

OUR CHILDREN ARE CHANGING

LESLIE J. CHAMBERLIN*
RICARDO GIRONA

"What is normal?" This basic question is again being asked as we discover some of the drastic changes that have come about in the maturation and development of today's children and young people.

CHILDREN are changing biologically, sociologically, intellectually, and in other ways. These changes are researchable and are a very definite reality. Important changes have taken place over the past one hundred years, and even more dramatic and observable changes have come about in the past two decades. All of these changes cannot be totally defined, but research has been, and is being, conducted concerning some of the areas of change. Researchers at the Albany Medical College (Albany, New York) plan to spend the next three years examining 1,000 babies, testing their belief that the baby of today is different from the baby of 20 years ago.¹

Many psychologists, such as Arnold Gesell, have studied the sequence by which human beings develop and individual differences appear. Studies such as these created the belief that we had discovered the script against which the development of all children could be measured. Current infor-

mation indicates that there is no "universal child" and that our growth data are constantly changing.

Biological Changes

One does not have to be a professor of physiology to observe that "they don't stay children very long any more." A quick survey of children within your family, neighborhood, or school will demonstrate that children have changed physically. Generally speaking, both boys and girls are much taller and heavier than previous generations. In addition, today's children are healthier and face the longest life expectancy yet known.

Another facet of biological change has been a progressively earlier development of menstruation and sex drives in children. The age of menarche has dropped by two years, from 13.5 to 11.5. In the period from 1870-1930, the mean age of the onset of menstruation fell from 16.5 years of age to 14.5, a decrease of two years over a 60 year span. In the last 20 years, however, it has dropped

**Leslie J. Chamberlin, Professor of Educational Administration and Supervision, and Ricardo Girona, Associate Professor of Education; both at Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio*

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the same amount, from 13.5 years in 1950 to a predicted mean age for 1970 of 11.5.²

This early onset of puberty can be ascribed to boys, also. Hence, today's children are not only attaining physical growth sooner but are also experiencing sexual maturity at a corresponding earlier age. A. D. Black and others have pointed out that girls tend to reach maturity quicker than their counterpart, they grow faster between the years of 11 and 12, they become more emotionally mature. At age 15 to 16 the boys catch up and pass the girls in growth physically.³

The causes that have brought about these biological changes within children are numerous and interrelated and may include the following:

1. Improved nutrition and diets
2. More and earlier immunization to disease
3. Better medical treatment, including prenatal care and baby delivery procedures
4. Increased use of vitamins and minerals
5. Diet additives given to livestock.

Various theories have been investigated regarding the biological changes that have occurred in children including the theory that diet additives fed to cattle for the purposes of bringing about earlier development and a rapid increase in the animal's weight have indirectly affected humans. It is thought

² Cutright Phillips. "Illegitimacy in the United States: 1920-1968." In: C. F. Wertoff and R. Parke, Jr., editors. *Demographic and Social Aspects*. Volume 1. Washington, D.C.: 1969.

³ Algernon D. Black *et al.* *Teen Love, Teen Marriage*. New York: Grosset and Dunlap, Inc., 1966.

that these additives are passed along to the developing generation through meat consumption. There may be numerous other factors contributing to the biological changes within our children today. However, one thing is clear: these factors are combining in such a way as to accelerate the biochemical transformation of our girls into women and our boys into men.

The results of these biological changes within our children have had an alarming impact on parents, an unpredictable impact on society, and, at times, a bewildering impact on the children themselves.

Today we find the age of adolescence beginning early, remaining overly long, and ending much later than for previous generations. With the onset of puberty at an earlier age, our children find themselves wandering through a no-man's-land between childhood and adulthood for at least ten years.⁴ Puberty, which in one way marks the end of childhood, no longer ushers in adulthood. Marriage and the establishment of a career which once marked the end of adolescence and the beginning of adulthood do not occur usually until the early 20's and often much later. In most industrialized cultures we find adulthood is delayed due to both educational requirements and economic conditions thus producing the paradox of children who, while biologically maturing earlier, are being required to wait longer for sex, social rights, and adult obligations.

As a result of this rapid maturation many expectations that used to be reserved for the older adolescent and adult world now seem appropriate for much younger children.

⁴ Brian Weiss. "Earlier Menstruation, Longer Adolescence." *Psychology Today*, November 1974.

Some of these expectations have to do with sex, money, career planning, and the world of work. Obviously, there is also a relationship to the developmental level of children and the curriculum to which they are exposed and the kinds of activities that motivate them.

Today's young child is motivated by many drives that only a few years ago affected only youths ten years his or her senior. Traits such as the straining against parental authority, desire for greater freedom, and extreme loyalty to peer groups, that once characterized the late teen years now are often encountered in much younger children. The "mating season," that period of time when young people will dedicate most of their attention to the opposite sex, now comes much earlier due to the rapid biological development and the early experiencing of sex drives. Often everything else will suffer during this time, including school work, home and family relations, and friendships with the same sex.

Perhaps this situation can best be described as a clash between culture and biology. We adults try to cling to and pass on the values and mores of our culture to our children while they struggle with maturing bodies and childlike emotions. Adults face a great challenge in assisting children to learn to cope with their rapid biological development and their preparation for adulthood.

Socio-Econ-Cultural Changes

As the question of "change and children" is considered, it becomes readily evident that children are changing just as our society is changing. Children are both a product and a reflection of our society. The very nature of childhood, being more flexible and open to change than adulthood, lends itself to change. Couple this characteristic with the vast socio-econ-cultural changes that have occurred, and it is quite apparent that the environment was such that children had no choice but to change.

Societal maturity comes later and later with each generation. In 1910 young people

were considered adults in many ways at about age 12 but by 1970 the age had risen to 18. Adolescence used to be considered the years between 13 and 19; today it is more likely to be from 10 to 30 with young people simply acting out the parts of mini-men and mini-women. Perhaps a new term is needed to describe this period of life, such as "youthhood" referring to the long period between childhood and adulthood.

The child's family is no longer the stable focal point of life that it once was. Increased mobility, both geographic and social, has also affected the child. Where at one time children were enmeshed in what we might call a stable setting and influenced by "the extended family" with even the neighbors having a concern for them; people today move so frequently that only the "primary family group" has any influence. Often even aunts and uncles are too distant to have much effect on them.

Part of the frustration for today's young people centers on the dramatic role changes that have occurred for men and women and the role confusion that has resulted. Today it is not uncommon to find men serving as waiters or cooks in the local cafeteria, while women provide such services as police and fire protection and fulfill many other roles that used to be considered masculine in nature. Young people today seem to have selected new values and morals as well as new roles and many are no longer fulfilling the traditional expectations in regard to behavior. In fact, values and morals change at such a rate that children reared in a particular value system can no longer expect to use these same values all of their lives. Values now change so rapidly that what one is taught as a child may no longer be functional when that child becomes an adolescent let alone an adult.

The noted anthropologist, Margaret Mead, asserts that society in the United States has burdened our children with unrealistic expectations. American adolescents are expected to mimic the ways of adults long before they are allowed to accept the adult role. Some signs of society's new expectations might include: the continuing down-

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ward trend in the age for dating, going steady, organized competitive athletics, and the spending of large amounts of money. Today's adolescents have been superficially exposed to so many adult activities, problems, and privileges that by the time they reach mid-teens they become bored and feel they have little to look forward to.⁵ This "over-exposure" has resulted in apathetic feelings of boredom and lack of motivation.

Some young people today are responding to the new pressures as a challenge while others are seeking escape. Many young people are rejecting the Puritan ethic of sexual restraint and are now seeking premarital intercourse long before leaving junior high school. The abuse of various chemical compounds is obviously one of the escapes being sought by some children. Perhaps the

⁵ Margaret Mead. "Early Adolescence in the U.S." In: Harold W. Bernard and Wesley C. Huckins, editors. *Readings in Human Development*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, Inc., 1968.

most alarming cultural phenomenon of the past decade has been this increasing chemical abuse by our youth and children. It seems that we have subscribed to the philosophy, "better living through chemistry." This increase of escape through the use of drugs is thought by many sociologists and psychologists to be directly related to the socio-cultural pressures of our times.

One reaction of our children to the social and cultural pressures is delinquent behavior. Increased violence is attributable, in part, to some of the pressures that young people are attempting to deal with. This increase in delinquent behavior is not unique to the United States, but is being experienced in most European countries and Japan as well. France recorded a 400 percent rise in delinquent behavior among its youth within the past ten year period, and Japan is experiencing one of the most rapid escalations of delinquency in the world. Analysis of this rise in delinquent behavior has revealed a significant relationship between a country's economic growth and a rise in delinquent behavior.⁶

The socio-econ-cultural changes that we have referred to seem to be related to this country's level of affluence, human and civil rights legislation, the activity of the courts, and the impact of television and other products of modern technology.

Intellectual Changes

In the world of education we find much information concerning achievement scores, IQ scores, interest inventories, and personality scales. Most children's cumulative school folders reveal that within the first few years of school they were screened, tested, evaluated, sampled, surveyed, and assessed. Such information seems to indicate that youth today are better informed than ever before.

The children today have had more exposure to information than any previous

⁶ Gerald J. Pine. "The Affluent Delinquent." In: Harold W. Bernard and Wesley C. Huckins, editors. *Readings in Human Development*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, Inc., 1968.

generation in history. Many have attended nursery school and most children today have gone to kindergarten. Practically all children have watched TV programs such as "Electric Company," "Sesame Street," "Captain Kangaroo," and others that have taught them about today's world. The majority have traveled farther and have seen more places than previous generations and through television they have observed how the people of many countries live. They have actually seen the things the news media have talked about: war, trips to the moon, and many other national and international occurrences. Also, there are more materials and aids available to classrooms today than ever before.

The increase in information possessed by our youth has also been affected by the technological advancements taking place within our schools. Teaching aids are better than ever before. Teachers are more thoroughly trained in the use of instructional media materials and educational experiences are improving continually. Without a doubt, better teaching methods have contributed to the improved learning capacity of many children.

Another factor that has dramatically affected the information level of today's child is the mobility of our population. Citizens of the United States are a people on the move. Over 40,000,000 people move every two years. Because of this increased mobility, many children are not just seeing things and places on TV or reading about them in books, they are experiencing them at firsthand. This "on hand experience" has profoundly affected the learning of today's children. They exhibit a geographic sophistication that many pre-World War II adults never attained.

The information level of today's child as well as his or her learning level has also been affected by the childhood activity of play. Due to legislation regarding child labor, greater automation of business and industry, and less need for children to work at home, today's child has time to play. Play activities are important to a child's development and can stimulate and facilitate creativity within children.

Young people today are not easily im-

pressed. There is not much that they have not seen whether it be foreign people and places, technological achievements that stagger the imagination, violence in vivid, bloody detail, and/or sex episodes in their most intimate detail.

Another result of the abundance of information is that young people today are confused. They experience an "over choice" in many areas such as the kind of occupation and life style available to them. Over choice in regard to dress, attitude, and values is a contributing factor to their confusion.

By the time most children are age six they have spent more hours in front of the television set than they will spend in classrooms during their entire high school career. Such great exposure to television obviously encourages mimicking of the various kinds of behavior that is seen. Their image of themselves which they form during the most impressionable years, from one to five, is often inaccurate or at least inappropriate. Finally, as a direct result of their TV viewing habits, children often have difficulty relating to reality and will frequently become upset in real life when they see someone seriously injured or die because they are accustomed to seeing the television hero always recover and appear to be indestructible.

One question that is raised by the changes discussed is "What is normal?" Normal is not a constant but changes as times change. The basic question of "what is normal" is now open to discussion. Years ago one could determine what was normal to some extent by his or her previous life experiences, referring back to how things used to be.

Because of the socio-econ-cultural pressures, times are not the same and the youth of today are faced with an entirely different situation. Interest in economic matters versus causes, such as integration and Vietnam, all seem to change with the changing times thus emphasizing the concept that normal relates more to times and places than to individuals. Therefore, rethinking needs to be done in regard to what is normal behavior for the modern child. □

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