

## If children are to thrive and childhood to survive, adults must be adult.

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.

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