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This paper, entitled “Polio in Twentieth Century America: A ‘Children’s Disease’ in a Child-Centered Culture,” was the final paper for a class called “Childhood in America.” My general topic stemmed from curiosity about the experience of disabled children, who were rarely, if ever, discussed in the primary and secondary sources we read in class. The specific topic of *polio* being a “children’s disease,” however came after I began researching in the library. Once I started looking through books and articles on the history of disabled persons, I realized how large and overwhelming that broad topic would be to tackle. With my professor’s guidance I narrowed my study to polio. From this initial experience I recognized the benefit of preliminary research, which led me to questions, which then led me to the topic and paper I now have completed. With this experience, I had ingrained in me that research should precede the choosing of a specific topic, for what you learn will lead your research in directions you may have never imagined and may have been resistant to if you had already committed yourself to one specific idea.

Prior to this paper assignment I had ventured beyond the main stacks only to the article databases and Link+, and even then mainly focused on secondary sources. For this paper, as I began to read the secondary material, I was struck by the dialogue between the child-centered American culture and the utilization of children to personify polio, and to find out more necessitated moving beyond the research techniques that had once seemed sufficient.

For the first time, I used the New York Times Historical database through ProQuest to find articles and images from the first half of the twentieth century. The format of the search tools made it simple for me to narrow down the dates of my search and I was excited to have access to tangible historical documents. Many matches came up and I poured over hundreds of

advertisements, articles, and photographs to find ones that I believed were paradigmatic for the time. What I discovered was that analyzing original discourse for myself provoked more questions and ideas than I ever could have had if I remained within the realm of scholarly secondary texts. Embedded within the pages of historical print journalism were pieces that I could put together in a new way. I found greater space for my own original thoughts and soon this paper took shape.

Aside from the New York Times, I also utilized primary sources in the form of parenting manuals, such as Luther Emmet Holt's and John B. Watson's. These primary sources, though not directly related to polio, shed light on societal views that informed my topic.

Secondary sources provided direction and support for my project. I read books on polio to give me a sense of what scholarly discourse on this topic was like. I also branched out to read books about more general or distant topics that could then be used to better understand the context for polio. For example, I utilized Gary Cross' ideas on "child-centeredness" and the creation of the "cute" child, linking them to polio despite the fact that he does not focus on polio. Link + proved crucial to my project. Although not every book I ordered proved useful, access to a breadth of authors and their perspectives gave me a better sense for the scholarly background. No one had written about my topic specifically, so I did not run up against debates where I would have to analyze biases. The authors agree on the importance of children in society having shaped the disease; none that I have found, though, has explored that aspect in much detail.

Exploring the library, I also used the on-line databases for articles and media. The PBS film, *A Paralyzing Fear*, provided me with more insights on the disease's history and, because of its unique medium, exposed me to another way of presenting and articulating that history.

What I learned is to explore, to be curious and ask questions before anticipating answers.

I learned also that my most honest and intriguing work comes when I do the most diverse research possible.