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March 1983

Volume 40

Number 6

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ISSN 0013-1784

Learning What They Live

Talk with a teacher and sooner or later you'll probably hear, "Kids today are different." It may be a complaint, an excuse, or just an observation, but it will be said with conviction.

And why not? This generation lives in a different world. Their nursery rhymes are McDonald's commercials and their fairy tales are crime shows. Their heroes are rock singers and the Dukes of Hazard, and their recreation is programmed by Atari. They are surrounded by material goods, symbols of prosperity, but they are vaguely afraid that life will get worse. Most important, they aren't sure what to value or believe in.

Not that today's kids are spoiled, or lazy, or dishonest. Some of them may be, but probably no more than usual. Socrates criticized the rudeness and irresponsibility of his day's youth. Seen in perspective, even the devastating statistics on juvenile crime and other problems cited by Neil Postman in "The Disappearing Child" can be enlightening.

To help decide which articles to publish, I usually ask advice from three or four members of the Publications Committee or other educators. Choosing manuscripts for this issue was particularly difficult because reviewers considered most of the articles "too negative." For example, they questioned the contention of James Mackey and Deborah Appleman that drugs and part-time jobs are causing an epidemic of "adolescent apathy" in schools. "What they say may be accurate as far as it goes," a principal told me, "but it's not the way I see our kids."

"But a lot of students do have jobs, don't they?" I asked, "and many young people apparently do misuse drugs and alcohol."

"Well, yes," he replied, "but we're also seeing a new seriousness; more interest in taking hard courses and getting good grades."

His comment illustrates the risk of generalizing about a whole generation. Like adults, young people are different, so anything said about them must be

qualified by the word "some." Nevertheless, those who work with youth need to think about major influences on them because understanding these influences may help us know how to respond. For example, Postman claims that television and other forces are erasing the lines between childhood and adulthood, with unfortunate consequences. Valerie Suransky bemoans inadequate provisions for childcare. Christine Nystrom analyzes "What Television Teaches About Sex" and finds it deplorable.

All this is pretty negative, all right. Is it unnecessarily alarmist? The answer lies in what we know—and beyond that, what we believe—about human development. A good many school principals have framed on their office wall a statement affirming that Children Learn What They Live: "If a child lives with hostility, he learns to fight. . . . If a child lives with fairness, he learns justice. . . ." It may sound maudlin but it's true.

If little children spend most of their waking hours in a noisy, disorganized human storage bin, they will probably have trouble concentrating on school work later on. If children see only cruel, manipulative sex on television, they may grow up to use sex as a bargaining chip. If children are continually reminded of their rights without being taught their responsibilities, they may become selfish, demanding adolescents. If children grow up in loving, intellectually stimulating surroundings, they are more likely to become caring, intelligent students and responsible citizens and parents.

Millions of children do receive the attention they need, but millions of others do not—and we see the results in schools. Although educators cannot by themselves change an entire society, our work is powerfully affected by television and other social influences. We need to understand how these forces affect young people and do what we can to make the world a better place for them. □

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