

PURITANISM

At least two specific influences of the seventeenth century heightened society's awareness of the special needs of the child: the rise of Puritanism and the philosophy of John Locke. The Puritans were a very strict religious sect who believed that everyone was responsible for his or her own salvation and that success in life was a sign of God's favor. They placed a high value on reading, because they believed the Bible should be accessible to everyone, and on education in general, since it helped ensure material success. Persecuted in England, many came to North America, where they soon established Harvard College (1636), emphasizing their commitment to education. If they did little to foster fine literature (they disapproved, in fact, of most literature as frivolous and ungodly), the Puritans are credited with encouraging literacy among the middle classes.

Schooling was an important part of a Puritan child's upbringing, and Puritan children used a variety of schoolbooks. *Hornbooks* consisted of simple wooden slabs, usually with a handle (many looked like paddles). Parchment containing rudimentary language lessons (the alphabet, numbers, and so on) was fastened to the wood and was then covered with transparent horn (from cattle, sheep, goats), a primitive form of lamination that made these books very durable. *Battledores*, cheap books made of folded cardboard and usually containing educational material, were widely used into the nineteenth century. The most famous of early schoolbooks was the *New England Primer*, which first appeared sometime around 1690 and continued in print in some form or another until 1886. It introduced young Puritan children to the alphabet through rhymes ("In Adam's fall/We Sinned all" for the letter A) and then to increasingly sophisticated reading material—all with a religious intent (see Figure 1.2). *Chapbooks*, small and cheaply made books containing fairy tales and other secular works, were also widespread during the period, but the Puritans frowned on these forerunners of the dime novel.



FIGURE 1.2 The *New England Primer* was one of the longest-lived school texts in American history, flourishing from approximately 1690 to 1830. The earliest surviving copy is from 1727, from which these illustrations are taken. Intended to teach the children of the early Puritans how to live a godly life, the book is unabashedly didactic, which is evident even in its rhyming alphabet, recalling a time when church and state were not so completely separate as they are now.