

America's FORGOTTEN Classroom — Part 6

How Early Americans Raised Respectful, Responsible Children

How A Tiny ABC Book Sold More Than 6-Million Copies Before 1830 And Taught Early American Students Reading, Character, Discipline and Respect

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Why Are So Many Teachers Struggling with Student Behavior?

Something remarkable is happening in American classrooms right now. Teachers are not merely expressing concern about test scores, funding, technology, staffing shortages, or curriculum disputes. **Increasingly, they are talking about behavior—self-control, defiance, aggression, attention, disrespect, consequences, parental support, and whether children are arriving at school prepared to function within healthy boundaries.**

A nationally representative Education Week survey released in 2026 found that **64 percent of teachers said student behavior had worsened during the previous year**, while the figure among elementary teachers climbed to **76 percent**. Another 2026 Education Week Research Center survey of more than 1,000 teachers and school and district administrators found that **75 percent expected student behavior to be a major challenge during the 2026–27 school year**, placing it ahead of every other concern on a list of twenty-seven possible challenges. (Current Education Research: [Education Week, “Teacher Morale in 2026: Five Takeaways”](#); [Education Week, “75% of Educators Expect Student Behavior to Be a Challenge This Year”](#).)

The concern is especially striking when we return to Massachusetts, the colony at the center of so much of our Forgotten Classroom story. A September 2026 statewide survey found that **60 percent of Massachusetts teachers identified student disinterest or low motivation among their greatest classroom obstacles, while 51 percent cited unclear standards surrounding student behavior and discipline**. The same survey found substantial concern about aggressive and violent behavior as well. (Current Education Research: [University of Massachusetts Amherst, “Annual Massachusetts Educator Survey 2026”](#).)

None of that proves that seventeenth- or eighteenth-century educators possessed a simple solution for twenty-first-century schools. Colonial children lived in another social world, and some disciplinary practices of earlier centuries rightly belong to the past. Yet these statistics force us toward a question that is older than public schooling itself: **What do we believe about the nature of the child standing in front of us, and what must happen if that child is eventually going to govern his or her own behavior?**

More than three centuries ago, generations of American children encountered one answer while learning the very first letter of the alphabet. A tiny schoolbook known as the *New England Primer* taught the letter **A** with the memorable rhyme, **“In Adam’s fall, we sinned all.”** The Library of Congress explains that the line simultaneously taught children the alphabet and the Christian doctrine of original sin, while more than six million copies in approximately 450 editions were printed between the late seventeenth century and 1830. (Primary Historical Source: [Library of Congress, “Books That Shaped America: New England Primer”](#).)

That enormous circulation tells us we are not examining an obscure Puritan curiosity. We are opening one of the most influential educational books in early American childhood, and hidden inside its crude woodcuts, alphabet verses, catechisms, prayers, and moral lessons is an entire theory of education. It asked not merely whether children could read, but what kind of people they were becoming.



Where We Have Been — And Why We Are Going Back to School

During the first five weeks of *America's Forgotten Classroom*, we have been conducting something like an archaeological excavation of American education. We are not attempting to recreate colonial America, nor have we argued that every older educational method deserves revival. We are asking what assumptions about God, truth, virtue, liberty, family, citizenship, and human nature helped form the educational civilization from which the American republic emerged.

- **Part 1 — [Why America Must Go Back to School Before It Can Go Forward](#)** established the larger thesis that education historically involved formation as well as information. The older classroom was expected to help form readers, citizens, consciences, families, and eventually self-governing adults.
- **Part 2 — [George Washington's Prophetic Warning to America](#)**— Washington's warning what would happen in America if religion and morality no longer remained “indispensable supports” of political prosperity. Washington's concern was not merely theological; he believed the moral habits of citizens were inseparable from the survival of republican government.
- **Part 3 — [The First Freedom in The Classroom](#)** returned to the First Amendment and showed that religious liberty did not originally mean

compulsory secularism. The Founders rejected federal establishment while protecting free religious exercise and conscience.

- **Part 4** — [America's Forgotten Thanksgiving Classroom](#) examined Washington's October 3, 1789 Thanksgiving Proclamation and recovered gratitude, repentance, Providence, and public remembrance as forms of moral education.
- **Part 5** — [The Old Deluder Satan Act](#) returned to Massachusetts in 1647 and showed lawmakers explicitly connecting literacy with the ability of ordinary people to read Scripture rather than remain dependent upon religious or political gatekeepers.

Those five classrooms now lead to a more fundamental question. If education is supposed to form human beings, what exactly did early Americans believe human beings were like? Before we can understand why they taught children as they did, we have to understand what they thought childhood required.



Classroom Discovery #1 — What in The World Is A “Primer”?

Many modern readers probably encounter the title *New England Primer* without knowing what a “primer” actually was. In the simplest sense, a primer was an elementary instructional book for beginning readers, but the *New England Primer* did

considerably more than introduce letters and sounds. **(MUST-WATCH Library of Congress: [4-Minute VIDEO](#) on the “New England Primer”)**

Think of it as a colonial ABC book, first reader, vocabulary workbook, moral textbook, Bible lesson, prayer book, and catechism compressed into one small volume. The Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History identifies it as the first reading primer designed for the American colonies and one of the most successful textbooks of the eighteenth century. Different editions varied, but children encountered alphabets, syllables, increasingly difficult vocabulary, moral verses, biblical material, catechetical questions, prayers, and illustrations. ([Smithsonian National Museum of American History, “The New-England Primer Improved”](#).)

The *Primer* also served another practical function modern readers might easily miss: it helped teach spelling at a time when the earliest colonial schools in Massachusetts and Connecticut did not yet possess the specialized spelling books that would later become common. John A. Nietz (1888–1970), longtime professor of education at the University of Pittsburgh and one of the foremost twentieth-century collectors and historians of early American textbooks, observed that whatever words many children learned to spell in those earliest schools apparently came from the *New England Primer* itself. That means the same little book could introduce the alphabet, syllables, spelling, reading, Scripture, prayer, doctrine, and moral instruction within a single educational sequence. ([John A. Nietz, *Old Textbooks: Spelling, Grammar, Reading, Arithmetic, Geography, American History, Civil Government, Physiology, Penmanship, Art, Music—As Taught in the Common Schools from Colonial Days to 1900*](#).)

American bibliographer Paul Leicester Ford (1865–1902), whose exhaustive history of the *Primer* remains one of the foundational studies of the book, traced it through printers, advertisements, surviving editions, illustrations, catechisms, and earlier English instructional works. Ford showed that the *Primer* became far more than a local Boston textbook; it developed into a durable institution within Anglo-American Protestant education. ([Paul Leicester Ford, “The New-England Primer: A History of Its Origin and Development”](#).)

Dr. Ford understood that this little volume could not be separated from the religious and moral world that produced it. In tracing the *Primer*’s development, he repeatedly showed how alphabet instruction, catechism, prayer, Scripture, and moral verse were bound together inside the same educational object. One of the *Primer*’s own memorable lines, preserved in Ford’s study, declares, **“My Book and Heart / Shall never part.”** The phrase captures something larger than affection for reading: in this educational world, the book was expected to shape the inner life of the child as surely

as it trained the eye and tongue to recognize words. ([Paul Leicester Ford, *The New-England Primer: A History of Its Origin and Development*](#).) [Google Books](#)

The man traditionally associated with creating the American version of the *Primer* also deserves more attention. Benjamin Harris was an English printer and religious nonconformist whose publishing activities brought him into serious conflict with English authorities. Nietz recounts that Harris printed religious tracts offensive to the government, was arrested and punished, and eventually came to Boston in 1686 after years of controversy in England. Once in New England, he drew upon the British primer tradition he already knew and helped create the book that became the *New England Primer*.

That background is more than an interesting biographical footnote. The Smithsonian likewise identifies Harris as the first publisher of the *Primer* in Boston in 1686 and explains that it was modeled upon British primers connected with Reformation-era literacy. Harris therefore came from a world in which printing religious material, placing Scripture before ordinary people, and challenging established religious authority could carry real personal consequences. That helps explain why the little book he produced fused basic reading so naturally with Protestant theology, conscience, Scripture, and moral formation. (John A. Nietz, *Old Textbooks*, 1961; [Smithsonian National Museum of American History, “The New-England Primer Improved”](#).)

The Library of Congress preserves editions from both before and after the Revolution, including a Boston edition from 1773 and a Hartford edition from 1803. The title of the later volume reveals its basic purpose: *The New England Primer, Improved: For the More Easy Attaining the True Reading of English: To Which Is Added the Assembly of Divines’ Catechism*. Reading instruction and Christian instruction occupied the same little book because its educational world did not imagine those subjects belonged in sealed compartments. ([Library of Congress, “The New-England Primer Improved, 1773”](#); [Library of Congress, “The New England Primer, Improved, 1803”](#).)

For many colonial children, then, the *Primer* was not merely one textbook among a stack of separate subjects. It could function almost like an integrated elementary curriculum in which spelling, reading, vocabulary, Scripture, doctrine, memory, prayer, morality, and stories of courage and martyrdom converged inside the same small book. That helps explain why its influence extended far beyond simply teaching children how to pronounce letters on a page.



Classroom Discovery #2 — Six Million+ Copies Before Mass Media (Library of Congress video: [“up to 8 million”](#))

The scale of the *New England Primer* is easy to underestimate from our twenty-first-century vantage point. Early America possessed no national television networks, streaming services, educational software companies, social-media platforms, or mass-market school systems capable of placing identical material before millions of children almost instantly.

Yet the Library of Congress estimates that more than **six million copies in approximately 450 editions** appeared between 1681 and 1830 and says the book became part of “nearly every child’s life.” In an age when every copy had to be typeset, printed, bound, transported, purchased, and physically handled, those numbers are extraordinary. The Library consequently included the *Primer* in its landmark exhibition *Books That Shaped America*. ([Library of Congress, “Books That Shaped America”](#).)

John A. Nietz (1888–1970), longtime professor of education at the University of Pittsburgh and one of the leading twentieth-century historians and collectors of early American schoolbooks, captured the *Primer*’s place in ordinary colonial life with a wonderfully concise observation: “The Bible, the New England Primer, and an almanac constituted the library of many colonial homes.” His point helps us understand why the *Primer*’s influence cannot be measured merely by school

enrollment or surviving classroom records. In many homes, this little book stood alongside Scripture and the practical yearly almanac among the small number of printed volumes a family might actually own and use. ([John A. Nietz, *Old Textbooks: Spelling, Grammar, Reading, Arithmetic, Geography, American History, Civil Government, Physiology, Penmanship, Art, Music—As Taught in the Common Schools from Colonial Days to 1900.*](#))

What makes those circulation figures even more remarkable is that the Primer spread through a world without centralized publishing, standardized national curriculum, or rapid distribution networks. Each edition depended upon individual printers, local booksellers, family purchases, schoolmasters, churches, and community networks that carried books from press to household and from one generation to the next. Its influence therefore grew not because a single institution imposed one textbook nationally, but because thousands of families and communities repeatedly chose, purchased, taught from, and reprinted the same basic educational model. That kind of persistence tells us something important about cultural formation: the Primer became powerful not merely because millions of copies existed, but because those copies were read aloud, memorized, recited, handed down, worn out, replaced, and reproduced across decades. A child in one town might encounter a different edition from a child hundreds of miles away, yet both could still be absorbing the same broad pattern of alphabet instruction, biblical language, moral maxims, catechetical teaching, and expectations about character. In that sense, the *New England Primer* achieved something early America otherwise had very little machinery to accomplish—it created a remarkably durable shared vocabulary of literacy and moral instruction across households and communities long before the nation possessed anything resembling modern mass media or a unified educational system.

The Smithsonian likewise describes it as one of the most successful textbooks of the eighteenth century and records its familiar nickname, “**The Little Bible of New England.**” That nickname did not mean it replaced Scripture; rather, it reflected the extent to which elementary literacy and Christian teaching were intertwined within the educational culture that produced it. ([Smithsonian National Museum of American History, “The New-England Primer Improved.”](#))

This was therefore not merely an ABC book in the modern sense. Children were learning letters and syllables, but they were simultaneously being introduced to a moral vocabulary through which those letters and words were expected to be understood.



Classroom Discovery #3 — Deuteronomy 6 And the Classroom Before the Schoolhouse

Long before Americans constructed large public-school systems, education began in the home. Deuteronomy 6 does not begin by telling parents to send their children somewhere else to be formed; it first tells adults to love God with heart, soul, and strength and to keep His words upon their own hearts. Only then does it command them to “teach them diligently” to their children while sitting in the house, walking along the way, lying down, and rising up. The first classroom, in other words, was daily life itself. (Deuteronomy 6:4–9.)

That biblical pattern helps explain why early American education cannot be understood by looking only at school buildings. Historian Lawrence A. Cremin (1925–1990), the Pulitzer Prize-winning scholar of American education, repeatedly emphasized that education takes place through a much wider network of institutions than formal schools alone. Families, churches, communities, books, customs, and public life all participate in forming the next generation. In colonial America especially, the boundary between education at home and education at school was far more porous than most Americans experience today. ([Lawrence A. Cremin, Columbia University, “Remarkable Columbians”](#).)

Historian Bernard Bailyn (1922–2020), the two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning Harvard historian of early America, made the same point from another direction when he

described the colonial family as an institution that “shaped their attitudes, formed their patterns of behavior, endowed them with manners and morals.” Education, then, did not suddenly begin when a child crossed the threshold of a schoolhouse. The family was already forming habits, expectations, beliefs, manners, vocabulary, conscience, and character long before a teacher entered the picture. ([Bernard Bailyn, *Education in the Forming of American Society*; American Historical Association, “Bernard Bailyn, 1922–2020”](#).)

That does not mean early America had a “**public school system**” in the modern sense. New England communities did establish publicly supported town schools very early, and Massachusetts’s 1647 “Old Deluder Satan” law required larger towns to provide formal instruction in reading and writing and to establish grammar schools. But the centralized, universal, tax-supported common-school system familiar to Americans today developed much later, particularly during the nineteenth century. The world of the *New England Primer* was therefore one in which **home, church, town, and school overlapped far more extensively than they do today**, and children could encounter the same moral and religious framework across several of those settings. ([Massachusetts Archives, “Old Deluder Satan Act,” 1647](#).)

That broader educational world also explains why a tiny book such as the *New England Primer* could exercise such enormous influence. It might be used by a teacher, read with a parent, memorized at home, or encountered within the wider religious culture that surrounded the child. Education was not conceived merely as the transfer of information from a professional educator to a student. It was the formation of a person through repeated instruction in the truths, habits, beliefs, and responsibilities that a family and community believed a child would need for life.

That arrangement also placed a much greater responsibility on parents than modern educational systems often do. If instruction was reinforced at the table, beside the hearth, during work, in worship, and through daily conversation, then the formation of the child could not be outsourced entirely to a teacher. The home remained the first place where children learned what adults actually believed, because they saw those convictions practiced—or contradicted—before they ever encountered them in a formal lesson.

Deuteronomy 6 therefore gives us something larger than a method of religious instruction. It presents a philosophy of formation in which truth must first inhabit the adult before it can be faithfully transmitted to the child. Early American education, whatever its imperfections, often retained that assumption: the next generation would become what the older generation deliberately taught, modeled, repeated, corrected, and remembered.



Classroom Discovery #4 — Before Behavior Became A Classroom Crisis: How Early America Taught Children to Govern Themselves

This is where the old textbook begins to look unexpectedly contemporary. Its creators were not interested merely in keeping children quiet long enough to finish a lesson. They were attempting to form habits, consciences, loyalties, and patterns of conduct that would eventually allow a child to function responsibly without an adult constantly standing nearby.

Bailyn's description of the family forming "patterns of behavior" is especially revealing. Moral education was not confined to abstract propositions; it included manners, habits, obedience, responsibility, relationships, and a developing sense of the child's place within family and society. ([Bernard Bailyn, "Education in the Forming of American Society"](#).)

The Smithsonian's description of the *Primer* reflects the same intention. Its alphabet rhymes often communicated lessons about good and evil, while prayer, catechism, biblical material, and stories supplied a larger framework within which children were expected to interpret conduct. ([Smithsonian National Museum of American History, "The New-England Primer Improved"](#).)

The larger objective was therefore not merely outward compliance. It was the gradual development of a person capable of recognizing boundaries and eventually governing conduct from within rather than behaving only because an authority figure was present.



Classroom Discovery #5 — Early America’s Answer to Classroom Behavior: Form the Child Before Trying to Control The Behavior

Every young child begins life requiring substantial external supervision. Parents establish limits, prevent danger, repeat instructions, impose routines, require apologies, teach language, model conduct, and correct behavior because children do not enter the world possessing mature judgment or self-control.

Healthy parenting, however, does not aim to preserve permanent dependence upon external control. The child gradually learns why certain boundaries exist, and repeated habits begin shaping judgment. Rules become principles, consequences become prudence, and moral instruction becomes conscience.

Literary scholar David H. Watters, writing about the *New England Primer*, argued that the book taught the child to imagine a self-bounded by higher authority, describing a person “**limited by the authority of God and parents.**” Watters was analyzing the literature historically rather than preaching Puritan theology, but his

observation captures the book's educational structure: the autonomous self was not treated as the final authority. (Scholarly Analysis: [David H. Watters, "I Spake as a Child': Authority, Metaphor and The New-England Primer".](#))

This distinction between external control and internal self-government is crucial to Part 6. A classroom can temporarily suppress behavior through surveillance and consequences, but a civilization requires adults who can govern themselves when no teacher, parent, policeman, or magistrate is watching.



Classroom Discovery #6 — Why The Alphabet Began With Adam

The famous line “In Adam’s fall, we sinned all” was memorable because it compressed an enormous theological claim into eight words. The Library of Congress specifically identifies the rhyme as a device teaching children both the letter A and the doctrine of original sin. (Primary Historical Source: [Library of Congress, “Books That Shaped America: New England Primer”.](#))

Modern readers can hear such language and assume that early Christian education regarded children as worthless or uniquely wicked. Historic Christianity begins elsewhere. Scripture says human beings are created in the image of God and therefore possess extraordinary dignity ([Genesis 1:26–27](#)), while children are repeatedly treated

as blessings entrusted to adults for protection, love, instruction, and formation ([Psalm 127:3](#); [Ephesians 6:4](#)).

At the same time, Scripture teaches that the divine image is borne by a fallen humanity. David speaks of sin reaching to the beginning of human life ([Psalm 51:5](#)), Jeremiah warns about the deceitfulness of the heart ([Jeremiah 17:9](#)), Jesus teaches that evil can proceed from within the human person ([Mark 7:20–23](#)), and Paul connects humanity's fallen condition with Adam while contrasting Adam's disobedience with Christ's redemptive obedience ([Romans 5:12–19](#)).

A helpful modern scholarly perspective comes from theologian Ian A. McFarland, whose study *In Adam's Fall: A Meditation on the Christian Doctrine of Original Sin* opens by observing that for centuries few beliefs were more deeply embedded in Western Christian thought than original sin, and that earlier generations would have found little strange in the Primer's declaration, **"In Adam's Fall / We Sinned all."** McFarland's point helps us avoid reading the Primer through purely modern assumptions. The rhyme was not an isolated attempt to frighten children; it condensed a doctrine that Catholics and Protestants alike, despite important differences, had long regarded as part of a serious account of the human condition. ([Ian A. McFarland, *In Adam's Fall: A Meditation on the Christian Doctrine of Original Sin*](#).)

The educational significance follows directly from that anthropology. If children possess immense worth because they bear God's image, yet also inherit the same moral disorder that marks the entire human race, then education cannot be reduced either to celebrating natural impulses or to suppressing them indiscriminately. It must cultivate judgment, conscience, restraint, repentance, courage, love of truth, and the capacity to recognize both good and evil. That is why the Primer could move so naturally from Adam to Scripture, prayer, catechism, obedience, judgment, and grace: its authors believed literacy should help a child understand not only the world outside him, but also the moral conflict within the human heart itself.

The old rhyme therefore carried an implicit humility for adults as well as children. If "in Adam's fall, we sinned all," then teachers and parents stood under the same moral diagnosis as the children they instructed. The doctrine did not place one flawless generation over a defective one; it placed everyone in need of truth, correction, mercy, and grace.

The result is not contempt for childhood but a realistic anthropology. Children possess dignity and require formation. If dignity is remembered while fallenness is denied, correction can begin to look inherently oppressive; if fallenness is emphasized while dignity is forgotten, correction can become harsh and dehumanizing. Biblical education has reason to reject both errors.



Classroom Discovery #7 — The ABCs Were Teaching A Moral Universe

The *New England Primer* did not teach letters as though the alphabet existed in a moral vacuum. After learning individual letters and sounds, children encountered biblical scenes, prayers, catechism questions, moral sayings, accounts of judgment and deliverance, and reminders of death, obedience, sin, and eternity. The child was learning to read, but at the same time was being taught what kind of universe he or she inhabited.

John A. Nietz (1888–1970), longtime professor of education at the University of Pittsburgh and one of the leading twentieth-century historians and collectors of early American textbooks, emphasized just how thoroughly religious the Primer's contents were. After the alphabet and elementary reading instruction came Bible questions, Scripture passages, prayers, the Creed, biblical names, the Shorter Catechism with its 107 questions and answers, and in many editions John Cotton's *Spiritual Milk for American Babes*. Nietz also noted the frequent presence of the story and woodcut of Protestant martyr John Rogers. This was not a secular reading book with a devotional appendix attached; its religious worldview permeated the educational experience. ([John A. Nietz, *Old Textbooks: Spelling, Grammar, Reading, Arithmetic, Geography, American History, Civil Government, Physiology, Penmanship, Art, Music—As Taught in the Common Schools from Colonial Days to 1900.*](#))

The surviving copies make that unmistakable. Children could encounter the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, morning and evening prayers, grace before and after meals, biblical names and events, catechetical instruction, moral maxims, and illustrated alphabet verses drawn from Scripture. The lessons moved naturally from letters to words, from words to sentences, and from sentences to beliefs about God, human nature, obedience, judgment, courage, and responsibility. Literacy was being embedded inside a worldview.

To modern eyes, much of this little book looks less like something we would expect to find in a public-school classroom and more like a lesson book from a church Sunday school. **Yet that very reaction reveals how much the educational landscape has changed.** The *New England Primer* was not confined to churches; it was used in homes and early schools, where reading instruction, biblical knowledge, prayer, moral formation, and catechetical teaching could be woven together rather than separated into different institutions. What many Americans today would classify almost automatically as "Sunday School material" once occupied a place within the ordinary process of teaching a child how to read. ([Smithsonian National Museum of American History, "The New-England Primer Improved".](#))

That integration is what makes the Primer so revealing. Its publishers were not merely asking, **Can this child pronounce the word?** They were also asking, **What will this child believe about God, humanity, duty, suffering, obedience, and eternity once he can read it?** The mechanics of literacy and the formation of conscience were treated as connected responsibilities.

Literary scholar Patricia Crain has described alphabet learning as a "central rite of socialization," an observation that helps explain why the contents surrounding the letters mattered so much. An alphabet book does more than introduce symbols; it introduces the child to the world those symbols will be used to describe. In the Primer, that world was explicitly moral, biblical, and providential. ([Patricia Crain, *The Story of A: The Alphabetization of America from The New England Primer to The Scarlet Letter*.](#))

That is why **"In Adam's fall, we sinned all"** mattered. The famous line was certainly memorable enough to teach the letter A, but it simultaneously located the child inside a theological explanation of human nature. The Primer was saying from the beginning that education must deal with more than intelligence because the human problem involved more than ignorance. A child needed knowledge, but also truth about the heart, moral boundaries, correction, repentance, grace, and ultimately the formation of character.

That educational assumption will become increasingly important as we move through the Primer, because the little book was not merely telling children what to know. It was telling them **what a human being is**, why human beings need instruction and restraint, and why the formation of character mattered to families, churches, communities, and eventually to a self-governing nation.



Classroom Discovery #8 — Why Did a Children’s Reader Include Death and Martyrdom?

Many versions of the *Primer* contained an account of Protestant martyr John Rogers (c. 1505–1555), who was executed during the reign of Mary I. Surviving editions preserved by the Library of Congress include the Rogers material, reminding us how directly early religious education introduced children to suffering, persecution, death, and steadfastness. ([Library of Congress, “The New England Primer, Improved”](#).)

Other verses were equally direct about mortality. One well-known alphabet rhyme declared, “Xerxes the great did die, and so must you and I.” The Smithsonian has highlighted that verse as an example of how the Primer combined alphabet instruction with larger moral and existential lessons. ([Smithsonian National Museum of American History, “Xerxes the Great Did Die, and So Must You and I”](#).)

To modern readers, this can sound oppressively grim. Yet colonial children lived in a society where infant mortality, infectious disease, dangerous childbirth, accidents,

fire, and premature death were far more visible than they are to many children today. The *Primer* was not introducing death into a deathless childhood; it was interpreting a reality children already encountered.

Its inclusion of martyrdom likewise reveals a particular educational ambition. Children were being prepared not merely for economic success but for the possibility that convictions might someday be costly and that character would matter when comfort disappeared.



Classroom Discovery #9 — Was The Puritan Classroom Too Harsh?

Historical honesty requires us to acknowledge that some seventeenth- and eighteenth-century disciplinary methods were severe by modern standards. Recovering the theological and educational strengths of early Christian education does not require defending every punishment used by parents, ministers, masters, or teachers.

Modern knowledge about child development, trauma, neurological differences, attachment, disability, and learning disorders gives us insights earlier generations did not possess. Scripture itself offers no permission for humiliation, abuse, rage, or cruelty toward children.

Nevertheless, rejecting some older methods does not require rejecting the underlying question. Early educators believed childhood was morally consequential and that adults were responsible for helping children become people capable of living wisely within families and communities. Watters’s analysis of authority and Crain’s study of alphabetization both show that the Primer intentionally formed social and moral assumptions in addition to literacy. ([David H. Watters, “I Spake as a Child”](#); [Patricia Crain, “The Story of A”](#).)

The modern challenge is therefore not to recreate seventeenth-century discipline. It is to ask whether education can abandon moral formation altogether without creating new problems of its own.



Classroom Discovery #10 — Children Are Not Angels, But Neither Are the Adults

Original sin does not mean every child is as wicked as possible. Christian theology has traditionally distinguished between the Fall reaching every dimension of human nature and the much stronger claim that every human being commits every conceivable evil to its maximum degree.

Children can show remarkable affection, loyalty, compassion, creativity, courage, and generosity. The same child who comforts an injured friend may fight with a sibling later that evening, while a child who tells the truth bravely today may invent an

excuse tomorrow. That complexity is not evidence that children are uniquely bad; it is evidence that children are human.

Christian realism also refuses to aim the doctrine of sin only downward. If the child is fallen, the parent exercising discipline is fallen too, as are the teacher, pastor, principal, judge, police officer, legislator, and president. Scripture therefore places limits upon authority by commanding parents to raise children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord without provoking them to anger ([Ephesians 6:4](#); [Colossians 3:21](#)), while Jesus' treatment of children demonstrates welcome rather than contempt ([Mark 10:13–16](#)).

The doctrine of sin should therefore increase accountability rather than excuse domination. A parent may need to apologize to a child, a teacher can misuse authority, a pastor can abuse trust, and political rulers can become corrupt. Biblical realism places everyone beneath moral judgment.



Classroom Discovery #11 — The Heart and Conscience Had to Be Educated Too

The old Christian classroom was concerned with more than the information stored in a child's mind. Educators also worried about what children loved, feared, desired, respected, remembered, obeyed, and eventually became.

Scripture itself presents conscience as something that can be good, weak, wounded, defiled, or seared ([Acts 24:16](#); [1 Corinthians 8:7–12](#); [Titus 1:15](#); [1 Timothy 4:2](#)). That means the advice to “follow your conscience” raises a prior question: **Who formed that conscience, and according to what standard?**

History is filled with people who sincerely rationalized slavery, persecution, theft, betrayal, oppression, and violence. Sincerity by itself cannot transform wrongdoing into righteousness, which is why older Christian education attempted to place the conscience beneath Scripture, moral instruction, family example, prayer, and divine authority.

The difference is important for understanding behavior. A child may obey because an adult is watching, but mature character appears when a person chooses what is right because conscience has been trained to recognize an obligation even in the absence of external supervision.



Classroom Discovery #12 — Memory Was Part of Character Formation

Modern education rightly emphasizes comprehension, critical thinking, creativity, analysis, and problem solving, especially after generations of criticism directed at lifeless rote instruction. Yet earlier educators understood that the mind cannot reason deeply with information it does not possess.

Children therefore memorized alphabets, vocabulary, prayers, Scripture, catechism answers, poetry, and moral sayings. Memory was treated as intellectual equipment that could later be used for judgment, reasoning, worship, argument, and decision-making.

John Adams (1735–1826) gives us a remarkable Founding-era example of that assumption. In 1771 he wrote that he wanted his future sons to copy an entire treatise on logic “**in order to imprint it on their Memories,**” immediately adding that such an exercise would also benefit his daughter. ([Massachusetts Historical Society, “Adams Papers Digital Edition: The Preceptor”](#).)

That surviving document does not prove Adams himself learned his alphabet from the *New England Primer*, and we should not claim more than the evidence allows. It does demonstrate that the Founding generation retained a serious educational culture of copying, memory, repetition, family instruction, and disciplined intellectual habit.



Classroom Discovery #13 — The Founders’ Children and The Family Classroom

This raises a question too important to ignore: can we prove that the *New England Primer* directly influenced individual Founders or their children? The safest answer is that its extraordinary circulation makes it part of the educational environment

surrounding many New England families, but that broad cultural influence is not identical to proof that every particular Founder personally used a surviving edition.

The Library of Congress's description of the Primer as part of "nearly every child's life" gives us strong evidence for widespread cultural penetration, particularly in New England. That makes it reasonable to say that figures such as Benjamin Franklin, Samuel Adams, John Adams, and John Hancock grew up in an educational civilization where the Primer was widely known. It does not authorize us to write that each man definitely learned his ABCs from it unless specific documentation can be produced. ([Library of Congress, "Books That Shaped America".](#))

The Adams family provides something even more valuable because its educational practices are directly documented. The Massachusetts Historical Society's Adams Papers identify Abigail Adams (1744–1818) as the children's "principal instructress," while John sent educational recommendations, books, and advice from afar. ([Massachusetts Historical Society, "Adams Papers Digital Edition: The Preceptor".](#))

Historian of education Maris A. Vinovskis, professor emeritus of history at the University of Michigan and a major scholar of American schooling and childhood, has emphasized that the family was not merely a background influence in colonial education but one of its central institutions. In his study of family and schooling, he writes that **"The family was an important source of education for children in colonial and nineteenth-century America,"** while churches and schools were expected to assist parents in the socialization and instruction of the young. He further notes that only gradually, especially by the mid-nineteenth century, did schools assume many responsibilities that had once belonged more directly to parents, including teaching children the alphabet and how to read. That historical pattern makes the Adams household less exceptional than it may appear to modern readers: Abigail's daily instruction, John's recommendations from afar, the circulation of books through the home, and the deliberate formation of memory and character all belonged to a wider American culture in which parents remained deeply responsible for the intellectual and moral education of their children. ([Maris A. Vinovskis, "Family and Schooling in Colonial and Nineteenth-Century America," *Journal of Family History*.](#)) [Sage Journals](#)

This is Deuteronomy 6 translated into an eighteenth-century Founding family. A father was often absent on public business, a mother oversaw much of the children's daily education, books circulated through the household, and learning occurred within family life rather than being delegated entirely to an institution.



Classroom Discovery #14 — Benjamin Franklin Did More Than Know About the Primer

Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790) gives us one of the strongest direct links between the *New England Primer* and the generation that would create the United States. Franklin did not merely live in a society where the Primer existed; his printing partnership actively sold it.

Paul Leicester Ford examined the accounts of Franklin and his partner David Hall and reported that their Philadelphia firm sold **37,100 copies of the *New England Primer* between 1749 and 1766**. That is a remarkable number for one printing operation during the colonial period. ([Paul Leicester Ford, “The New-England Primer: A History of Its Origin and Development”](#).)

A surviving 1764 edition carries the imprint identifying it as printed and sold by Benjamin Franklin and David Hall in Philadelphia. Its title remained explicitly educational: *The New-England Primer Enlarged: For the More Easy Attaining the True Reading of English*. ([“The New-England Primer Enlarged, Printed and Sold by Benjamin Franklin and D. Hall, 1764”](#).)

Franklin’s mature religious beliefs differed substantially from orthodox Puritan Calvinism, so printing the book should never be treated as proof that he personally endorsed every doctrinal statement it contained. The historical significance lies

elsewhere: one of the most important figures of the Founding generation participated directly in disseminating the very book we are examining.

The *Primer* was therefore not a relic that disappeared before the Revolution. It remained a commercially significant educational text during Franklin’s adult life and during the decades in which the generation that would found the United States was coming of age.



Classroom Discovery #15 — When John Hancock Entered the ABC Book

The *Primer* also changed as American political allegiance changed. Ford traced editions whose frontispieces reflected the political world around them, and those images provide a fascinating window into how education and civic identity could overlap.

During the Revolution, John Hancock (1737–1793) began appearing in editions of the *Primer*. Ford describes the transformation from royal imagery to Revolutionary figures, while the Morgan Library preserves a 1777 edition bearing the caption, “**John Hancock, Esq.; President of the American Congress.**” (Historical Scholarship: [Paul Leicester Ford, “The New-England Primer”](#); Primary Artifact Record: [Morgan Library & Museum, “The New-England Primer Improved, 1777”](#).)

Ford also traced an edition using Samuel Adams (1722–1803), while Washington became an increasingly common post-Revolutionary image. The precise illustration could therefore change while the book continued to teach reading, religion, morality, and memory.

Imagine the educational world that creates. A child might encounter the alphabet, Bible lessons, Christian martyrdom, catechetical questions, prayers, and a Revolutionary leader in the same small volume. Political identity, moral education, literacy, and religion were not yet imagined as subjects that necessarily had to be separated from one another.



My 1844 issue of Ira Webster's 1843 facsimile reproduction of the 1777 *New-England Primer Improved*—preserving the John Hancock portrait, Christian hymns and catechisms, biblical alphabet lessons, and the Revolutionary-era educational world of the original.

A Copy I Can Actually Hold

I actually own a copy of this remarkable book—or, more precisely, an **1844 issue of Ira Webster's 1843 facsimile reproduction of the 1777 *New-England Primer Improved***. Webster's Hartford reprint was created to preserve the famous Revolutionary-era edition printed in Boston by Edward Draper and sold by John Boyle in 1777, complete with the John Hancock frontispiece, old woodcuts, prayers, catechetical material, and the distinctive arrangement of the earlier book. Bibliographic records identify Webster's exact reprint as beginning in 1843, while

surviving copies and institutional records also document 1844 issues of the same facsimile family. My own copy contains a preliminary page explicitly dated “**Boston, August 9th, 1844**” and signed in print by Ira Webster, which explains why both 1843 and 1844 appear in descriptions of this reproduction. (Historical Artifact: [University of Southern Maine, “The New England Primer Improved,” 1844](#); Comparative Artifact Record: [Morgan Library & Museum, “The New-England Primer Improved, 1843”](#); Historical Bibliography: [Paul Leicester Ford, *The New-England Primer: A History of Its Origin and Development*](#).)

A particularly valuable contemporary assessment came from antiquarian and book collector George Livermore (1809–1865), who had studied early schoolbooks and catechisms closely. In a certificate later printed with Webster’s reissue, Livermore called Webster’s 1843 production “**a correct reprint of the oldest copy of that remarkable work**” known to him and added that other reprints he had seen had been “considerably altered—modernized—from the original.” Thomas Williams, writing in 1844, similarly praised Webster’s edition as an “exact copy” of the Primer remembered from his youth. Those judgments help explain why this nineteenth-century reproduction matters historically: Webster was not simply producing a nostalgic imitation, but deliberately attempting to preserve an older educational artifact with unusual fidelity at a time when many other editions had already been modernized or changed. ([George Livermore and Thomas Williams, certificates reproduced with Ira Webster’s *New-England Primer*](#); [Morgan Library & Museum, “The New-England Primer Improved, 1843”](#).)

What makes this copy especially meaningful to me is that it preserves a version of the Primer first printed during the American Revolution. The reproduced 1777 edition carried the portrait and caption of “**John Hancock, Esq.; President of the American Congress,**” placing a living Revolutionary leader directly before children who were also learning their alphabet, prayers, moral lessons, and Christian doctrine. My copy therefore sits at an extraordinary intersection of education, faith, and national identity: it is itself a genuine nineteenth-century artifact intentionally preserving the appearance and substance of a Revolutionary-era children’s book. ([Morgan Library & Museum, “The New-England Primer Improved, 1777”](#).)

Its Christian content is just as striking as its political imagery. The Webster facsimile reproduces material such as Isaac Watts’s “Divine Song of Praise to God, for a Child,” the Assembly of Divines’ Catechism, Mr. Cotton’s Catechism, biblical alphabet lessons, prayers, moral instruction, and other explicitly Christian material. The larger Primer tradition also frequently included material such as the account of John Rogers and a dialogue between Christ, a youth, and the Devil; when my copy arrives, I will be especially interested to confirm exactly which of those later pages survive in this particular issue rather than assuming every Webster state was identical.

Bibliographers have specifically warned that Webster's facsimile appeared in numerous different issues and states, which makes the surviving contents of an individual copy worth checking carefully. ([Morgan Library & Museum, "The New-England Primer Improved, 1843"](#); [Open Library, *The New-England Primer Improved*](#).)

The physical construction is also part of the story. According to the antiquarian bookseller from whom I purchased it, this reproduction was made with wooden rather than later card-stock boards, covered with paper and joined by a leather spine, deliberately giving the little volume the substantial feel of an older schoolbook. The pages themselves also have a distinctive blue or blue-gray cast, another unusual physical feature that gives the volume a striking antiquarian appearance. The covers are chipped, abraded, and visibly aged, while the interior retains the old typography, woodcut illustrations, and reproduced 1777 title page. Those features make the book especially useful for this Forgotten Classroom series because they allow us to see not merely the words children read, but the small physical object through which those lessons were presented.

The geographical story matters too. The *New England Primer* began in the Protestant educational culture of New England, but by the eighteenth century its reach extended far beyond Boston. Benjamin Franklin and David Hall were printing and selling tens of thousands of copies in Philadelphia, while later editions and adaptations appeared in Hartford, Newark, Brattleboro, Philadelphia, and other American communities. By the time Ira Webster reproduced the 1777 edition in Hartford in the 1840s, the Primer had long since become part of a broader American educational tradition rather than remaining a narrowly Massachusetts phenomenon. ([Paul Leicester Ford, *The New-England Primer: A History of Its Origin and Development*](#).)

The 1844 preliminary page in my copy adds another layer of historical interest. Webster reproduced an early 1691 advertisement for the *New England Primer* that announced a second impression containing additional spelling instruction, the prayer of King Edward VI, and verses by Protestant martyr John Rogers. By reproducing that advertisement, Webster was doing more than reprinting an old schoolbook; he was consciously preserving the publishing history of the Primer itself and reminding nineteenth-century readers that this educational tradition reached back to the earliest years of colonial New England.

Holding this **1844 issue of Webster's 1843 facsimile** today makes the history unexpectedly tangible. What we are studying in this classroom is not merely a theory about how early Americans educated children; it existed in little books like this one, handled by families, read by children, and deliberately reproduced because nineteenth-century Americans still regarded the older Primer as historically and

educationally important. The object itself becomes a witness to the long life of an educational philosophy that linked literacy with biblical knowledge, character, moral responsibility, discipline, and eventually the habits required for self-government.



Classroom Discovery #16 — A Child Could Watch The Revolution Inside the Textbook

The changing portraits reveal something fundamental about textbooks themselves. Books used for teaching children never transmit information alone; they also communicate which people, symbols, stories, assumptions, and loyalties a culture considers worthy of attention.

Under British rule, royal imagery could appear naturally. During the Revolution, Hancock or Samuel Adams could take its place. After independence, Washington could become the familiar national figure. Ford's documentation allows us almost to watch political allegiance change through successive editions. ([Paul Leicester Ford, "The New-England Primer".](#))

Patricia Crain's description of alphabet learning as a form of socialization helps explain why those images mattered. Children were not simply decoding letters; they were being introduced to authority, memory, and cultural identity through the structure of the book itself. ([Patricia Crain, "The Story of A".](#))

Historian Ruth Miller Elson, whose landmark study *Guardians of Tradition: American Schoolbooks of the Nineteenth Century* examined how textbooks transmitted cultural values, observed that early American schoolbooks were consciously used to help form a national character. She noted that their authors understood schoolbooks as instruments for “the creation of an American nationality” and the formation of a “**National Character.**” That insight fits the changing imagery of the *Primer* remarkably well. When royal figures gave way to Hancock, Samuel Adams, and eventually Washington, the book was doing more than updating illustrations; it was introducing children to a new political memory and a new set of loyalties, helping define who belonged at the center of the emerging American story. ([Ruth Miller Elson, *Guardians of Tradition: American Schoolbooks of the Nineteenth Century*.](#)) faculty.washington.edu

This does not mean every child absorbed those messages identically. It means educators and printers understood what modern textbook publishers still understand: children learn something about their society from what adults choose to place before them.



Classroom Discovery #17 — What About George Washington’s Childhood Education?

George Washington (1732–1799) requires greater caution because the evidence does not presently allow us to claim that he personally learned from the *New England*

Primer. The Library of Congress notes that surprisingly little is known with certainty about his formal early schooling, which may have involved small local schools, private instruction, or both. ([Library of Congress, “George Washington’s School Copy Books, ca. 1745–1747”](#).)

What survives, however, is extraordinary. Washington’s school copybooks contain geometry, decimals, trigonometry, measurement, geography, surveying, interest calculations, and other exercises completed when he was still a boy. ([Library of Congress, “George Washington Papers: School Copy Book, Volume 1, 1745”](#).)

Washington’s surviving school materials also include one of the most revealing documents from his teenage years: the **110 “Rules of Civility & Decent Behaviour in Company and Conversation.”** Sometime before he was sixteen—Mount Vernon commonly dates the exercise to about age fourteen—Washington carefully copied these maxims into one of his schoolbooks. The rules were not his own invention; they descended from a late-sixteenth-century French Jesuit tradition and were later translated into English, but the exercise itself is striking. They taught habits of restraint, courtesy, speech, dress, table manners, respect for others, promise-keeping, and self-command—precisely the kinds of behaviors that eighteenth-century educators believed had to be practiced until they became part of a young person’s character. Mount Vernon describes the exercise as one now regarded as a **“formative influence in the development of his character,”** while historian Cathy Hellier of Colonial Williamsburg notes that Washington’s concern for proper conduct and how he appeared to others remained important throughout his life. ([George Washington’s Mount Vernon, “The Rules of Civility and Decent Behaviour”](#); [Colonial Williamsburg, “The Rules of Civility”](#).) [Mount Vernon](#)

Some of the rules sound quaint today, but others go straight to the heart of moral formation: **“Think before you Speak,” “Associate yourself with men of good quality if you esteem your own reputation,”** and the final rule, **“Labor to keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire called conscience.”** Washington copied them as a schoolboy, yet their emphasis on discipline, reputation, conscience, respect, and restraint fits remarkably well with the broader educational culture we have been tracing in this classroom. The point is not that the *Rules of Civility* were the *New England Primer* or that one directly produced the other. It is that Washington’s own teenage schoolwork shows how seriously eighteenth-century education could treat the shaping of conduct alongside handwriting, arithmetic, surveying, and intellectual skill. ([George Washington Papers, “The Rules of Civility”](#); [Library of Congress, “George Washington: Living the Rules of Civility”](#).) [Washington Papers](#)

These manuscripts do not connect Washington directly to the Primer, but they reveal an eighteenth-century educational culture that placed enormous value on repeated practice, handwriting, copying, calculation, and practical mastery. The future commander of the Continental Army and first president of the United States once sat filling pages with exercises like any other student.

Washington's later life gives the exercise added significance because contemporaries repeatedly remarked on his unusual self-command, reserve, and concern for dignity in public conduct. Those traits cannot be reduced to one childhood notebook, but the *Rules of Civility* show that disciplined behavior was being consciously practiced long before he became a military or political leader. In that sense, the surviving schoolbook offers a rare glimpse of character formation while it was still in process rather than only after history had made the man famous.

That is worth remembering because historical greatness often begins in unglamorous habits. Long before Washington governed a nation, he had to learn to govern attention, effort, accuracy, and time.



Classroom Discovery #18 — The Child at The Desk And The Statesman in Office

Here the deeper architecture of Part 6 becomes visible. The child whose behavior must be formed and the politician whose power must be restrained inhabit the same moral universe because neither childhood nor political office abolishes human nature.

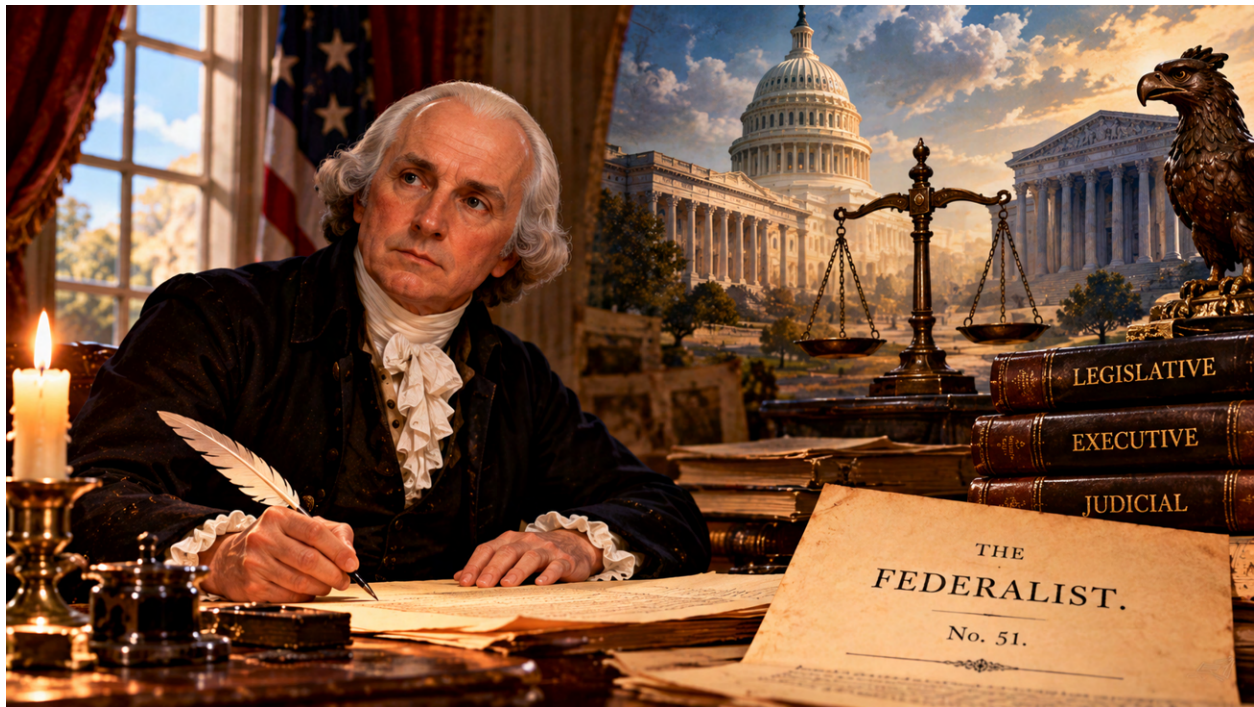
The child receives boundaries, instruction, and consequences because desire does not reliably produce wisdom. The officeholder encounters constitutional limits because political authority does not reliably purify ambition. In both cases, the problem is not that human beings are worthless but that human beings possessing dignity still require accountability.

A child gradually learns that wanting something does not make it right, while the elected official must learn that winning an election does not make authority unlimited. The first lesson concerns self-government in miniature; the second concerns government restrained by law.

Historian Gordon S. Wood, the Pulitzer Prize-winning scholar of the American Revolution and early Republic, has emphasized that republican government depended upon the character of the people themselves. As he explains, a republic required citizens willing to restrain private interests for the sake of the public good; its success depended upon **“the caliber or the character of the people in the society.”** That observation helps connect the child at the desk with the statesman in office. A constitutional republic could establish checks, balances, offices, and laws, but those institutions still had to be inhabited by human beings capable of exercising restraint, respecting limits, and subordinating immediate desire to larger obligations. The educational concern with forming self-command in the child therefore belonged to the same broader republican world in which political liberty was understood to require both external constitutional restraints and internal habits of character. ([Gordon S. Wood, National Constitution Center, “Why Did the Founders Think Virtue Was So Important to the Success of a Republic?”](#).)

That parallel also helps explain why the language of “self-government” mattered so deeply in the early republic. Before the phrase described a nation governing itself, it described a person capable of governing appetite, anger, ambition, and impulse. A society that prized political liberty therefore had strong reason to care about the habits formed long before adulthood, because constitutional freedom could be endangered not only by bad institutions but by citizens and leaders who had never learned to govern themselves.

That comparison does not require us to claim the Constitution was copied from the *Primer*. It demonstrates that a similar realism about human nature appears within both educational and constitutional thought.



Classroom Discovery #19 — Madison’s Political Realism: “If Men Were Angels”

James Madison (1751–1836) articulated that political realism with extraordinary clarity in *Federalist No. 51*. Defending the proposed Constitution, he explained why republican government could not depend solely upon the personal virtue of those holding office.

Madison wrote that “**ambition must be made to counteract ambition**” because constitutional design had to account for the motives of actual human beings. He then delivered one of the most memorable sentences in American political thought: “**If men were angels, no government would be necessary.**” Government must possess enough authority to control the governed, Madison argued, while also being structured so that it can “control itself.” (Primary Founding Source: [Yale Law School Avalon Project, “Federalist No. 51”](#).)

That logic helps explain divided branches, competing centers of power, elections, federalism, bicameralism, and constitutional limits. The system does not assume every ruler will be evil, but it refuses to assume honorable intentions permanently defeat ambition.

Constitutional scholar Donald S. Lutz (1933–2012), whose work examined the intellectual foundations of American constitutionalism, emphasized that the Founders’

system rested on a sober view of human nature rather than on confidence that public office would somehow perfect those who held it. The Constitution was therefore designed to distribute, check, and redirect power because power itself could tempt even capable and well-intentioned people beyond proper limits. Madison's famous language in *Federalist No. 51* is not cynicism but institutional prudence: a free society must build safeguards around the possibility of ambition precisely because liberty is too important to entrust to unchecked virtue alone. ([Donald S. Lutz, *The Origins of American Constitutionalism*](#).)

The old classroom approached human nature from the beginning of life while Madison approached it from the exercise of political power. Both recognize that liberty cannot safely rest upon the assumption that human beings automatically correct themselves.



Classroom Discovery #20 — Raising Self-Governing Children for A Self-Governing Nation

This connection between personal self-government and political self-government may be the central insight of the entire article. A republic entrusts ordinary citizens with remarkable freedom, which means millions of daily decisions occur beyond the immediate reach of government.

Citizens own property, enter contracts, worship, speak publicly, raise children, publish ideas, vote, criticize rulers, serve on juries, form associations, spend money, conduct business, and live much of their lives without an official standing nearby. A free society therefore depends upon enormous amounts of voluntary restraint.

People must sometimes tell the truth when lying would be profitable, honor agreements when breaking them would be convenient, restrain anger before it becomes violence, remain faithful when betrayal is possible, respect another person's property when theft might go unnoticed, and accept political defeat without destroying the constitutional order that made political competition possible.

External authority cannot supervise all of that. A government powerful enough to control every bad impulse of every citizen would itself become a grave danger to liberty.

Political scientists Richard Vetterli and Gary C. Bryner, writing on the intellectual foundations of the American republic, argue that the Founders treated virtue not as an optional ornament but as a **“precondition for republican government.”** They explain that the central question confronting the new nation was whether Americans possessed enough virtue “to soften the sharpest edges of self-interests” and “temper the most disruptive personal and social passions.” Their conclusion is especially important here: **“a citizenry lacking in virtue was not capable of sustaining a democratic republic, whatever its structure.”** That observation takes us directly back to childhood formation. Constitutions can restrain public power, but they cannot personally supervise every private decision; a free society therefore depends upon citizens whose habits of honesty, restraint, responsibility, fidelity, and respect for others have been cultivated long before those citizens ever enter a voting booth. ([Richard Vetterli and Gary C. Bryner, “Public Virtue and the Roots of American Government,” *BYU Studies*.](#))

There is another consequence as well: self-government is learned relationally before it is exercised politically. A child who learns to respect another person's property, keep a promise, accept correction, wait his turn, and restrain anger is practicing in miniature the habits that later make contracts, juries, elections, neighborhoods, churches, businesses, and civic associations possible. Those small acts may look private, but multiplied across millions of citizens they become part of the moral infrastructure on which a free society quietly depends.

Self-government therefore begins long before the ballot box. Its earliest lessons may occur when a child learns that desire does not automatically create permission, that actions have consequences, that other people possess rights too, and that freedom carries responsibility.



Classroom Discovery #21 — Rousseau And a Different Understanding of The Child

The contrast becomes clearer when we turn to Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), one of the most influential thinkers in the development of modern educational thought. His 1762 work *Émile, or On Education* opens by declaring, “**Coming from the hand of the Author of all things, everything is good; in the hands of man, everything degenerates.**” (Primary Educational Source: [Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Émile, or On Education”](#).)

Rousseau’s educational philosophy is far too sophisticated to reduce to the slogan that children are good and society is bad. Yet his understanding of natural development, social corruption, and civilization represents a striking alternative to the Augustinian and Reformed doctrine of fallen human nature reflected in the *New England Primer*.

The older Christian anthropology begins by saying that something has gone wrong both around us and within us. Human beings create corrupt systems because human beings themselves are morally disordered, while corrupt systems can in turn magnify and institutionalize that disorder.

Christianity therefore recognizes oppressive institutions, unjust laws, wicked rulers, corrupt churches, exploitative economies, and destructive cultures without allowing us to relocate all evil outside ourselves. Jesus’ teaching in Mark 7 makes that impossible

by locating pride, deceit, greed, sexual immorality, and other evils within the human heart as well as in the environment around it.



Classroom Discovery #22 — What Happens When “Sin” Disappears but Misbehavior Does Not?

A society can stop using the word *sin* without causing selfishness, dishonesty, aggression, envy, lust, greed, cruelty, or pride to disappear. It can become uncomfortable with words such as *obedience*, *authority*, *rebellion*, and *discipline* while still confronting the human behaviors those words once described.

Children continue to require boundaries whether adults call the process discipline, classroom management, behavioral intervention, social-emotional learning, executive-function development, or something else. The vocabulary may change while the human problem remains.

Children are also being formed by far more than schools. Parents, peers, entertainment, advertisements, smartphones, algorithms, video platforms, political movements, churches, social-media personalities, pornography, music, and online communities all communicate ideas about what should be desired, celebrated, mocked, resisted, feared, or believed.

There is therefore no formation-free childhood. The question is always who is doing the forming, what understanding of human nature guides them, what authority informs their judgments, and toward what kind of adulthood they are leading the child.

The 2026 teacher surveys become significant precisely here. When large majorities of educators identify behavior as worsening or as one of the greatest challenges facing schools, perhaps the conversation eventually has to move beneath techniques and ask what we believe about human beings themselves. (Current Education Research: [Education Week, “Teacher Morale in 2026: Five Takeaways”](#); [Education Week, “75% of Educators Expect Student Behavior to Be a Challenge This Year”](#).)



Classroom Discovery #23 — Original Sin Does Not Mean Children Are Terrible

Because the doctrine is frequently caricatured, this point deserves special attention. Original sin does not mean every person is as wicked as possible or that children possess no goodness, affection, courage, creativity, compassion, or capacity for sacrifice.

Christian theology has traditionally distinguished between the Fall touching the whole person and the stronger claim that every person expresses every imaginable evil to the greatest possible degree. Human beings remain image-bearers, which helps explain

why fallen people can still show real kindness, loyalty, beauty, generosity, and courage.

The Christian claim is that no dimension of human nature remains entirely untouched by sin. Reason can rationalize wrongdoing, desire can become disordered, conscience can become malformed, love can become possessive, fear can overpower duty, and power can tempt even people who began with honorable intentions.

Biblical realism therefore refuses both cynicism and naïve optimism. Human beings are more valuable than cynicism admits because they bear God’s image, yet they are more morally complicated than optimism admits because they live within a fallen condition.



Classroom Discovery #24 — Why Grace Changes The Entire Educational Picture

If the *New England Primer* ended with Adam’s fall, its message would indeed become crushing. Christianity does not end there, because Paul contrasts the first Adam with Jesus Christ, whom he calls the “last Adam,” connecting Christ with redemption, resurrection, and new life ([1 Corinthians 15:21–22, 45](#)).

The Christian doctrine of sin therefore explains why people need more than encouragement, while the doctrine of grace explains why failure does not have to

become a person's final identity. The gospel does not tell guilty people that enough positive thinking will eventually reveal they were innocent all along; it announces that guilt can be forgiven.

That distinction makes Christian realism hopeful rather than despairing. A person can admit wrongdoing without concluding that restoration is impossible, while repentance can become a pathway toward forgiveness rather than merely a descent into shame.

A truly Christian classroom therefore cannot make discipline its final destination. Correction is supposed to serve truth, responsibility, repentance, reconciliation, growth, and ultimately grace.



Classroom Discovery #25 — A Biblical Classroom Must Restrain the Adult Too

The doctrine of human fallenness also contains a built-in warning against authoritarianism. If children require correction because they are human, the adults doing the correcting require accountability for exactly the same reason.

Parents can become angry, teachers can humiliate students, pastors can manipulate congregations, principals can exercise power unfairly, judges can become corrupt, and political leaders can abuse office. The doctrine of sin cannot be used only against the person who possesses less power.

Scripture therefore commands parents to instruct children while simultaneously warning them not to provoke them to anger ([Ephesians 6:4](#); [Colossians 3:21](#)). Jesus receives children with dignity rather than treating them as irritants ([Mark 10:13–16](#)), while Paul’s description of love emphasizes patience, kindness, humility, and the rejection of arrogant conduct ([1 Corinthians 13:4–5](#)).

A biblical classroom should consequently require repentance from adults as well as children. Parents sometimes need to apologize, teachers sometimes need correction, pastors require oversight, and governments require constitutional restraint.

That returns us to Madison’s insight from another direction. Because people in authority are not angels either, authority itself must have boundaries.



Classroom Discovery #26 — Benjamin Franklin, John Hancock, And The Primer of The Revolutionary Generation

Taken together, the Franklin and Hancock evidence changes the way we should think about the *New England Primer*. The book was not merely something Puritan children encountered in the seventeenth century before disappearing into antiquarian collections.

Franklin and Hall sold tens of thousands of copies during the middle eighteenth century, placing the book firmly inside the generation approaching the Revolution.

Later editions incorporated leaders such as Hancock and Samuel Adams into their visual world, while post-Revolutionary editions increasingly used Washington.

That sequence reveals a book flexible enough to carry older religious instruction into a changing political environment. Its theology remained rooted in an earlier Protestant culture even as its political imagery adjusted to independence.

The result is one of the most visually compelling pieces of evidence in this entire series. Children could literally watch America's political world changing inside the same type of book that taught them their ABCs.



Classroom Discovery #27 — The Primer Itself Began To Change

The *New England Primer* did not remain frozen, and that may be one of its most important lessons for us. The Smithsonian notes that more secular alphabet passages appeared in later versions, while Ford documented changes in portraits, illustrations, wording, and other contents as printers adapted the book for new generations. (Historical Artifact: [Smithsonian National Museum of American History, “The New-England Primer Improved”](#); Historical Scholarship: [Paul Leicester Ford, “The New-England Primer”](#).)

That gradual development matters because institutional and cultural change rarely occurs in a single dramatic moment. A word changes here, an illustration changes there, a doctrine receives less emphasis, a new audience is accommodated, an old assumption becomes implicit rather than explicit, and eventually an institution may retain its historic name while operating according to different convictions.

The *Primer* therefore becomes almost a miniature study in educational drift. Its changing pages allow us to watch political identity, theology, and educational philosophy interacting across generations.

This prepares us naturally for Part 7, because what happens to a textbook can also happen to a college, church, school, ministry, denomination, or family.



Classroom Discovery #28 — What The Primer Understood That We Still Need

Once we separate enduring principles from disciplinary practices that properly belong to another century, several insights remain difficult to dismiss. Children require formation because maturity does not automatically arrive with age, while knowledge and character remain distinct because a brilliant person can still be dishonest.

Habits matter because repeated choices shape future choices. Parents matter because institutions cannot permanently substitute for the formative work of the home.

Authority is necessary, but fallen authority requires accountability, while consequences matter because actions shape both character and life.

Conscience requires instruction because sincerity is not the same thing as truth. Freedom requires self-restraint because a person enslaved to appetite is not fully free simply because nobody externally stops him from satisfying it.

Above all, the *Primer* assumed that truth exists outside the individual. Education therefore meant encountering realities we did not invent and learning how to order ourselves in response.

That assumption may be one of the most important differences between the older Christian classroom and many modern approaches to identity and autonomy.



Classroom Discovery #29 — Every Classroom Tells Children What They Are

No educational system is anthropology-free. Every classroom eventually teaches children something about what a human being is, whether or not the lesson is labeled philosophy, religion, psychology, civics, health, literature, or social-emotional learning.

Tell children that their desires define them, and we have taught anthropology. Tell them their feelings determine reality, and we have taught epistemology. Tell them human beings are merely accidental arrangements of matter, and we have given them a theory of existence.

Likewise, tell children that nothing exists above the autonomous self, and we have taught a doctrine of authority. A classroom does not become philosophically neutral merely because it stops using theological vocabulary.

Biblical Christianity makes its anthropology explicit. Children are created by God and therefore possess immeasurable dignity, yet they belong to a fallen humanity and therefore require formation. Their desires deserve attention but not automatic sovereignty, their conscience deserves respect but also instruction, and their freedom deserves protection while remaining inseparable from responsibility.

Biblical Christianity tells a child something radically different about human identity: **you are not an accident, and you are not merely an advanced animal—you were created in the image and likeness of God** ([Genesis 1:26–28](#)). That claim gives every child a dignity that does not depend upon intelligence, appearance, achievement, usefulness, race, wealth, health, or social status. By contrast, a strictly naturalistic evolutionary account explains humanity through common ancestry with other primates and the long processes of biological evolution. Whatever one concludes about those scientific claims, the contrast in anthropology is profound: one begins with humanity as bearing the image of God, while the other explains humanity entirely within the natural history of animal life.

Developmental research reinforces just how consequential the messages of adults can become in a child's developing sense of self. Child-development educators YaeBin Kim and Heidi Petermeier of the University of Nevada, Reno warn that **“labels can greatly influence how children view themselves”** and that what parents and other adults repeatedly say can become part of a child's identity. More recent psychological research likewise finds that children's self-concepts develop in interaction with the beliefs and expectations communicated by parents and teachers. That makes the question of anthropology intensely practical: when adults repeatedly tell children what they are, what they can become, what gives them worth, and what ultimately defines them, those messages do not simply pass through the classroom unheard—they help furnish the categories through which children begin to understand themselves. ([YaeBin Kim and Heidi Petermeier, University of Nevada, Reno Extension, “Avoid Labeling Your Child”](#); [Caoimhe Dempsey and Selina McCoy, “The Role of Academic Self-Concepts, Parent Expectations and Teacher–Student Interactions in Socio-Economic Gaps in Educational Attainment,” *British Journal of Educational Psychology*](#).)

When they fail, they need something greater than indulgence and something greater than condemnation. They need truth, repentance, forgiveness, and grace.



Classroom Discovery #30 — Deuteronomy 6 And the Classroom That Never Closes

We can now return to the passage with which the deeper educational story began. Deuteronomy 6 does not first tell Israel to construct a better institution; it tells adults to carry God's words in their own hearts and then teach them diligently to their children throughout ordinary life ([Deuteronomy 6:4–9](#)).

That order should make every parent, grandparent, pastor, and teacher uncomfortable in a useful way. Children are remarkably skilled at detecting the gap between what adults teach formally and what adults actually live.

A father can teach self-control while modeling rage, a mother can teach forgiveness while sustaining resentment, a pastor can preach humility while seeking status, and a teacher can demand respect while treating students with contempt. Deuteronomy's family classroom therefore requires adults to remain students too.

Parents and grandparents do not need to reproduce a seventeenth-century *Primer* at the kitchen table. They can, however, recover its conviction that certain moral words deserve deliberate transmission: truth, honor, duty, courage, forgiveness, self-control,

justice, mercy, repentance, liberty, responsibility, sacrifice, faithfulness, sin, and grace.

Children need to understand that “I want” and “I should” are not identical statements. They need to learn that freedom does not erase consequence, that authority can be respected without becoming absolute, that wrongdoing can be admitted without destroying dignity, and that repentance is not humiliation when forgiveness and restoration remain possible.

That is Deuteronomy 6 translated into daily family life. Education occurs not only during lessons but also at breakfast, in the car, around the table, during conflict, while spending money, when somebody apologizes, when somebody forgives, and when adults decide whether the principles they teach children will also govern themselves.

That responsibility also means formation cannot be postponed until adolescence, crisis, or rebellion makes it unavoidable. The habits children practice in ordinary moments—how they speak, wait, apologize, work, spend, obey, forgive, tell the truth, and respond to frustration—are already shaping the adults they are becoming. Deuteronomy 6 treats those repeated moments not as interruptions to education, but as the very setting in which education happens.

The Realistic Classroom

The *New England Primer* began with Adam because its educational world believed that something had gone wrong within humanity itself. That conviction could certainly be applied too harshly, and Christians of earlier centuries were no more immune from misunderstanding or sin than Christians today.

Yet the underlying anthropology deserves something better than caricature. These educators believed children possessed immense worth and immense need, which meant they required affection and instruction, freedom and boundaries, knowledge and wisdom, correction and forgiveness, authority and accountability.

The educational objective was not supposed to be permanent external control. It was the development of a person increasingly capable of governing desires, judging conduct, recognizing truth, accepting consequences, and acting responsibly when nobody else was watching.

That is why this little ABC book connects so naturally with America’s larger experiment in republican government. Madison knew rulers were not angels, while the older Christian classroom knew children were not angels either. Neither

conclusion required hatred of rulers or children; it required realism about human beings.



The Lesson for America Today

Perhaps America's educational crisis is ultimately larger than declining reading scores, teacher shortages, aggressive behavior, smartphones, artificial intelligence, absenteeism, curriculum disputes, or school budgets. All of those issues matter, but beneath them stands a deeper question every educational philosophy must eventually answer: **What kind of human being are we trying to form?**

If children are primarily future consumers, education will prepare them to consume. If they are primarily future employees, education will prepare them for work. If they are primarily political instruments, education will prepare them for ideological struggle, while an educational philosophy built around autonomous desire will repeatedly direct children inward as though the self were its own final authority.

Biblical education begins somewhere else. It sees children as human beings created by God, carrying His image and therefore possessing a dignity no parent, teacher, government, ideology, or majority vote can legitimately erase. It simultaneously sees them as members of the same fallen humanity as every adult around them, which means desire requires discernment, conscience requires truth, liberty requires responsibility, and power requires restraint.

The forgotten connection between childhood formation and political liberty may therefore be one of the most important discoveries in this series. Before America became a self-governing republic, families, churches, schools, books, and communities spent generations—imperfectly and sometimes severely—attempting to form people capable of governing themselves.

The *New England Primer* belonged to that world. Benjamin Franklin helped print and sell tens of thousands of copies, Revolutionary figures such as John Hancock and Samuel Adams appeared in its changing visual universe, and Washington later became a familiar image in editions produced after independence. The Adams household continued the larger culture of parental education, disciplined reading, copying, memory, and family instruction, while Washington's surviving schoolbooks reveal the patient habits of study required long before public leadership arrived.

The Constitution itself would later assume that grown men holding power remained human beings who required institutional limits. The child at the desk and the statesman in office were separated by age, experience, education, responsibility, and power, but they were not separated by human nature.

That is why self-government must begin long before government. Parents, grandparents, pastors, and teachers can teach children to read while also showing them what reading is for; they can teach rights alongside responsibility, prepare young people for careers without pretending career success defines a life, and teach courage while modeling humility.

Deuteronomy 6 places this responsibility inside the ordinary movement of everyday life. Adults are called to teach while sitting at home, walking along the way, ending the day, and beginning another, which means children must hear truth in what we say and see it embodied in how we live.

The old Primer began its alphabet with the fall of Adam, but the Christian classroom cannot end there. It must lead beyond Adam to Jesus Christ because Christianity's final educational message is not simply that children must become better behaved; it is that human beings need truth strong enough to expose what is wrong, love strong enough to refuse to abandon them, discipline wise enough to teach responsibility, and grace powerful enough to redeem.

America therefore does not merely need better-controlled classrooms. We need another generation of young people who can gradually become self-governing men and women—people able to recognize truth, restrain appetite, exercise liberty responsibly, admit wrongdoing, extend forgiveness, resist manipulation, respect legitimate authority, confront illegitimate authority, endure hardship, and understand

that moral failure can lead toward repentance and restoration rather than either denial or despair.

Three centuries from now, nobody will care very much whether our children mastered the newest device of 2026. What will matter far more is whether they learned what truth is, developed courage enough to follow it, discovered that freedom without self-government eventually destroys itself, and understood that the God who tells the truth about human sin also offers grace to fallen human beings.

That is the larger lesson hidden inside one of early America's smallest books. The crude woodcuts, antique spelling, catechisms, changing portraits, and unforgettable rhyme about Adam belong to another century, but the question beneath them remains ours: **How do we raise children capable of governing themselves in a nation that expects its people to govern themselves?**

Next Week — From the Child's ABC Book To America's Great Colleges—including the Ivy League

The story now moves naturally from childhood education into higher education. If the world of the *New England Primer* linked literacy with God, character, conscience, moral responsibility, and self-government, what happened when the same civilization created institutions such as Harvard, Yale, Princeton, William & Mary, King's College, Brown, Rutgers, Dartmouth, and the College of Philadelphia?

Next week we will examine the Christian roots of America's earliest colleges, the Founders those institutions helped educate, and the way institutional convictions can change gradually over generations. The evolution of the *New England Primer* has already given us a small preview of that process, because textbooks, schools, churches, universities, and even families can preserve familiar names and traditions while slowly changing the beliefs that once gave those traditions meaning.

Part 7 therefore begins exactly where Part 6 ends. Having watched early America attempt to form the child, we will next enter the colleges that helped form the men who would shape the nation.

