had my

²⁹⁷ April 26, 1753, *Israel Loring, diary*.

children so many of them spared me unto this Day?” Though their bodies were healthy, Hall worried about the souls of his children, perhaps because his children could easily die of the “throat disease” and be sent to be judged by the Lord. He feared “few if any of them are new Born.” Hall committed to instructing his children in the way of the Lord. He asked God for assistance, “Lord help me to be more Diligent in doing my Duty to them. And grant me this Joy to see my Children walk in the Truth.”

In October of the same year, Hall pondered if he was doing all he could to ensure his children’s spiritual health in times of epidemics. Hall reported that though his family had been sick, “God hath spared us our lives.” He thanked the Lord for His mercy and hoped he and his family could grow spiritually from their physical distress, “Lord awaken my family to Consideration and O my Lord awake[n] to a more Lively Exercise of Duty.”²⁹⁸

Prayer

It was usually the deaths of children, both their own and those in their congregations, that prompted fathers and ministers to reflect in their diaries about the larger purpose of the deaths. It appears as though when children were sick, most Puritan men did not blame young people’s suffering on the sins of the child, in contrast to a sick adult who may figure he was the cause of his own suffering. Thus, children’s deaths were more upsetting spiritually. More simply, though, is that the deaths of young children are fundamentally heartbreaking. The death of a child was, as it is now, devastating to anyone who knew him or her.

Fathers and religious authorities acted in any way that could prevent the deaths of children. Though parents and minister-physicians tried to prevent the deaths of young people with medicine that they believed helped their physical ailments, their efforts often failed. When a

²⁹⁸ October 23, 1756, *David Hall, diary, vol. 1, 1740-1769*, Pre-Revolutionary Diaries, microfilm edition, Massachusetts Historical Society.

disease was beyond the skill of a mortal physician, people begged God, the almighty physician, to cure their children. Finally, when children were dying or died, parents and ministers contemplated the significance of their death. While as evidenced above, some fathers saw the illnesses of their children as opportunities to augment their own faith, fathers also looked for meaning in their children's illnesses apart from considering whether God afflicted their children to test their love for Him.

Cotton Mather often searched for a deeper purpose in his children's suffering. This pattern can be uncovered by examining the many misfortunes of his daughter, Nanny, who was born in 1697. Mather often prayed for mercy for his daughter, asked God not to punish his child for his own sins, and wished for sanctification for her suffering. One of the most poignant events was when, on January 2, 1698, Nanny fell into the fireplace in Mather's study. Mather blamed himself for her suffering but perhaps did not want to believe that his daughter's immense physical pain and permanent scarring were devoid of divine intention. Mather reasoned God sent the literal and metaphorical fire to permanently mark her with His love.

The fire burned the right side of Nanny's face, hand, and arm. Mather immediately blamed himself for the event. He cried, "Alas, for my *Sin*, the just God throwes *my Child* into the *Fire!*" He followed by "pouring out my Prayers to God, for His Mercies unto the Child, and the rest of my Family." Mather aimed to remedy the situation and thus set apart a "*secret Fast*" to repent for his sins that he believed prompted his daughter's fall, which Mather called a "humbling Providence." He prayed that God would forgive him for his sins and not punish his family. He hoped God would pardon his sins through "the *Blood* of His own Son." He then "sett myself, to cry unto Heaven, for the Welfare of my *Children*, and my whole *Family*, on all accounts."

Mather believed that God listened to his prayers and his “cries are *heard, in the Holy Place of God.*” He found a blessing in his daughter’s scarring. He reasoned that her burns, inflicted by God, now served as a permanent mark of her holiness. Mather felt an overwhelming assurance that not only would Nanny happily recover:

shee shall bee blessed throughout eternal Ages God will make her one of His own Children; God will distinguish her with Marks of his everlasting Love. The Fire, that hath wounded the Child, hath added a strong Fire and Force to the Zeal of my Prayer for her; and God has now raised my Prayer for her, to this Degree of a Particular Faith in her behalf. If this Writing of her poor Father, ever come to bee readd by her, lett her give Thanks to God, that ever Hee cast her into a Fire, which thus enflamed the Supplications of her Father for her.

Nanny’s burns signified that she was destined to be eternally loved by God. He also reasoned that his prayers were heard by God because they were fueled by a fire that rivaled the flames that scorched his child. While Mather believed that Nanny’s body and soul recovery was blessed by God, Mather wished to ensure that children other than his own dodged the flames of God’s wrath. He promised he would dedicate more time in his sermons to inform parents and children of their spiritual responsibilities. He vowed to “preach ere long, on the Duties of *Parents and Children*, with more forceable Inculcations. And see, whether there bee nothing further that I may do, to save the *Children* of my Flock, from falling into the unquenchable *Fire* of the Wrath of God.”²⁹⁹

Nanny’s physical suffering prompted Mather to promise the Lord to help the children in his congregation on several occasions. A year after Nanny fell into the fire, she was tormented with convulsions and severe fever. Mather sadly reported on June 7, 1699, that “This Day my pretty Little Daughter *Nanny*, was taken with a terrible *Convulsion*; and the Convulsion was follow’d with a violent *Feaver*.” Mather was deeply affected by this illness. He initially could

²⁹⁹ Mather, *Diary*, 282-4.

not comprehend why God would punish his daughter with such a severe illness just a year after she had been severely burned. “My Soul was in many wayes *wounded*, with the deplorable State, which this *little Bird*, that had already undergone so much Calamity, was again fallen into.”

Mather prayed to God to bless his three living daughters. He compared himself to the biblical Job, who had three living daughters and had lost three, “I, who had buried *three Daughters*, could not but cry to the Lord, that Hee would give me a Blessing in the *three* which I had now living with mee.” Mather then bartered for her life. He vowed that if his two-year-old daughter did not devote herself to the Lord, he then would not ask God to spare her. After this, he experienced a sense of powerful reassurance in his spirit that his daughter would live a blessed life. Mather’s “Soul was immediately and inexpressibly hereupon, irradiated with a Faith from Heaven, *that the Child should live*.” Though her illness persisted for a few days more, Nanny survived the illness.

Though Mather reckoned Nanny would overcome the threat, Mather still wanted to “obtain the Smiles of God,” and prevent any further harm that might come to his family. He made several promises to God and promised several ways “the Condition of my Child should awaken mee” to honor God. First, he promised to educate his children. He “would grow yett more fruitful in my Conversation with my little Birds, and feed them with more frequent and charming Lessons of Religion.”

While Mather often reasoned that his children’s illnesses were a result of his own sins, like many Puritans he believed that the sins of a community could also prompt ill health in any individual member. Thus, Mather promised to help the members of his community to help their souls but also to prevent their sins from harming his children in the future. He vowed to curb

“the Scandals whereinto more of my Flock are fallen, and prevent the Wrath of Heaven against mee, for their Scandals.”

He offered several ways he could serve his community better. First, he would “promote *Schools for Children*, in my Neighbourhood...[and] visit all the *Schools*...to speak such things both to the Teachers and the Scholars, as they may all bee the better for!” Additionally, he would more frequently visit the families of his neighbors, and “scatter among the Families, my little Book, of a *Family well-ordered*.” Finally, Mather elected to save the souls of indigenous children. He “would shortly write a little Book, which my Kinsman shall Translate into the *Indian Tongue*, to make the Knowledge of Christ, and Christianity, more effectually apprehended among the *Indians*, and their *Children*.”³⁰⁰

On May 4, 1705, Cotton Mather’s eight-year-old daughter, Nanny underwent another painful affliction. This time, her illness was life-threatening. She was “visited with a violent Feavour and unto all Appearance now drawes near unto the Gates of Death.” Mather went on to wish that God would sanctify her suffering so that she could have a happy afterlife or so that Mather himself could learn something from her pain. He prayed that:

“God sanctifies the Condition of that Pretty and lovely Child unto me. God awakens me by her Sufferings, to mourn for my Sins against Him, and to think, what special Duties he calls me to. And I cannot be at rest, until I have obtained of the Lord, that this Child shall be in spiritual Blessings to have an abundant and glorious Compensation for all her temporal sufferings.”

To Mather’s surprise, Nanny survived the illness, in his mind possibly because of his prayers. When Nanny fell ill with another fever in 1706, Mather believed his prayers contributed to her

³⁰⁰ Mather, *Diary*, 303-4.

recover. He praised God for hearing his prayers and answering with her revitalization, “the Hearer of prayer, to our Admiration again restores her.”³⁰¹

Reverend Israel Loring often prayed to God after children died or were sick with life-threatening illnesses. Most often, he would pray for the children’s sanctification. For example, in 1751, he wrote that five-year-old Abigail Moor died of “throat distemper,” adding that she was “The Fourth that has died of late among us of this Mortal Disease.” Loring prayed that the deaths could serve a larger purpose, “The Lord Sanctify these Deaths to his People and to their Children.” Alongside this plea, Loring begs God to spare the lives of any others He might smite, “Save them from the arrow that [Fleeth] by day, the P[estilence] that Walketh in Darkness, the D[estruction] that Waiteth at noon day.”³⁰²

On another occasion, a fourteen-year-old boy, Amos Barron, died of throat distemper on March 18, 1751. Loring reported it was a “sudden surprizing and affecting death.” Loring prayed for both the boy and the rest of the children in the community. Loring prayed “The Lord Sanctify it [to] my People, especially to the Children of thy people, and School-mates awaken in their young and tender souls serious and solemn thoughts of death judgement and eternity.”³⁰³ Loring wished that the death of Amos, though it was tragic, could help the other children.

David Hall had a similar reaction when throat distemper struck Sutton in 1749. On August 11, 1749, the throat distemper was taking the lives of children throughout Sutton. Hall reported he had recently been to three funerals, one seven-month-old, one eighteen years old, and one of an unknown age due to fading in the manuscript. He prayed “the Lord sanctify such repeated strokes...to all Especially to young people.”³⁰⁴ Two years earlier, on October 31, 1747,

³⁰¹ Mather, *Diary*, 532.

³⁰² March 27, 1751, *Israel Loring, diary*.

³⁰³ March 18, 1751, *Israel Loring, diary*.

³⁰⁴ August 11, 1749, *David Hall, diary*.

Hall attended the “sorrowful” funeral of a boy who “died by a violent blow he received in a well by blowup the Rocks with Gunpowder.” The death prompted Hall to pray that the boy’s death be sanctified, but he also was thankful that it was not one of his own children. He reflected, “It might have been one of might the Lord Sanctify such a providence [to me] and mine.”³⁰⁵

Conclusion

Puritan fathers did everything they could to keep their children safe and healthy. While their efforts were certainly aimed at helping their children, they likely also soothed their own minds in this process. Since fathers were constantly reminded of the high child mortality rate in seventeenth and eighteenth-century New England, they could not sit idly by and watch their children succumb to their illnesses. Despite recognizing that God ultimately decided their children’s fates and was the “alsufficient physician,” fathers medicated their children and took any spiritual steps they could to earn God’s favor. Fathers coped with the fact that their efforts were not always effective by blaming themselves for their children’s illnesses or trying to envision how their deaths may be God’s attempt at strengthening their own faith. Fathers coped in any way they could. In a situation mostly out of their control—it is unlikely that their medicines were doing much to help their children when they faced serious illnesses—still, they acted.

³⁰⁵ October 31, 1747, *David Hall, diary*.

Conclusion

This thesis has delved into the lives of Puritan fathers in the domestic sphere as they cared for their children's ailments and reflected on the spiritual meaning behind their illnesses. The well-being of their children consumed them, and they wanted to care for their children as best as they could.

Chapter one explored the historiography of Puritan masculinity and fatherhood, the history of childhood, and the history of medicine. It highlighted the importance of studying the history of fatherhood and domestic life through the lens of medical history. It then delved into the medical world of seventeenth and eighteenth-century New England. To set the stage for the following chapters, it then explained common children's medical ailments, epidemic diseases, and the treatments, which mostly consisted of laxatives and emetics.

Chapter two illustrated how fathers formed intimate bonds with their children through providing medical care. Detailed descriptions of their children's physical health and the medicine administered to ease their pain proved that the sickroom was not strictly a place for women. These Puritan fathers were physically, mentally, and emotionally present throughout their children's illnesses.

Chapter three looked at fathers' spiritual responses to the physical ailments of their children. It also revealed how the fatherly desire to help one's sick child drove fathers' actions rather than an adherence to the abstract concept of Puritan masculinity. Fathers attempted to bargain with God to ease their children's pain, help them recover from their sickness, and save their souls. Ultimately, fathers fought however they could to save their children's lives and eternal souls.

The connection between fatherhood and children's health is an understudied topic in Puritan historiography even though health seems to have consumed the Puritan mind—death and disease were inescapable, major aspects of Puritan existence. Domestic life especially revolved around the health of family members. If a family member was sick, a family's daily life was affected. The care of sick people required money, time, and energy. Sickness diminished a family's resources, but also clearly affected Puritans mentally and emotionally.

Puritan childhood is also an understudied topic, though there are notable exceptions.

³⁰⁶ Some scholars dismiss the study of childhood either because they see an incompatibility of the concept of agency with children or because of a lack of sources. My thesis not only illustrates the role of men in domestic life, but it also uncovers snippets of children's lives. I originally began this thesis with the intention of writing about the experiences of childhood in colonial New England, but the prominence of fathers writing about their children specifically in reference to their physical health was too prominent to ignore. Still, the stories of children are there in the sources, and they are worth uncovering. Their stories are essential to understanding life across periods of history.

Further, the study of family history seems to have fallen out of fashion in recent decades, but its importance remains. Historians studying domestic life would benefit from using methodologies often used by environmental historians and historians of the body. Domestic life is rooted in the physical world; thus, it would be constructive to study family history while keeping in mind the physical environment and bodily experiences.

³⁰⁶ For example, see Howard P. Chudacoff, *Children at Play: An American History* (New York: New York University Press, 2007) and Steven Mintz, *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004).

The hands-on, visceral nature of fatherhood in colonial New England, as evidenced in this thesis, may conjure up images, sounds, and smells in the mind. Each laxative and emetic prescribed caused the messy physical effects which a child experienced, and caretakers then had to tend to the consequences. A focus on continuity rather than change over time can help illuminate the connections between domestic experiences in the twenty-first century and those in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Experiences related to physical experiences of childhood and parenthood mirrors the experiences of modern individuals.

At its core, this thesis tells the stories of fathers who loved their children. It illustrates how fathers cared for their children in times of illness and injury—such as the medicines they administered and their prayers to God for his assistance in their children’s recovery. It also rejects the proposition that parental labor was strictly divided between the public and private spheres. Instead, it uncovers the actions of fathers and experiences in the domestic sphere. This thesis reveals a group of hands-on fathers who fought for their children’s well-being, just as many modern parents do. Cotton Mather’s reflection may parallel what many people feel today about their little ones:

*“If our Children are poor, we are troubled; if our Children are hurt, we are weeping; if our Children have their Bones broken, it breaks our Hearts.”*³⁰⁷

³⁰⁷ Cotton Mather, *The Duty of Children, Whose Parents Have Pray’d for Them* (Boston, J. Edwards and B. Gray, 1719), 95.

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