PARENTS & CHILDREN IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND:
NEW QUESTIONS, NEW APPROACHES, NEW CONCLUSIONS

ABOUT THE LECTURE:
The original historiographical debate over whether or not there was a concept of childhood in the past, whether or not children were severely disciplined, and whether or not parents were bonded to their children now seems overly narrow, and rather unimaginative.

New research has moved the field beyond the categorization of the history of parenting in terms of domination or affection, and has tackled neglected facets of the history of childhood. The original focus on parents, especially mothers, parental authority, and on the wealthier sectors of society provided a limited picture of parents and children in the past. The history of childhood, for example, was reduced to the history of parenting, or the history of ideas about children rather than the history of children. Fatherhood in concept and practice was virtually ignored.

Scholars have only recently begun to explore the complexities involved in bringing up children who could successfully navigate their cultural milieu. Masculinity in early modern England, for example, was based on personal autonomy, independent judgement and self command. These qualities could be acquired and practised only by knowing the world. Keeping sons in a state of domestic dependence would stunt the development of proper masculine values, but sending young men out into the world with all its temptations could easily endanger a family’s dynastic and financial security. Submission to duty and male authority was one of the most important lessons imparted to girls, yet at the same time, girls had to be capable of independent thought and action.

The sibling relationship is one of the most durable of family ties but it is only now beginning to attract scholarly attention. The emotional and financial interactions of siblings, positioned as they were somewhere between hierarchy and equality, offer a new way to look at family. The material circumstances of family life also mattered. The parenting practices of the poor need to be understood on their own terms. Bringing up a child involved financial costs and immense physical labor and poverty could prevent poorer parents from realizing even the basics of father providing and mother nurturing.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER:
Linda Pollock is a historian of early modern England. She specializes in social history topics such as childhood, the family, religion and medicine. Her current research is on the history of emotions 1550 to 1700. She is Professor of History at Tulane University and author of A Lasting Relationship: Parents and Children over Three Centuries (University Press of New England, 1987) and Forgotten Childhood: Parent-child relations from 1500 to 1900 (University of Cambridge Press, 1989).

Prof Pollock will be conducting a masterclass entitled “Interpreting early modern affect”, at the Australian Historical Association [AHA] “Conflict in History” conference in Brisbane, July 7-11. For more information: www.theaha.org.au/conferences.html