

Children

Childhood at Risk



ACCT photos

The precarious situation of children today should provoke us to informed action.

What is happening to childhood today? In our schools and our families, in our work and our play, the everyday images of childhood in America are sometimes alarming. What are we asking children to do and to be in today's world?

Children and Families

First, consider the American family—not the family structure that used to be the norm but the one that, like it or not, is prevalent today.

Three children are eating dinner with their mother. All are tired from a full day of work, school, and "after-school." Dinner is a brief pause with fast food carry-out before the evening routine of homework, laundry, and making lunches. During this "family time" the TV does all the talking, about public dishonesty in high places and disasters that appear paradoxically close and clear and yet unreal and distant. This unbearable news is made less painful by the incongruous interruptions of light chirpy messages about a dog who likes to party with people who drink beer, a car that gives people freedom, and a pill that changes not only how a woman feels but, remarkably, seems to improve her appearance and her social life within seconds.

Changes in the American family are a fact of life. Women work outside the home; increasingly they are the heads of households. While this is a social phenomenon, it is often experienced

by women and children as a private event, a personal problem, even a personal failing. Because of economic realities that discriminate against women and public policy that is constructed around an assumption of the practically nonexistent "typical" family, the changing American family has become an unnatural disaster for millions, with far too few resources spread far too thin.

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Children need the home base of family life in order to grow up healthy and strong. They need to be listened to and understood, nurtured and challenged by caring, committed adults. They do not necessarily need a traditional family structure, but they do need adults who share their successes and feel their pain, who know how to hold them close but also how to let them go. For example, in *Shy People*, an award-winning film, two mothers confront issues of love, commitment, and freedom within their families. One imprisons her grown sons literally in a toolshed and figuratively in a web of superstition and passivity; the other disapproves of her teenage daughter's cocaine habit and promiscuity but refuses to stop her. Both love their children, but neither is able to contribute to the children's self-esteem, self-activity, or self-control. Neither understands the link between authority and permissiveness, or the need for both autonomy and connectedness.

Somehow, if children are to thrive and childhood to survive, adults must be adult. They must provide the balance of "the taste and the boundary of freedom; the comfort and irritation of being controlled; the safety and threat of being known" (Biber 1970, p. 3). When this balance is missing, children

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are injured and childhood itself is in jeopardy.

Children and Society

Children today also need to experience balance outside the family, but instead they are assaulted by confusing images that exploit them and rob them of childhood itself. Consider the following image, just one of thousands a child might encounter in a single day.

Two preteen girls look out from a full-page newspaper ad. They appear in front of a jungle gym in a playground where no one is playing. One girl, the one in profile with long blond hair falling over one eye, has her arm draped casually over the shoulder of the other girl, who is sitting cross-legged, square to the camera. The blond child is wearing a bikini top and designer jeans. The other child has on an oversized T-shirt and jeans that both bear the same designer labels. She has pulled the shirt down over one shoulder. Each affects a suggestive stare and pouting lips.

The image of young girls posturing as sex objects in order to sell jeans is a particularly distressing kind of pornography. This is an image of exploitation, with an implicit message that sexual precocity and this stylized, sophisticated consumerism are valuable and, further, that childhood is not hip and is therefore undesirable. Cultural images help to shape childhood, and in our culture a preponderance of images are aimed at the child as a consumer: Eat this! Drink this! Wear this! Buy this! Children are the targets of billion-dollar junk food, fashion, and toy industries.

Television continues the assault of images. Most youngsters watch far too

much TV, and much of the content they watch offers little educational value. But beyond specific content is the juxtaposition of TV images with the passivity of TV watching. Disconnected pictures and words about a violent war, for example, combine with the passive reception of that information to produce a deep sense of helplessness

and inaction. Similarly, the implication that freedom comes from the instantaneous, superficial pleasure of driving a car too fast combines with the atomized experience of TV viewing to create the notion that freedom is personal, private, and sensational rather than a social and public achievement or a sustained group effort for the public good.

Children in Crisis

Robert Maynard

The saddest thing about the sad case of Tawana Brawley is that we may never know just what happened to her. The nation was gripped and baffled by this tale of the black teenager who said she was abducted and abused by a group of racist white men. A controversial New York grand jury decision said her story is almost certainly a fabrication. They concluded there was no abduction, no rape, no mutilation by others, no villainous smearing of her body with dog excrement at the hands of hatemongers. If that is true, then we must search elsewhere for explanations.

Millions have asked the question: "If she did those things to herself, why?" The grand jury report contains a good set of possibilities. Once they're addressed, another aspect of reality attaches itself to the name *Tawana Brawley*. The grand jury's findings suggest Tawana is more typical than she might at first appear. Indeed, her plight is shared daily by thousands of teenagers across the nation, kids you see every day and wonder why they're doing some of the things they do. Look in Times Square, San Francisco's Tenderloin, and the adult districts (so-called) of a dozen large cities. You'll see the other side of Tawana Brawley, the kids who run away, hit the streets to escape sexual abuse at home. They're boys and girls, black and white, and every other shade. Often they are like Tawana Brawley—no: the best behaved of children.

What's different about Tawana is that she didn't physically run away. She ran away mentally. That's the essence of the grand jury finding. She took a flight of fancy in which she created a circumstance intended to garner sympathy and deflect the violence she feared at home from her mother's live-in boyfriend. She was aware of his violent history. He killed his first wife and served time in prison for murder. That, the grand jury says, is why Tawana Brawley did those terrible things to herself. She made up a tale to escape. Other kids faced with some of the same fears of violence and abuse make their way to the streets. There they find themselves enmeshed in a world of crime, especially drugs and prostitution.

At the other end of the country from the Tawana Brawley case, another example is unfolding of what happens to the group some call "America's throwaway children." Several prominent San Franciscans, a former mayoral candidate and a police officer among them, are charged with sex crimes involving children—throwaway children. As the prosecution tells it, an enterprising couple in San Francisco recruited runaway kids to serve as prostitutes for a clientele of men older than their grandparents. For this particular clientele, the younger the appearance of the children, the more appealing.

These are children from homes in which the fear of violence, abuse, and neglect is so great that they prefer the life of the streets. Social workers say some come from homes that do not want them back. "Keep them," the families say when child welfare workers call. That is why they are known as throwaways. Nobody wants them; nobody, that is, except for drug dealers, pimps, and old men in search of innocence to corrupt. Many who might wish to go home again are afraid. They fear being beaten, sexually molested, or psychologically abused. They are children at risk in their own homes.

The New York grand jury and the FBI believe Tawana Brawley was such a child. That, the jurors say, explains this bizarre case and answers the question of why a child might do such terrible things to herself. She had worse things to fear.

Robert Maynard is a featured essayist appearing regularly on the MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour. He presented this essay on December 29, 1988.

Children and Schools

Our society has undergone dramatic and fundamental changes in the past 50 years, but what goes on in schools is very much what has always gone on in schools. They, too, are failing our children by staying the same amid massive societal changes. Consider the following scene, played out daily in schools throughout the country.

Social studies class is half over. This is a good class in a good school; the students report that the teacher works hard at what he does and shows genuine regard for them. Everyone knows the rhythm and ritual of this class; everyone knows, for example, that recitation and discussion will come later. Most kids are tuning in and out, 28 minds wandering to other matters: a basketball game today after school, a date tomorrow night, the job on Saturday, and then the Sunday trip with the bicycle club. Later one student comments that social studies is her favorite class, and it is boring. Asked to explain this apparent contradiction, she says, "Hey, it's school!"

The crisis in education, manifest in catastrophic dropout rates, widespread failure to teach the basics, and looming teacher shortages, is largely a problem of the cities and of poverty. But there is also a crisis of responsiveness, of imagination. Almost all children expect school to be mostly unresponsive, disconnected from life, and unrelated to their deepest desires and concerns. Life in school is likely to be teacher-centered, textbook-dominated, restrictive, impersonal, and rigid (Goodlad 1984).

This commonplace of life in school leads to several questions. First, if we are committed to students' becoming critical thinkers—or just thoughtful adults—we must wonder why our schools emphasize coverage, not reflection, not thinking, not problem solving. And if we intend to foster lifelong interest in learning, we must ask why so many classrooms look like lecture halls instead of laboratories for learning. Further, if we want students to grow up as productive citizens of a democracy, we must ask why so much of schooling involves following orders, completing meaningless tasks, and being passive and obedient. We must also answer the question of why schools assess students' recall of disconnected bits of information as the ultimate measure of school success.

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If we recognize critical thinking, lifelong learning, and citizenship as measures of school success, we understand that even our most privileged schools—locked into fragmented curricula and standardized tests—may be failing our children. We need schools where students pose their own important questions, figure out collectively with their teachers and their fellow students how to pursue answers, and actively work to derive useful knowledge from information.

Of course, schools today strive for children to become competent, and this is a legitimate goal. But competence drawn narrowly, as the acquisition of skills, misses the dynamic that fuels so much of learning. What's more, this definition can lead to accelerating children inappropriately, introducing more tasks faster, as if this in itself were competence. Rather, competence comes from the challenges and interactions of daily life and the ways they contribute to an inner sense of worth. To help children become truly competent, we must build on the know-how they bring to school and value what the children themselves value, bridging self and school. Failing to make this connection contributes to a sense of alienation from both school and self.

The Restoration of Childhood

When we look closely at America's children, we see that even basic needs for care, shelter, food, and love are not being met for millions of kids. We see runaways, homeless families, child

prostitutes, and privileged children who live for fashion and consumer gadgets—countless youngsters who are disconnected and aimless.

Perhaps the precarious situation of childhood will provoke us to informed action. The practical place to begin is to recall that children are whole people, with bodies, minds, cultures, and feelings. Furthermore, we can acknowledge that children want what all human beings long for: love, support, respect, community, meaningful work to do, and real choices to make.

We can acknowledge the pressures on families and work diligently for enlightened social policies around issues like child care and equal pay. We can struggle against those who treat children as markets to penetrate and exploit. We can create child-friendly environments, what Eliot Wigginton (1985) called "islands of decency" for children, places where the needs, dreams, intentions, and hopes of children are recognized and encompassed. We can create these islands of decency in our homes, in our playgrounds and day care centers, and in our daily interactions in schools.

Educational leaders cannot evade responsibility for creating, recreating, and changing the world in which we all live and learn. Part of our task is to allow children to be children, to protect childhood, and to create spaces where children can interact productively with each other and with caring adults. This is our abiding responsibility to the development of whole human beings. □

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