

# When Parenting Fails: Religious Upbringing, Discipline, and Public Disapproval in Early Modern Finland

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## Abstract

This chapter investigates religious education and the creation of patriarchal authority in early modern Finland through a fascinating case study: reports about a group of children who caused general upheaval by baptising a cat. The chapter uses the lower secular court records created when the children's play with baptism was investigated as potential blasphemy. Reading these records against normative seventeenth-century texts on children's education and upbringing, such as Catechisms and household manuals, the case offers a rare opportunity to study how society dealt with discrepancies between the ideals and the realities of upbringing and the transfer of values from parents to children. The chapter ultimately discusses the creation of patriarchal power and family authority via religious education and discipline.

# Introduction: How a Cat Was Christened, and What It Can Tell Us About the Upbringing of Children and Family Ideals in Early Modern Finland

## **Baptism and Religious Education**

The Taivassalo children's game reached the court arena because the children imitated baptism, one of the most important religious rites of the Lutheran church. Indeed, it was one of the two sacraments left in the Lutheran church. Symptomatically, cases of adults mimicking the Eucharist—either in earnest for religious reasons or for fun and mockery—also reached the court every now and then, but no playing children were among the accused, although at least one case involved a teenage boy acting with adult men (Kuha 2012, 99–104; Toivo 2016, 92–93, 159). This in a way reflects the division of religious education and authority in early modern Finnish society into the theoretical and pragmatic on the one hand and the church and the lay on the other.

The catechism teaching of the populace in Finland, however, remained relatively narrow. It consisted mostly of Luther's Smaller Catechism as preached in catechism sermons in church, which were heard by the congregation. After the church service, the parents and household masters—the father, mainly—were expected to repeat the most important parts of the catechism sermon to the members of their households who could not be present in church and to question their family and household members on the points of catechism learned (Hanska and Vainio-Korhonen 2010).

Printed catechisms only became popular items after the printing of Gezelius' *Lasten Paras Tawara* in 1666. Although considerably more affordable than previous catechisms, even this was too expensive for much of the Finnish peasantry, so cheap broadsheet excerpts of the Table of Duties taken from the Lutheran Smaller Catechism were printed to fill the need for formal educational material. Nevertheless, in reality, educational ideals were mostly transferred orally (Getzellus 1666; Laine et al. 1997, 80–101; Laine 1993).

Religious education transferred the core Lutheran or Christian values of the early modern period—the ideas of sin and salvation but also the correct societal order. A declaration of patriarchal values as well as the order between parents and children and between the genders was inextricable in this. The Table of Duties consisted of short excerpts of the Pauline letters, which organise society into fairly straightforward hierarchical pairs of social relationships: rulers and subjects, teachers and pupils (which meant not only schools but also in parishes where the priests were understood as teachers and the congregation as the pupils), husbands and wives, masters and servants, and parents and children. The grouping of these pairs into three estates, which was usual in early modern catechisms, was absent in the first Finnish catechisms in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This can be thought to have made the hierarchical relationships within each pair clearer, but it also highlighted that everyone belonged to multiple pairs of relationships (Getzelius 1666). In the case of Taivassalo, the parents of the wayward children were placed in a double role, both as the parents, who were supposed to train and discipline their children to ensure proper behaviour, and subjects to be disciplined by the authority of the court officials. This applies especially to the chaplain's widow, the mother of one of the girls, who had not prevented the children from taking the baptismal cloth. The role and responsibility of the other villagers—the neighbours and witnesses who had seen the children's play—was more difficult to place into the existing social theory. This may be why it was discussed by implication; no one said aloud that they had some sort of responsibility—according to any formal criteria, they did not. Yet some hinted at an apology for not putting an end to the matter, claiming that the events passed too quickly to react or that they had not realised the full implications of what the children were doing.

In Scandinavia, recent studies on the early modern upbringing of children and the young have concentrated on childcare and education as work, performed both by the parents and as 'shared parenthood' by older siblings, neighbours, hired labour, teachers, and pastors within and outside the families or households. In Sweden, Linda Oja has investigated childcare as part of the household division of labour and thereby gendered power relationships (Oja 2015). Susanna Hedenborg has investigated the ideological, economic, and social conditions of infant care in Stockholm. Like most of the currently

available historical work on Scandinavian childhood, this analysis concentrates on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Hedenborg's analysis draws on records of infant mortality and household structure; although she manages to draw a picture of how the care of small children was organised, the information available on the values, preferences, and aims of the people involved remains indirect (Hedenborg 2004). The present chapter focuses on how values and important skills were transferred to older children through example and imitation in play and on the conflicts that may arise when the transfer (temporarily) failed.

Several scholars have pointed out that the demands of childcare and other duties could not always be reconciled in early modern society. This caused problems especially for women, and sometimes led to the neglect of children (Lithell 1988, 99–100; Crawford 2010, 52–59). These interpretations may reflect the old tendency of downplaying the importance of children (Bohman 2010; Mispelaere 2013). This idea starts with Lawrence Stone's and David Gaunt's by-now classic—but in many aspects outdated—studies (Stone 1977; Gaunt 1983) and may reflect the old tendency of downplaying the importance of children. As Stine Bohman suggests, solutions to free up mothers for other labour seem to have been found, for example, by using babysitters or bringing children into workplaces (Bohman 2010; Mispelaere 2009 and 2013).

A considerable amount of the literature concerning children's upbringing and training in the pre-modern dates from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and there is considerably less literature on the seventeenth century—the period of my study—let alone the sixteenth century. It is therefore necessary to contextualise the events in Taivassalo in a picture extrapolated from the following and previous centuries, but it is equally necessary to remember that the centuries were not alike in social and cultural terms. According to scholars such as the medievalist Barbara Hanawalt and Swedish scholars on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries like Jan Mispelaere and Orvar Löfgren, children were taken along in the daily tasks of the parents and other carers (siblings, grandparents, hired childminders) in order to see that they came to no harm, to teach them the ways and methods of the work, and to socialise them into the customs and values of the community—like gender order and age

or status hierarches<sup>1</sup> or, in the case in Taivassalo, religious and communal expectations. Often children as young as five were also given small paid or unpaid tasks of their own to perform, from fetching and carrying things with their elders to minding younger children and horses in the transport duties of the so-called *skiutsning*—a tax-like duty levied on the peasant population, who had to organise the transport of crown authorities and the post; farmsteads took turns in providing a horse, carriage, and a driver from one inn to another. Mispeläere has found children as young as eight taking their household's turns ([Lofgren 1977](#); [Hanawalt 1986](#); Mispeläere 2009 and 2013).

It may be worth noting that although there are currently strong efforts to treat children in history as the subjects and actors of their own lives, the material we have on children tends to treat them as objects and targets of other people's actions. However, it also seems that the nature of children as people and the requirements of play and fun were understood. There are, for example, cases where accused witches successfully managed to defend themselves against charges in court by saying that although they had done various things that had seemed out of order and were interpreted as witchcraft by their neighbours—they had, for example, tied bells around the cattle's necks or blown horns—these things had been done in order to amuse the children, who had been taken along in the work. Bringing up children was then presented as a respectable task, and amusing the children by indulging in fun was perfectly respectable. It also served the purpose of implying that the people training children were good people who were not likely to be witches ([Court Record 1676](#), 53–4v; [Court Records 1687](#), 183–185; [Toivo 2008](#), 187–188).

The family sphere was the main arena of religious upbringing for children in early modern Finland. While there were schools for the different levels of education in more southern parts of Europe in the early modern world, they were not meant for the bulk of the population. Private education was, until the eighteenth century, usually considered more effective and less dangerous. In early modern Finland, around seven schools were available for men aspiring to clerical or secretarial careers (in addition to around twenty often short-lived children's *pedagogia*). All the rest of the education was carried out by the households and household workshops, either by the children's

biological families or by their masters' families when they went out to service and apprenticeship (Hanska and Vainio-Korhonen 2010; Laine 2007).

In many ways, the children's play was completely natural: they seem to have experimented and 'rehearsed' the baptismal rites as well as the social customs afterwards. The children had seen baptisms enough to borrow a baptismal cloth. Indeed, there was some discussion of the nature of the clothes since the eldest of the children, the fourteen-year-old Elsa, tried to say that it was not a real baptism cloth but only a woollen frieze wrap, but eventually the children had to admit that it had really been the baptism cloth. While the discussion was recorded only to cover the extent of the children's play, it also demonstrates that the children not only knew what a baptismal cloth was, but they were also aware of the different gradations of the sacred regarding what could or could not be played with. Sacred markers—rituals and processions but also material objects like candles, or, in this case, clothes—upheld the boundaries and the communication between the holy and the profane without which early modern people felt the world might collapse into chaos. Theologically, the danger of blasphemy lay in appropriating the rite of baptism. In the eyes of the children, and probably the village neighbourhood, the clothes reserved for use in the sacrament were thought to manifest or possess some sort of sacredness, too, in a manner reminiscent of Catholic secondary relics. The transformation and continuity of gradations of sacredness after the Lutheran Reformation was far from complete (Duffy 1992; Duffy 2001, 105; Scribner 1987; Bossy 1973).

The baptised cat and its 'godparents' were paraded from house to house around the village in the same way the children had obviously seen real babies being presented. The children had apparently been taken along with adults to see and take part in the real baptismal ceremonies in much the same way they were taken along to most of the village's events, from daily work to leisure and the sacrament.

It can be suggested that using the baptismal cloth, the discussion of the cloth afterwards, and the parade show the children testing their relationship with the gradations of the sacred in terms of how to manage it and what they could and could not do with different sacred things. In this, the more visible aspects for the village lay community may have been more important for the children to play with and

learn about than the more purely theological ones. They also were more important in the sense that the children defended themselves against violating the sacred rituals of the village community in particular. Community seems to have been a value transferred and shared, even when its sacred markers were violated.

## Discipline and Patriarchal Power

The early modern culture of learning and religion—then one and the same thing—has been thought to be one of punishment: in religious terms, the Old Testament emphasis on punishment for sin and its relationship to survival in this life and the salvation of eternal life has been considered to dominate the seventeenth-century worldview. Discipline was what ensured both that people learned and that they kept to what they learned (Laasonen 1977, 100–109). As the Taivassalo case reached court, disciplining the children became a major part of the discussion, and the problem of authority and teaching responsibility eventually focused on discipline. The court record does not explicitly state that the children had not been punished before the matter reached the court of law, but, at the time when the courts usually held to the principle that one crime should be punished once, the court ended up ordering a punishment for the children. This was difficult, however, which is shown by the fact that the first court session did not arrive at a conclusion. The difficulty reflects the ambiguity of the power to punish in this case: was it held by the court as a crown authority, or was it held by the children's families?

In early modern—and indeed already in late medieval—European culture, discipline was thought to be the duty of the father, rightly enforced by physical means. Disciplining was not a right but a duty of most superiors in social relationships, including parents towards their children. Discipline was understood as an essential part of fatherly love, in a context where love in general was understood as a set of duties towards others rather than as a passion. According to Philip Grace, fathers were expected to love more rationally than easily indulgent mothers did; therefore, they were also trusted to discipline their children. The rhetoric of fatherly love and discipline was then extended towards the higher earthly

rulers, whose disciplinary duties towards the subjects were explained as those of a father (Grace 2015, 9, 163–165).

The rhetoric used also mirrored the rhetoric on the catechisms and the message given in sermon literature in Finland, too. Refusal to administer discipline was thought of as a refusal to perform one's social duties and was therefore a loss of honour for someone in a position of power (Getzelius 1666; Laine 2017a, 855–866; Laine 2017b, 40–49).

Nevertheless, the duty to discipline was never unambiguous. All the catechisms also suggest that children should first be brought up by example and good advice, that discipline was needed only when they failed. There were no books on etiquette or appropriate conduct, no catechisms or folk tales recommending casual violence—even if one had a theoretical right to it; it was thought better to command by mental and spiritual authority based on sense and righteousness (Getzelius 1666). As it was known that not all parents could be relied upon to give the loving example and help for their children, authorities such as parish priests were supposed to organise help and guidance (Laine 2017b, 46). Ending up in a court of law for excessive discipline—that is, violence—was therefore both a loss of honour for the violent person and a sign that the church courts and the minister had failed in their duty to prevent or stop the violence. Therefore, the use of violence as discipline was both a right and a duty, as well as a source of honour and shame of the socially superior in a domestic relationship (Roper 1989, 191–192; Jokiaho 2002; Sharpe 2010).

In popular literature in Europe, the emphasis on example is even stronger. Because upbringing was such an important part of life and society, there were also a number of advice books, both across Europe and specifically in Sweden and Finland. Most of these, however, were meant for the use of the higher estates—the nobility and gentry or at least wealthy merchants. The Swedish clergy wrote succinct advice for merchant and trading families; the advice collections for nobles could also consist of suggestions for further improving reading, such as the second part of Per Brahe's *Oeconomia* (Brahe 1581), suggesting that its young readers should improve their religious ideals by reading Melancton and their Latin skills by reading authors ranging from Erasmus of Rotterdam to Cicero and Quintilian.



Satu Lidman's chapter in this volume makes further use of the educational literature in early modern Sweden. Per Brahe's *Oeconomia* serves as a specimen of the Swedish or Finnish nobility's endeavours here, but, like the printed material introduced in Lidman's chapter, it was rather far from the lives or needs of the peasant people active in Taivassalo.

For the use of the rural peasant population, which in Finland formed the overwhelming majority, there was less theoretical guidance available, apart from the catechisms. However, there was clearly an interest: when both literature and literary efforts started to advance among the peasant population, one of the earliest sets of peasant religious literature also included texts on educating and bringing up children. The texts in question were compiled by a group of Ostrobothnian peasants and artisans, who translated into Finnish and circulated manuscripts of Quietism and French Pietist mysticism. While Pietism in general was officially frowned upon, Quietist influences brought into these texts views of authority so pronouncedly subversive that they were banned and the manuscripts had to be circulated secretly. According to a late eighteenth-century secret translation of a seventeenth-century text by Pierre Poiret, 'if parents take heed of the Divine Truth—their example produces an influence in the children, which is laborious to overcome with schooling and discipline' <sup>2</sup> (*Lyhyt ja ytimellinen ulosveto*, sine anno, the following quotations are from the same source). Parents were exhorted to 'show not so much severity but kindness and love'. <sup>3</sup> Many parents, the text complained, saw that their children were unwilling to take heed of their responsibilities and were not able to do any better than to say 'if they will not, they must and give all their might to that force—but that is more like forcing an animal than bringing up a Christian child'. <sup>4</sup> Physical discipline was not forbidden, however; the manuscript merely suggests that it should be used only after the child had been brought to understand that the punishment was right and for his or her benefit. This can be taken to mean two things. First, while example and love were thought to teach children right from wrong, the children—or indeed people in general—were not necessarily expected to be able or willing to follow the correct values without punishment. Second, punishment was not so much understood as a deterrent or an

enforcement of the values—they were already understood and internalised before the punishment—but rather as an atonement for the sins committed.

French mysticist literature, including the ideas of Poiret and Guyon, circulated in widely manuscript and printed form in Europe from the latter half of the seventeenth century. There is no direct evidence that the literature reached Finland before the secret translations flourished, at least in Ostrobothnia—still in manuscript form since it was banned—in the latter half of the eighteenth century. The text *Lyhyt ja ytimellinen ulos weto muutamain ylös walaistuin sielun kirjoituxista nijn kuin ensixi P.Poiretilta*, as well as the translation of a text by Madame Guyon (*Christillinen neuwo nuorukaisille*, sine anno) that was bound in the same volume, consists of excerpts picked and chosen from Poiret's publications from the last decade of the seventeenth and the first of the eighteenth centuries (Mehtonen 2016, Mehtonen 2017; Cross and Livingstone (2005) *Oxford English Dictionary of the Christian Church* (third revised edition) on Poiret, Pierre (1646–1719); Kors (2002) *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment* (Poiret, Pierre) or Krieg 1975, 311–315). Therefore, it would have been impossible for parents of the wayward children in Taivassalo to ground their behaviour on Poiret, if indeed they had left the children unpunished before the court procedure. Nevertheless, such views seem to have struck a chord among the seventeenth-century Europeans, even Finns. Despite the lack of direct evidence, there is also reason to suppose that the mental world which formed the background of Poiret's educational views were not completely unknown in Finland. There was actually quite a wide circulation of ideas between Finland, the Baltic region, and Northern German areas at all levels of society, which was enabled by the travels of the learned to the universities but also of the uneducated for purposes of trade and warfare (Salminen 2010, 2015; Droste 2017). Therefore, it is also possible that similar ideas had gone through the minds of the parents of the Taivassalo children.

In the case of Taivassalo, the exemplary and disciplinary duties were apparently left unfulfilled by the parents. The court had to order the execution of the latter. It is evident from the first trial that the court was not comfortable in taking over the discipline, which is why the case was originally left without a decision and the Court of Appeal had to order a proper investigation. The criminal law was

ambiguous about how far legal minors were considered responsible and punishable by the court. Whereas a number of other parts of the rural law stipulated different ages for who could consent to marriage, who was capable of handling saleable and landed property, who was considered part of the taxable workforce, and who was required to go to service or have a workplace, the criminal code did not stipulate a clear age limit. There was an understanding that children were not fully capable of comprehending the consequences of their actions, and different methods were invented and used for determining just how advanced individual children were and whether or not they were punishable under the law (Mispelaere 2009). No such method was employed in Taivassalo. Together with the fact that the court at first did not deal out any punishment at all, this suggests that the children's responsibility was not the main interest of the court. The witness statements include short explanations of why the witnesses—having noticed that something odd was happening—did not intervene and stop the children. This suggests that the responsibility was at least partly seen to have lain with the adults. Nevertheless, none of them were formally punished in the first session or the later. When the rural court was forced to action by the Court of Appeal, it ended up treating the children as the main culprits and order them to be birched by their relatives, at home but in the presence of the representatives of the crown and the community.

The court took over the disciplinary power to punish the children but only in part. The court ordered that a punishment must take place, and it also stipulated what punishment this was—'a good birching'—but it left the execution to the parents or relatives. Because the parents had previously failed in their upbringing duty, the court ordered its own supervisors to oversee the punishment. This shared the disciplinary power yet let the tangible parts of it stay in the hands of the parents.

## Conclusions

The Taivassalo children's play reflected in a way the division of religious education and authority in early modern Finnish society into the theoretical and pragmatic on the one hand and the church and the lay on the other. On the one hand, there was the theoretical instruction in religion driven by the church,

mediated by catechisms and sermons, and eventually carried out at home. Previously, most of the scholarship on early modern religious teaching has concentrated on this theoretical and theological part. On the other hand, a different kind of religious upbringing also existed, one that could be thought of as practical training in dealings with the sacred—that is, religious education in praxis rather than in abstract catechism teaching. It resembled the sort of apprenticeship-type education and socialisation within and outside the home and the family sphere where the children were just taken along in performing the normal household work and religious rituals, given small tasks, encouraged to play along with the work, and taken by the hand to learn in practice. Here, theology played a smaller part: the pragmatic upbringing concentrated on the unofficial religious rituals and customs of the village lay community, on things like processions around the village after baptismal, sharing church ales, and other communal rituals, which held the community together and marked the boundaries of the sacred. While this was a successful way of teaching customs and traditions, it could also lead to trouble when the children started to explore the traditions on their own and re-created those boundaries in the wrong places or at wrong times.

Parental power and failure were mixed in such situations. This challenged the society's understanding of patriarchal disciplinary power and authority and blurred the lines between private family matters and communal interests. Both the village community and the larger society in the form of legal authorities were reluctant to interfere. In the end, the court authorities took over the disciplinary power to punish the children but did so only in part. The court ordered that a punishment must take place, and it also stipulated what this punishment was, but it left the execution to the extended families. This shows us how unstable and ambiguous early modern patriarchal power was, and how interdependent and restricted by each other both the parents, the village community and the legal system were in their use of power, even in such a seemingly simple context as bringing up children in a family.

## Notes

### Archive material

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1 Löfgren stated, e.g. that the gendered division of work was clear for both adults and children, but this conclusion is largely based on nineteenth-century material. In Mispeläere's earlier material, Swedish boys and girls largely shared the same tasks, with only a couple of exceptions: handling firewood and saw materials was a boy's prerogative, whereas milking and threshing were tasks for girls.

2 'ottaa waarin Jumalallisesta totuudesta . . . ja tällä tavalla andais vanhembain oma esimercki lapsihin sen kaldaisen vaikutuxen, jota usein on Työläs woittaa monein skouluin ja Kuristuxsen kautta.'

This manuscript material and the reference was pointed out to me by Dr Päivi Mehtonen, who is currently making a literary analysis of it.

3 'ej nijn paljo angaruutta kuin ystäväällisyden ja Lembeyden osottamista viljellä tulee'.

4 'Jolleika he tahdo, nijn heidän täytyy ja sen jälkeen andawat he kaikki tulla täytymisen päälle—mutta se on enemmän yxi eläinden pakko kuin järjesllisten christillisten lasten ylös kasvattajain.'