

# Parenting Into the Spin: Trauma, Coming of Age, and Raising Children in Stranger Things

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on how families of Hawkins, Indiana respond to trauma and threat and considers how the idea of family itself shifts in *Stranger Things* between Seasons One and Two. “Parenting into the Spin” (or skid) refers to what the authors see as a particular valorization of adaptive and flexible modes of parenting that has a good deal more to do with contemporary values and concerns than the 1980s that *Stranger Things* nostalgically recalls. The introduction of domestic violence in Season Two, alongside still ongoing institutional and supernatural traumas, expand the importance of authority and empathy in parenting. Of interest here is how *Stranger Things* offers a dark mirror to those contemporary anxieties that shape parental practice, and to the challenges of parenting itself, while providing a revisionist account of the family as it appears in nostalgically-recalled 1980s texts. We see this especially in a range of non-normative parental figures whose character arcs shift to protect and empower the children in their care. At the same time that *Stranger Things* reinscribes heteronormativity on the children within the show, it also offers various queerly-coded found families and informal familial relations that radically depart from 1980s patriarchal norms.



Fig. 1. Hopper approves Eleven's "Bitchin'" new look when they are reunited at the end of Season Two. (2.09). Copyright: Netflix

## Introduction

Like the Spielbergian fantasies of the 1980s to which it pays homage, *Stranger Things* (Netflix 2016-present) persistently focuses on the family under stress, imperiled and endangered. Blending horror and science fiction with serial melodrama, its protagonists are challenged from without by supernatural evil and governmental malfeasance and from within by domestic tensions, their relationships strained by trauma, especially in Season Two. This essay asks: How do families of Hawkins, Indiana respond to trauma and threat? Taking into consideration that it is Generation X, the "family first" generation, we see coming of age in Season Two, their adolescence nostalgically reimagined for a mostly-Millennial audience now of an age to be parents themselves, in what forms of family life are they participating (Nazareth 79)? What types of parenting do these families experience or employ?

Of particular interest to this discussion is how *Stranger Things* from Season One to Two shifts away from the ideal of a nuclear family constituted by the heterosexual married couple and its biological offspring, moving toward an alternative notion of family constituted by varied social or kinship relations and "diverse sets of practices," including different modes of parenting, co-parenting, and self-parenting (Chambers 33). In this expanded notion of family, *Stranger Things* contrasts "non-adaptive" or maladaptive parenting based on traditional or "fixed beliefs" derived from the parents' past, with "adaptive" practices focused on preserving or restoring the child's or adolescent's "individual agency" in a world permeated by threat (Jones, O'Sullivan, and Rouse 383-4, 385-6). Such representations resonate generally with the contemporary focus on "resilience" in popular and scholarly literature on parenting (Hoffman 385-6, Masten 12-13, Goldman), which has "surged over the past decade" in response to widespread concern over "natural and technological disasters, economic instability, war and terrorism" (Masten 12). In its most aspirational modes, such literature shares the "vision of creating responsible human beings that have the inner strength not just to make it through an uncomfortable event, but also have the capacity for transforming themselves and their world during difficult times," yet

might also be viewed as “yet another approach to parenting that encourages intensive parental investment and involvement in children’s lives” (Goldman xxiii; Hoffman 391). Of interest here is how *Stranger Things* offers a dark mirror to those contemporary anxieties that shape parental practice, and to the challenges of parenting itself, as well as a revisionist account of the family as it appears in nostalgically-recalled 1980s texts. In the 1980s world of *Stranger Things*, as now, resilience is valorized as the product of “healthy adaptation” for families and children living in uncertain times (Masten 12).

The reference to steering “into the spin” or (in American parlance) “into the skid” refers to what appears as a move away from traditional modes of parental and patriarchal control of the family, based upon fixed beliefs, to parenting that models flexible alternatives to the authoritarian impulse. Recovering command of a spinning or skidding vehicle by turning into instead of away from the direction of perceived danger (literally turning the front wheels of a car into the direction the back is skidding) means, among other things, refusing the resistance to loss of control. It is also a nod to the importance of the car in Season Two of *Stranger Things*, where we see repeated examples of the close alignment of driving and parenting, an extension of the series’ nostalgic linking of cars and character (Torchinsky). The abuses of stepbrother Billy Hargrove (Dacre Montgomery) are enacted in and through his showy late 1970s muscle car, the iconic Chevy Camaro, while Steve Harrington (Joe Keery) ends up, like Billy, *in loco parentis* in part because he’s got wheels, his early 1980s rich boy Beemer, which takes the place of bikes for The Party at the end of Season Two. Then there is the 4×4 1980 Chevrolet K5 Blazer driven by Police Chief Hopper (David Harbour), rugged favorite of rural law enforcement, which seems an extension of his khaki uniform. Capable of powering through and over all obstacles in its path, it forges the wilderness where he and Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown) form an isolated familial relationship. Self-centered deadbeat dad Lonnie Byers (Ross Partridge) like Billy drives a classic muscle car, a 1972 Oldsmobile 442, its mint condition and classic status a marked contrast to the battered little avocado green subcompact driven by his hard-working ex-wife Joyce Byers (Winona Ryder). Joyce’s Ford Pinto hatchback might be viewed as a vehicular metaphor for the danger with which she and her sons cohabitate as a matter of course, driven with gravel-strewing panache despite the incipient dangers signaled by the exploding gas tank scandal of *State of Indiana v. Ford Motor Company* which caused this model to be recalled in 1978.



Fig. 2. Joyce peels out of her driveway to find Will (2.03). Copyright: Netflix.

The big, solid, weather-beaten 1972 Ford LTD driven by her son Jonathan (Charlie Heaton), sibling parent to brother Will (Noah Schnapp), likewise offers a contrast to his father's glossily macho car, as well as the showy rides of his peers Billy and Steve, appropriate to his outsider status. And, as what looks like a hand-me-down family sedan (Torchinsky), it's appropriate for a big brother who has taken on the parental role abdicated by Lonnie. Turning into the spin or skid rather than away is a seemingly counter-intuitive move, as are many of the more successful parental moves in *Stranger Things*. It means resisting the urge to move or turn away from that which causes fear, anxiety, and powerlessness in the parent or carer, including the child's own fear, anxiety, vulnerability and pain. Turning into the spin means resisting the urge to be either over-protective or controlling and authoritarian despite palpable risk and threat and working instead to maintain reciprocity and communication between parent and child, cornerstone of contemporary adaptive parenting styles (Osofsky and Thompson 63, 56).

After an overview of families and trauma in *Stranger Things*, this essay will look closely at the traumatic experiences and responses of the children themselves, followed by a review of parental responses. Parenting, whether adaptive and helpful or maladaptive and destructive will be addressed both in relation to generic tropes of horror and in the context of contemporary theories of parenting. Of concern here is less how correct or incorrect these models of parenting are in absolute terms than how evocative these narratives of adaptive and maladaptive parenting might be for the contemporary viewers mindful of the risks and potential traumas attending their own efforts to care and protect. Also of interest here is the pervasiveness of trauma—its cyclical nature expressed in both narrative tendencies of serial melodrama and franchised entertainment, as well as the inherited generational or complex trauma affecting the children of parents who turn away from their own traumas allowing "maladaptive patterns" to repeat "generation after generation" (Osofsky and Thompson, 56). In some respects, the representation of good and bad parents, especially the focus on and structural role of "missing, consumed, distant or malevolent father figures" in *Stranger Things* echoes Spielbergian

fictions of the past (Friedman, 34). Yet, the valorization of adaptive parenting and an expansive notion of what constitutes family, including a move toward the degendering or queering of parental roles in Season Two, also appears to be shaped by a generational trend toward increased acceptance of the “pluralization of family forms and arrangements,” all of which speaks to a certain discomfort with those objects of nostalgia which have given shape to *Stranger Things* (Ruspini 2016, 3).

At the beginning of Season One in *Stranger Things*, identities, families, and the shelter of the family home appear strongly aligned with the conservative, patriarchal dominant of the 1980s fictions it nostalgically references (Britton, Wood). In Season Two, this patriarchal dominant and the apparent certainties of the nuclear family are queried as part of its focus on an increasingly uncertain world. The range of trauma—familial, structural, personal—present within the series, particularly in Season Two, provides a broad foundation to examine the parental responses, as moderated by the conventions of the genre, and media in general. In its attentions to different forms of family and parenting that merge in Season Two, flexibility, adaptability and resilience emerge as virtues, alongside a heightened desire for a renegotiated model of the familial as a source of comfort and protection in the face of threat. By contrast, those who rely on conventional authoritative models of parental control based on traditional or “fixed beliefs” about gender, sexuality, and conformity, in a manner that Jones, O’Sullivan, and Rouse identify as maladaptive, raise children who avoid their parents and the family home and who are forced to self-parent (383-4). The radical vulnerability of key parental figures in Season Two refigures the domestic for The Party and their families in a way that both disrupts the normative generic expectations of horror, evident in source texts of the 1980s, while engaging contemporary concerns around trauma, adaptive parenting, and cultivation of resilience. In this we see *Stranger Things* respond to contemporary fears and anxieties in part by re-inventing the promise of home, with its assurance of safety, solace, and care. Thus *Stranger Things* in Season Two works to adapt the central aspirational trope of Spielbergian fictions—a nostalgia for “the kind of imagined family happiness [Spielberg] never actually knew, an ideal he recognizes rarely exists in reality” —for a new generation of parents and children (516, McBride).

## From Season One to Season Two: Family Life and Trauma

Given the strong influence of Spielberg’s *ET: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), Season One of *Stranger Things* privileges the spaces and comforts of suburbia as necessary adjuncts to, even perhaps guarantors of, a happy home life. Specifically, the two-parent solidity of the Wheeler family home, firmly ensconced in middle-class suburbia complete with conservative political beliefs and faith in the government, is valorized in Season One as a site of security for its children, even if the parents don’t exactly model connubial bliss. By contrast, while Joyce Byers goes the distance as a heroically good mother in Season One, recalling those of *Poltergeist* (Hooper, 1982) and *Amityville Horror* (Rosenberg, 1979), she is also clearly a figure of social difference which inflects her alignment with and struggles against the Upside Down (Arnold). When she talks to the Christmas lights, sits sleepless with hatchet in hand in her ruined living room waiting for monsters to arrive, she recalls not just the good mothers of horror who risk all to save their children from ghostly and demonic intruders, but also the mad and marginalized ones who raise monsters. In this respect, the gendered dynamics of Season One which strongly link female characters with the Upside Down is complemented by class-

based ones. The Byers' working-class household, with its stresses and eccentricities is presented as a negative foil to the stolid suburbia of the Wheeler home, a weak point in the social fabric of small-town life where monstrosity can break through. In this context, Will's victimization does not seem entirely accidental. In this context, Joyce's maternal heroism appears as a necessary adjunct to or consequence of the hardscrabble nature of her everyday life on the edge of poverty, a life which seems to attract the darkness in a way that lives lived in big split levels on groomed lawns do not. The exception, of course, is when those big suburban houses host bad teen hijinks—underage drinking and sex. Like Barb (Shannon Purser), side-swiped collateral damage of residual slasher horror morality who is taken to the Upside Down after cutting herself on an underaged beer, Joyce and her family in their difference appear the not-quite-random victims in the suburban-centric world of Season One. In Season Two, by contrast, though the Byers home once again sees hard usage, the darkness is now everywhere. What Robin Wood referred to as the "terrible house" in Reaganite horror is transmuted into a terrible town, as all of Hawkins and its surrounds are honeycombed by monstrosity and traces of trauma that are no respecter of class or locale (90).

In Season Two, as Hawkins is increasingly enveloped in alien evil, the perspective on parents, parenting, and families shift away from suburban privilege, revealing in its place the "nuclear crisis" that Vivian Sobchack identified in the mid-1980s as a shared attribute of Reagan era horror and science fiction alongside those conservative impulses aimed at containing and working through a pervasive "weakening of patriarchal authority" (9, 10). The Wheelers (Cara Buono and Joe Chrest)—prototypical nuclear family—has atomized into a housebound husband who naps, a wife who drinks, and children who avoid the family home. Repression and suppression, distraction and willful ignorance are their mode of (not) dealing with trauma, even as their children Mike (Finn Wolfhard) and Nancy (Natalia Dyer) act out their anger, mourning, and distress pursuing strategies of self-comfort and self-parenting as they anticipate the one-year anniversary of the loss of Eleven and Barb. The trauma-riddled familial focus of Season Two, while engaging with the motif of the single parent family and latchkey child under threat familiar from 1980s horror, alongside the associated motif of the alienated or possessed child, ultimately makes clear that having two parents or one, blood relative or adoptive carer, is of less consequence than the particular qualities of parenting. Mother Joyce and elder son Jonathan look after Will who is likewise cared for by avuncular Dr. Sam Owens (Paul Reiser) at Hawkins Lab. Chief of Police Hopper endeavors to parent Eleven, believed dead and thus left to fend for herself after destroying the Demogorgon and the team led by evil Dr. Brenner (Matthew Modine), whom she called "Papa." Beyond the borders of Hawkins, Eleven's deeply traumatized biological "Mama," Terry Ives (Aimee Mullins), endlessly replays the memory of her daughter Jane's birth, theft, and failed rescue, while under the care of her sister Becky (Aimee Semetz). When Eleven successfully makes contact with her aunt and her damaged, locked-in parent, Mama attempts to reunite Jane/Eleven with Kali/Eight (Linnea Berthelsen). In "The Lost Sister" we find that Kali has her own makeshift criminal family of the unwanted and discarded which bears a strong resemblance to the rebel vampire band of *Lost Boys* (Schumacher 1987) (2.07). And like the lead vampire who grooms a latchkey teen for transformation in the earlier film, she makes a charismatic play for Jane/Eleven's affections and loyalty on the basis of their shared alienation. Then there are the step-siblings Max(ine) Mayfield (Sadie Sink) and Billy Hargrove, true latchkey children who are damaged more by the presence than the absence of their abusive parents. Billy, *in loco parentis*, replays his father's abusetargeting Max with verbal insults

and intimidation, road rage, threats of violence toward her friends. Like trauma with supernatural sources, parental abuse is cyclical.

Thus, Season Two's fascination with the complexities of the familial is inflected by trauma of various kinds. Trauma appears the natural adjunct to horror—given the genre's focus on extremes of affect and bodily threat and the way victimization, mourning, and anxiety are woven through its texts. And certainly, the contemporary horror film has been recognized as a site where historical traumas—of wars, genocides and other cataclysmic events like 9/11—have been registered metaphorically and given voice (Blake; Lowenstein; Wetmore). *Stranger Things* picks up the post-Vietnam War-era motif of PTSD used in *Aliens* (Cameron 1986) where monsters don't just threaten the body but overwhelm the adaptive capabilities of the minds in those who survive. The "final girls" of *Aliens*, former flight officer Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) and sole remaining child of a deep space colonial outpost, Newt (Carrie Henn), recover only when they return to and relive their trauma, surviving yet another confrontation with the aliens, forming a familial bond of mother and daughter through the shared experience. This rather grim modeling of how traumatic injury and recall can serve the narrative purposes of franchised entertainment and how new forms of familial connection might be forged through this trauma, together highlight a dominant motif of Season Two. In Season Two, survivors deal with traumatic memory alongside the lingering dangers of Season One, their personal and social lives reshaped by anxiety and anger, mourning and loss. The diagnosis of PTSD given by Dr. Owens to Will—but which might just as easily be assigned to Season Two as a whole—dates back to psychiatric treatments of Vietnam War veterans, officially replacing the older term of shell shock in 1980. It is a diagnosis that is both right and wrong, as it is based on the assumption that the traumatizing event is over and that Will is being tormented by recollections which feel all-too-real, when in reality he is tormented both by traumatic memory and likewise by the ongoing influence of the Upside Down in the form of what The Party aptly name The Mind Flayer. Like the Demogorgon, the Mind Flayer is the monstrous expressions of what C. Wright Mills in 1956 dubbed the military-industrial complex (Hantke, 10-11). These monsters are the consequence of cooperative efforts by corporate capitalism and the military—expressed in the toxic paternalism of Eleven's Papa—to control and dominate America's enemies by any means, turned back on a civilian population, reshaping its landscape and social life.

This focus on trauma in Season Two dramatically transforms that familiar trope from 1980s horror, the latchkey or self-parenting child—a child who is not violently orphaned as in the case of Newt in *Aliens*, but nevertheless left to fend for itself. Mirroring some of the social realities of growing up "Generation X," those offspring of baby boomers who were born between 1965 and 1984, latchkey children of 1980s horror were those raised either by two working parents or a single divorced parent (usually a mother), and consequently left alone or in the care of siblings for hours at a time (Nazareth 65-85). They are the resourceful protagonists of *The Monster Squad* (Dekker 1987), *The Gate* (Takacs 1987) and *Lost Boys* (Schumacher 1987), fighting evil on their own in films that use supernatural threats to figure anxieties for children left to self-parent, unprotected and unguided during crucial years of late adolescence (Muir 2007, Howell 2017). In *Stranger Things* the motif of latchkey children is further complicated by other internal stresses within the family, for instance, memories of a dead daughter who could not be saved in the past inflecting Hopper's over-protective parenting and anger in the present. Other traumas that come from the past, originating in the family, include the abuse of Billy by his father,

and Billy in turn of Max, yet another example, beyond the military-industrial complex, of toxic paternalism and monstrous side-effects of efforts to exert dominance and control. Different from the common trope of traumatic family relations in horror (found for instance in *Carrie* [de Palma, 1976] and *Friday the 13th* [Cunningham 1980]), it isn't bad mothers, but instead bad fathers, who produce monsters in *Stranger Things*. The Demogorgon that is released from the Upside Down is the consequence of Papa/Dr. Brenner's abusive manipulation of test subject Eleven, and the cycle of abuse spirals from Neil Hargrove (Will Chase) though son Billy, a predatory bully who pays forward the physical and emotional mistreatment received from his father.



Fig. 3. Billy pays forward his own abuse with step-sister Max (2.04). Copyright: Netflix

In recalling and amplifying the Reagan-era representation of a “patriarchy simultaneously terrified and terrorizing in the fact of its increasing impotence” exemplified by Stanley Kubrick’s 1980 adaptation of Stephen King’s *The Shining* (Sobchack 14), the bad father becomes a significant motif along with the good mother in Season Two. But the series also explores varieties of caringly parental males characterized by a gender fluidity that departs strikingly from 1980s predecessors, where fathers are either conservatively patriarchal, absent, or—in the case of Jack Torrence—explicitly monstrous.

### Traumatic Pre-Teen Years

Trauma, as the driver of franchised entertainment and serial melodrama in *Stranger Things*, appears both cyclical and cumulative. Moreover, trauma of recollected horror, mourning and loss in Season Two is complicated by the anxieties and challenges associated with coming of age. Specifically, we see how evolution or renegotiation of identity formations associated with coming of age is combined with traumatic challenges to wholeness or integration of self that come from mourning, loss, and recollected horror. Will’s exposure to the Upside Down makes him its natural victim in Season Two. His possession is slowed and ultimately reversed by Joyce’s mothering, which is both protective yet also itself a source of distress for Will, as it is a signifier of his difference, his failure to move beyond childhood restriction as the other members of The Party have done. In his fugue states where he



returns to (or gains access to the ever-present) Upside Down, he sees what appears as a massive storm brewing in the distance. This is the early manifestation of the Mind Flayer, as we discover, but it is also an all-too familiar, well-worn metaphor for the changes attendant on coming of age, a time of “Sturm und Drang” (storm and urge) as G. Stanley Hall termed it at the beginning of the twentieth century (22). The emotional unsteadiness, dissolution and reformation of self, even the impulse to violence that Hall identifies with coming of age are all likewise the symptoms of Will’s progressive overtaking by the Mind Flayer. These inner or mental torments (or what are perceived as mental torments) are exacerbated by social ones, as Will’s victimization is not limited to his vulnerability to the supernatural. As a consequence of his post-funeral reappearance in Hawkins, Will is taunted by bullies as a “zombie boy.” Will’s desire to be ordinary, to fit in, to be “not a freak” is met with elder brother Jonathan’s wisdom concerning identity, coming of age, and the social in the brutal contexts of middle school life, saying “nobody normal ever accomplished anything meaningful in this world” (2.01). Nevertheless, Will’s sense of separation and otherness renders him especially sensitive—and resistant—to the caring concern of both his friends and family who to his mind treat him “like a baby, like I can’t handle things on my own” (2.01). Will’s resistance to parenting leads him to reject, for instance, Jonathan’s chaperonage on Halloween night, with unhappy results.

Similarly, Eleven’s trauma as an exploited girl-weapon in Hawkins Lab marks her as target of both governmental forces and otherworldly monstrosity. Concerned with her protection, attempting to elude government agents and keep her safe, Hopper takes her to a cabin in the woods where she is shut off from everyone. Like Will, she rails against this protective impulse. At the time we meet her it is almost a year later; and, it is clear that her solitude and Hopper’s restrictions are re-enacting aspects of her previous trauma (2.01,2.02,2.03). Once again, she is a captive, a closely held secret project being trained and controlled, even coerced—albeit with an infinitely more humane keeper in Hopper than she had in Brenner. In response, she enacts an extreme version of the familiar hormonal and identity crises of the teenaged girl, further amplified by her special powers and circumstances: she has screaming fights with Hopper, blows out the windows with rage-fuelled telekinesis, and, after finding her file from the Lab with her birth name Jane (2.04), runs away (2.05, 2.07), seeking others with whom she has ties of blood and trauma, namely her “Mama.” Jane/Eleven’s attempt to help her mother, to heal the psychological damage done by Eleven’s birth within the Lab, is a failure; she cannot parent her mother through trauma, and neither can her mother parent her. Consequently, she is forced to reevaluate the existing and previous parental figures in her life—her relationships with Brenner and Hopper—through the overwhelming new knowledge of other children like her, her sister from the Lab, “Eight” who has renamed herself Kali. While their meeting and relationship is not consistently positive, nurturing, or safe, Kali with her gangnevertheless models an alternative family and the possibilities of self-individuation and independence, envisioned through anti-social acts (a home invasion in which Jane/Eleven participates) as well as divergent fashion choices (2.07). When Kali does a makeover of Jane/Eleven the focus isn’t on making her “pretty,” as is commonly the case with teen makeover scenes, but instead to make her into a visually distinct and harder-edged version of herself. With her oversized jacket, slicked-back hair, and cuffed jeans denoting a punk/goth aesthetic, the results are very different from her girlish—E.T. inspired—first-season makeover by The Party. Rather like Will, who is encouraged by his brother Jonathan to embrace his freakishness after being taunted as “zombie boy,” through the illustrative example of alternative music (“who would you rather hang out with, Bowie

or Kenny Rogers?")(2.01), Jane/Eleven finds a more fitting alternative identity with the help of her older sibling. That said, this makeover moment of bonding is moderated by Eleven's ultimate rejection of Kali—and her therapeutic recourse to retributive violence—despite their bond. Eleven's return to Hawkins is made with the knowledge that she does need and want the parental figures there. In response to Eleven's return as a teen rather than a child, likewise in response to his own reflections and fears concerning his treatment of her, Hopper re-evaluates his stance of patriarchal control, becoming in the process a positive example of parental adaptability and flexibility in an uncertain world (2.09).

For Max, the horrors of Hawkins—the alien Demodogs, the psychic “mage” Eleven, the apocalyptic developments of season's end—are underwhelming in their impact compared to the domestically violent homelife she consistently escapes via games, skateboarding, and through developing bonds with The Party, especially Lucas. Her mother is mostly absent, returning only to lend her silent acquiescence to a violently heteronormative patriarchal family structure which recycles itself into Max's abusive sibling relationship with Billy. With her father actively abusive and her mother passively acquiescent, there is no parental attempt to recognize, acknowledge, much less to heal this trauma. In this respect her experience recalls that of Mike and Nancy in the increasingly limited model of nuclear normalcy represented by the Wheeler household, although neither of them is the victim of verbal or physical abuse. Nevertheless, as in Max's case, their traumas are largely ignored in favor of parental controls of non-normative behaviors stemming from that trauma, based upon conventionally-gendered notions of fatherhood, and authoritative models of parenting. Ultimately it is The Party, primarily Lucas—also Steve when enacting his “Mr. Mom” role—who support and facilitate Max's violent rejection of this abusive cycle. When Billy invades the Byers' house where she is sheltering with The Party, Steve attacks Billy with the same weapon used against the monstrous Demodogs, while Max repurposes the sedative for Will's inner monster to quell Billy's in turn (2.09). Max provides a prime example of how surface conventionality and stability of a family can hide monstrous abuse and violence. The agency denied to her in the scope of her own two-parent family home with its surface of nuclear stability is enabled in the Byers' comparatively chaotic, single-parent home. Reflecting the variable nature of family in the twenty-first century, it becomes clear in Season Two from the example of the Wheelers and the Mayfield-Hargroves that the presence of a mother and father offers no guarantee of positive parenting. As a latchkey child, Max has been subject to abuse by her stand-in carer Billy, a very different relation than one sees in horror focused on latchkey children of the 1980s that typically depict a contentious yet supportive relationship between older and younger siblings.

The repeated phrase “friends don't lie” informs both parenting and self-parenting among the traumatized children of The Party, with an emphasis on sharing or revealing secrets of both government conspiracy and familial abuse as the means to self-empowerment. Max's developing relationship with The Party is based both on Lucas's revelation of hidden undercurrents, the history hidden from her, and likewise her revelation and acknowledgement of Billy's abuse. Her conversations with The Party, particularly Lucas, revolve around not just the mystery of Eleven, and Will, but how Max is to negotiate the traumas and dramas of her life at the bottom of the patriarchal pecking order. This accords with models of resilience that emphasize the importance of social networks and community (Masten 16, 18; Goldman 209, 229, 243). In this we see how the horror/sci fi motif of governmental conspiracy and secrecy as the source of horror—the breeding ground of monsters—is applied to the

domestic/intimate space. Responding to both these familial and supernatural threats, Steve plays the role of supportive older sibling that Billy does not, in a similar manner to Jonathan but without biological ties, protecting and helping The Party in the manner of self-sufficient latchkey siblings of the past. With a domestically cozy tea-towel slung over his shoulder in the makeshift shelter of the Byer's house at the end of Season Two, Steve forgoes received gender scripts to parent and rally The Party, accepting the duty of care, engaging with both the social and emotional challenges of children who need him. While reminiscent of 1980s latchkey sibling narratives, this alternative kinship group or found family likewise appears queerly coded. And, when Billy re-enacts the role of violent father and attacks Lucas—the friend he's explicitly warned Max against—in a show of power and white patriarchy, Steve challenges him, suffering a brutal beating that prompts Max into action. She interrupts this all-too-familiar replay of the domestic violence that characterizes home life of the Mayfield-Hargroves and literally takes the wheel from both Steve and Billy, stealing Billy's car and leading the others on the supernatural offensive, to attack the Demodogs.



Fig. 4 Max takes the wheel from Billy in the Season Two finale (2.09). Copyright: Netflix.

## Post-Trauma Parenting

The four families—Hopper, Byers, Mayfield-Hargroves, Wheelers—exhibit four methodologies for parenting through trauma at the beginning of Season Two. Hopper is worried about Eleven's physical safety but less about her state of mind. He seeks to contain her, isolate her, while not taking her desires and concerns into account—in many ways infantilizing her as Brenner did, though without the aim of exploitation (2.01, 2.03). He feeds and teaches and provides rules for safety but doesn't engage her concerns (2.03, 2.04). Joyce and Jonathan, by contrast, are protective of Will yet work to reintegrate him socially, preparing him for Halloween and talking to him about his readjustment to school. Joyce's household is expanded with a new-found boyfriend, the terrifically normal Bob (Sean

Astin), her circle of carers further expanded with Dr. Owen at Hawkins Lab. The difference between their care of Will and Hopper's of Eleven is that while both are concerned with safety and health, Hopper is not inclined to listen to Eleven's desires and concerns or to rank them as being as significant as his own. Nevertheless, in Will's view at least, Joyce, Jonathan and his friends infantilize him with their efforts to care and protect. And, consequently, in his determination to be like other boys coming of age, he is open to Bob's rather simplistic (and conventionally masculine) lesson to "stand his ground" against what Bob assumes to be imaginary fears, which allows Will to be possessed by the Mind Flayer (2.03). Bob is thus a figure that both models alternative parenting by talking his step-son through his fears, yet also dramatizes the maladaptive effects of received gendered scripts, also the presumption that children are unreliable narrators of their own experiences.

Meanwhile, the Wheelers, the stereotypical nuclear family, worry about Mike and Nancy's behavior (especially Mike's) but not about their states of mind, and thus the siblings self-parent and rely on friendship groups for support that they do not find at home: Mike retreating to the blanket-fort to attempt connection with Eleven (2.01), Nancy taking a more proactive approach to seeking retributive justice for Barb's death (2.03, 2.04, 2.05). Neal and Susan Hargrove (Jennifer Marshall) enter late in the season (2.08). Another example of a nuclear family, but largely absent from the screen and their children's lives, their methods of parenting are revealed in their results, the dysfunctional and increasingly dangerous relationship between step-siblings Billy and Max. They refuse to deal with or recognize the trauma produced by their own abusive parenting, and instead harshly punish any deviation or variation from the normative, an explicitly dysfunctional variant on the deliberate emotional non-engagement and control that the Wheelers seek to exert.

In Hopper's and Joyce's narrative and the counter-examples of the Wheelers and Mayfield-Hargroves over the course of Season Two we see a valorization of flexibility and adaptability of parenting in times of uncertainty, focusing on responsiveness and resilience to traumatic experiences, rather than silence or stoicism. Hopper starts with rules and repression of his traumatized adoptive daughter—not unlike the traditional patriarchal model of the Wheelers and Mayfield-Hargroves which focus on behaviors and punishments rather than emotional engagement and communication. By doing so, he drives El away to find alternative solutions to her trauma. But then Hopper turns away from this model of fathering, confronting his own fear and powerlessness, repairing their relationship with El on her return by a show of vulnerability and appreciation for her new "bitchin'" new look and attitude (2.09). Reunited post-makeover, reflecting perhaps on his own rebellious youth, Hopper accepts Eleven's leap beyond childhood. Control (and debilitating fears for her) relinquished, he faces with Eleven the trauma they share—which allows them to close the gate, save Hawkins, and mend their familial bond. Assisted by Dr Sam Owens, Hopper formalizes his paternal role at the conclusion of Season Two, having earned that role through flexible and compassionate parenting. While such positive representations of parenting reflect mainstream values and beliefs of twenty-first century pedagogy and the Millennial generation, such parental reactions to the trauma inflicted by the government on the children of *Stranger Things* is simultaneously complicated by parental compliance with governmental forces. In this respect, we see a persistent division between the world of adults and children that typifies horror of the past, as Joyce relies on Hawkins Lab for Will's treatment, Hopper continues to keep the Lab's secret's safe even as he hides Eleven from its new personnel. The compliance with the originator of

the trauma—Hawkins Lab and by extension the government— is a facet of an abusive system. It is only disrupted by the particular relationships Joyce and Hopper form, not just with each other, but with the Doctor. Dr Owens—unlike the duplicitous corporate functionary he recalls from *Aliens*—ultimately reveals himself as stalwart and dependable in the final fight at the lab. He works against corporate decision making, speaking against other scientists and doctors in the lab. This models his own version of “parenting into the spin” where he prioritizes his patients/children as individuals with agency, while working against generic expectations to become another nurturing paternal figure as well as a useful government ally, providing a birth certificate to document Eleven’s relationship with Hopper (2.09).

Joyce consults, but then ultimately, by the end of Season Two, rejects the expertise of doctors in the Hawkins Lab, relying instead on a series of alternative father figures—Bob, Jonathan and Hopper—to shepherd Will from trauma to post-trauma. As a single mother she offers an “alternative narrative to the dominant one of middle-class, full-time beatific motherhood” embodied by the much more conformist and complacent mothers of Hawkins, such as Mrs. Wheeler and Mrs. Hargrove (Williams 2015, 31). Her devotion to her son, and his friends, is marked by her belief in them. In the way she embodies an alternative version of purposeful motherhood, she offers an aesthetic and ideological opposition to middle-class behaviors and belief systems that put their faith in full-time parenting, heteronormative monogamy and marital status, rather than interpersonal engagement and a building of trust. The mothering she provides for children beyond her own – particularly for Eleven in the final episodes of Season One – identifies the tensions of the motherhood role. Unlike the “beatific motherhood” or “unrepentant mothers” of unruly (girl) children in horror as identified by Kathleen Karlyn Rowe, Joyce embodies motherhood as part of an occasionally contested and often difficult identity rather than the entirety of her role (227–29). That is, she smokes, drives wildly, engages in “make out” sessions with Bob at work – all reversions to the teen years she reminisces about with Hopper. But she also dares to believe in the supernatural and act on that belief in her radically intuitive and adaptive approaches to parenting. These actions all mark her difference, separating her from the cowed fear, dismissive neglect, and absent-minded obliviousness shown by other mother figures of Hawkins.

When Will resists Joyce’s parenting, it reframes her in terms of the maligned twenty-first century category of the “helicopter parent,” associated with Millennial generation coming of age in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Yet the series ultimately valorizes her intense engagement, as she repeatedly connects Will umbilically to the real world, both in the first season when she speaks to him through Christmas lights and in the second when she enacts an exorcism of the Mind Flayer. Will’s alienation as consequence of his possession by the Mind Flayer appears as a forced and toxic removal from the dependencies of childhood—transformed not into a teen but a monstrously other version of himself. His unwilling complicity in the spreading evil of the Demogorgon requires him to be blinded, deafened, and reborn into humanity in Hopper’s cabin, the monstrosity burned out of him as the rest of The Party battle the Demogorgon in the tunnels. Joyce’s unflinching gaze on his trauma, her willingness to intensify his pain is another example of turning into and facing the source of danger, steering into what is spinning out of control in her son and in Hawkins. The final scene of exorcism, where she is both priest and mother, she uses her connection with Will to save him, without withdrawing from the pain caused by it or by her. Joyce’s *own* trauma is centered on her motherhood; she lost Will once and is unsure that he is truly back, clearly evidenced by the scene where the phone rings during the Byers’

family movie night and she flinches with each trill, even though he is seated nearby, his boredom equal to Jonathan's in response to Bob's ironic film choice, the 1983 comedy *Mr Mom* (Dragoti). Like Joyce's other maternal fears, this anxiety is justified as perceptive despite its apparent excess, as it turns out that Will *is* being traumatized, progressively taken over by the monster from the Upside Down. Bob himself, despite his tragically misguided advice to Will to stand his ground, is depicted as a caring parent who supports, believes in, playfully distracts, and doggedly solves problems for his newfound family. Unaffected by trauma himself, Bob is at once somewhat out of his depth, relying wrong headedly on traditional gendered beliefs from his own past, yet also a figure of flexibility and care offering real solutions to supernatural problems, a solid, steady presence who provides a recovery space for Joyce as well as her sons.

For the Mayfield-Hargroves family, who appear as a shadow version of the Wheelers, their willful ignorance, abuse, and neglect force Max into parenting herself, much as Mike is isolated by both his parents and Nancy. Max finds support instead with The Party and their extended families – even the acrimony of Eleven – in a way that allows her to assert and rescue herself. Mike finds his greatest support – of a kind – in his similarly neglected sister Nancy's turn as a girl detective. She is not his emotional support network, but her actions alongside those of Jonathan, play a part in vanquishing the monsters that haunt him. Ultimately, Nancy returns to Hawkins' social life reasserting her space as Mike's sister when she dances with his friend. Both the Mayfield-Hargroves and the Wheelers perform the patriarchal extremities of gendered parenting, with aggressive fatherly assertions about homosexuality and patriotism interrupting intentional absence and neglect, while maternal assertions are subservient to those paternal proclamations. Through the multiply predatory figure of Billy, the heteronormative family is depicted as poisoned and poisoning in a rhizomic motif that echoes that of the Upside Down. His mother watches passively while her husband abuses his son and Billy backs down under that abuse; then Billy in turn takes the opportunities not just to share repeat that abuse with Max, but also to make sexual overtures to Mrs. Wheeler while her husband is ensconced in his chair and his reading, refusing to even answer the door. The cycle of abuse is a familiar plot device in horror, productive of monstrosity in films like *Carrie*. Billy clearly emerges as a different kind of monster; not one that speaks to the abject difference of the monstrous feminine but rather one that speaks to the monstrous effects of patriarchal dominance and control. The spiraling nature of abuse is likewise registered in the way others respond to the neglect and abuse of their parents. Nancy, for instance, seeks out the prematurely parentified Jonathan in preference over the less mature "King Steve," while abandoning her brother in order to get closure on the death of her best friend Barb. The second season of *Stranger Things* both harks back to and challenges patterns of abuse with the reunion and remaking of Eleven and Hopper as a family, also Max's assertion of agency and self-preservation against Billy. In the example of Hopper and Eleven we see the cycle of abuse interrupted by the parental figure in power, while in the case of Max, she has a protector in Steve but ultimately acts on her own behalf as well as his against her stepbrother, the final episode showing them in an uneasy state of detente.



Fig. 5 Max protects her friends and challenges Billy (2.09). Copyright: Netflix.

The contrast of these traumatic transitions from childhood to puberty in Eleven, Will, Mike and Max in these four families, alongside the varied parental negotiations of trauma, point to a rejection of nuclear families in Season Two that stands in contrast to Season One. Likewise, an emphasis on alternative and positive fathering signals a departure from 1980s source texts, whereby *Stranger Things* valorizes the paternal while critiquing the patriarchal. Single parent families are likewise validated in Season Two not as a danger to latchkey children but instead as positive spaces for their recoveries thanks to adaptive parenting methods and radical vulnerability of those who parent. These performances of single parent, elder sibling, and community parenting highlight comparatively the dysfunction of the nuclear family unit found in both the Wheelers and the Mayfield-Hargroves blended family. The single parent families that work in terms of dealing with the children who have been hurt are ones where the parents react and respond to the trauma without adhering to strict gendered roles, Joyce and Hopper both fulfilling roles conventionally associated with both fathers and mothers to parent effectively. By contrast, Dustin's single mother appears to abdicate authority as a parent, leaving Dustin (Gaten Matarazzo) to caretake and support her (hiding unpleasant facts from her about her lost cat, for instance) while he, in a comic-horror version of parentification, himself attempts to parent Dart and troubleshoot the effects of Dart's rapid—and ravenous—development on his own. Here we see a classically comic-horror representation of 1980s latchkey child, as Dustin deals with monstrosity first on his own and then with the help of a surrogate big brother (or substitute Dad) Steve. This is not because his mother isn't at home but because she appears happy for Dustin to take care of her emotional needs as well as his own, as though he were the prototypical man of the house, with his own monstrous offspring.

## Conclusion

At the beginning of Season One in *Stranger Things*, identities, families, and the shelter of the family home appear solid for the inhabitants of Hawkins, with family and parenting strongly oriented toward the suburban fastness of the Wheeler household. Though in some respects it appears as a point of

origin for incursions of the Upside Down, seemingly conjured by the authorial voice of Mike Wheeler in his Dungeons and Dragons roleplay, the Wheeler family home is also a refuge, particularly for Eleven. In this context of security and safety, the willful and well-meaning ignorance the Wheeler parents is of little consequence, as it appears that the very idea of the suburban nuclear family who gathers at the breakfast and dinner table, that monitors its children's behavior, is sufficient to light the darkness. Season Two, by contrast, focuses on a world in which this conventional suburban stronghold of the nuclear family is no longer sufficient to deal with traumas originating from without and within, the supernatural and social circumstances reshaping the lives of Hawkins' youth. Thus Season Two breaks with the conservatively nostalgic project of Season One to register the changing shape of the family since the 1980s as well as changing modes of parenting, as re-formed family groups focus on contingent social networks and single-parent households rather than ones comprised of married couples with children.

One of the impacts of past trauma and present threat is the increased focus on men in care-giving roles, so that the strong focus on the bad father, evil and exploitative Dr. Brenner in Season One is balanced by various male characters acting as good parents in Season Two. That said, the motif of the bad father continues. While the transgressions of Brenner continue to resonate through the trauma of Eleven and the continued monstrous incursions of the Upside Down, bad fathers are no longer associated solely with patriarchal structures of government—or even broken families like the Byers—but explicitly with the abusive extremes and normative deficiencies of patriarchal control within the nuclear family itself. The trauma of Season Two, and parenting through it, draws on allusions to horror films of the past, but the solutions to trauma appear contemporary, reflecting demographic shifts of the last forty years, as well as values somewhat removed from the most conservatively patriarchal ones that informed 1980s horror.

By “parenting into the spin” of the varied forms of trauma the adult protagonists of Hawkins form relationships with their children and each other outside the expected heteronormative nuclear family structure, highlighting the importance of social networks and support in times of trauma and stress. This is contrasted with the approaches to those traumas by the normative family units – namely the Wheelers and Mayfield-Hargroves – who rely on authoritative parenting models. The results are made explicit by the acts of those children, who avoid those domestic spaces, family environments, and self-parent or turn to each other for guidance. The introduction of a domestically violent, and sexually predatory figure in Billy Hargrove, a negative example of the sibling-parent, shows how maladaptive parenting through trauma can result in further abuse, suspended by his step-sister's violent defense of herself and her friends, but also by the maternal caregivers Steve and Joyce. In the conclusion to the season we see Max literally take the wheel, confronting the violence of her home life in order to assert herself, remaking power relations between her and Billy, accompanied by Dustin, Mike, Lucas, and Steve. Similarly as the closing shots of Season Two reveals, the trauma is still there but as Hopper and Joyce lean against her Pinto, they face the oncoming troubles of teen years and supernatural incursions as supportive parents to The Party.

Radical vulnerability in facing the trauma inflicted on the children of Hawkins typifies the response of key parental figures – Joyce Byers, Chief Hopper, Dr Brenner, disrupting the normative tropes of horror



as a genre, and the authoritarian parenting of other parental figures in the series. The promise of home as a place of safety and care is reinvented not by adhering to the generic or generational expectations but by the ways parents respond to the violent and traumatic events of both seasons. Season Two works to combine the aspirational aspects of nostalgic, Spielbergian fictions, their vision of an imagined family happiness, with new models of families and parenting found in *The Party* and their nonconforming parental figures.

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