

ALEX MOLNAR

## Children

# Turning Children into Things

Working together, educators and parents can help create social policy that regards children as esteemed persons, not objects.

*commodity*: 1. a thing that is of use or advantage. 2. an article of trade or commerce.<sup>1</sup>

**T**he child. There is no holier icon in American public discourse. That is why the statistics on childhood in the United States are so puzzling. Consider the following.

- We are the first nation in history in which children represent the poorer segment of the population. One child in four grows up in poverty. Furthermore, the younger the child, the poorer he or she is likely to be.<sup>2</sup>

- Families make up over one-third of the homeless, and their number is growing. Fewer than half of the homeless children attend school.<sup>3</sup>

- Reports of child abuse were up 55 percent nationally between 1981 and 1985, the last year for which data are available.<sup>4</sup>

These grim statistics make a mockery of the public assertions of love and concern for children we routinely hear from our civic leaders. Even if we considered this information as accountants whose moral values extended no further than the bottom



Photograph by Linda B. Walter

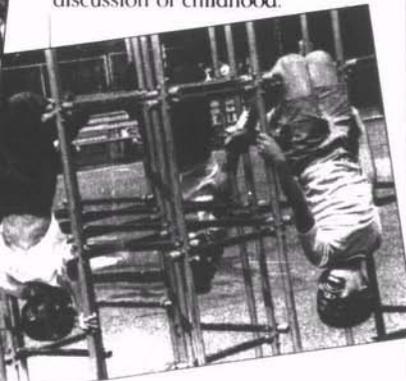


Photograph courtesy of the U.S. Department of Education

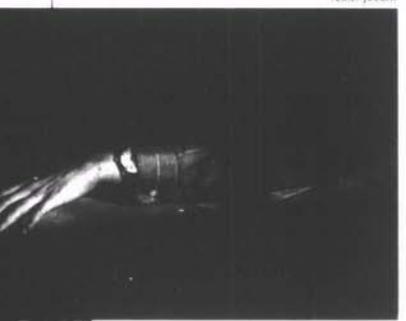
Photograph courtesy of Library of Congress

line, it would be hard to understand. For example, according to the House Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families, a \$1 investment in prenatal care can save \$3 in short-term hospital costs; a \$1 investment in the Childhood Immunization Program can save \$10 in later medical costs; and \$1 spent on preschool education can save \$6 in later social costs.<sup>5</sup>

In material terms, selecting the right parents clearly determines whether or not childhood is the best of times or the worst of times. Yet there is more to understanding the difficulties of contemporary American childhood than can be revealed by economic and social statistics. There are necessarily moral and ethical dimensions to any discussion of childhood.



AP/WIDEWORLD



The positive images of childhood favored by our society (top row of photographs) sometimes contrast sharply with the grim realities (bottom row of photographs)

Regardless of their material circumstances, children are often not served well in their relationships with adults. Indeed, the value of children is often determined by the extent to which they offer psychological satisfaction to their parents and other adults. Compare the impoverished teenager who wants a child in order to have someone to love and the yuppie parent who wants the "experience" of having a child. Their material circumstances differ, but both parents regard a child as an object whose principal function is to satisfy a personal desire or to compensate for some deficiency in their lives. Consider also the materialistic couple who attach great importance to the designer labels on their child's clothing and who construct a social life for their child that mimics that of adults living "the good life." These parents, of course, are not as brutal or explicit in their exploitation as a child pornographer. However, the child's status is that of an object.

Adults are not villains. They are part of a society in which possessions and earnings are the principal means of determining personal value. Within this context, it is hardly surprising that children are treated as products whose function is to satisfy some adult desire. In the great countinghouse that passes for mass culture in the 1980s, even parents who mean well find themselves so pressed by the demands of economic survival or so captured by the materialistic values of our society that they use objects to express their love. Adult love and affection are thus "commodified," sometimes in spite of adults' best intentions and sincere efforts to the contrary.

Changing this state of affairs will require social policy that tangibly supports humane rather than materialistic values. In 1988 it is cynical to assert that families headed by a single adult or families in which both adults work full-time do so entirely by choice. So far, U.S. social policy toward children is long on exhortation about the need for parents, schools, and other social agencies to do more and short on providing a coherent framework that actually supports healthy and non-commodified relationships between adults and children.

There are more constructive approaches to encouraging adult-child relations based on wholesome interpersonal contact, not the exchange of material goods. Love relationships are not systems of material exchange. Children and adults need time together to work, play, and just "hang out." They need time away from each other to think their private thoughts and to explore and seek meaning in their lives. They need to know that if they are ill they will be cared for, that they will have secure homes to live in, adequate clothing to wear, decent jobs to work at, and good schools to learn in. In a word, children need nurturing, and adults need the support and security necessary to provide it. Good social policy for children is good social policy for adults. It is impossible to provide for one and ignore the other.

As professional educators, we are well placed to teach by example what humane adult-child relations can look like. We are also well placed to see the deficiencies in American social policy toward children and adults. Thus far, we have been better advocates for children than we have for the adults who touch our students' lives. If we are to influence social policy constructively, we must overcome our professional tendency to blame parents for the problems children have in school and in society. Instead, we can learn to make common cause with other adults in helping to create social policy that helps us treat children as valued persons, not commodities. □

1 From *The American College Dictionary* (New York: Random House, 1963), p. 243.

2 Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "Half the Nation's Children: Born Without a Fair Chance," *New York Times*, September 25, 1988, p. 25.

3 "Study Says Families Make Up One-Third of Homeless," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 11, 1987, p. 8.

4 "Child Abuse Reports Increase," *USA Today*, November 6, 1987, p. 8A.

5 "Cost-Effective Programs," *New York Times*, September 24, 1988, p. 24.

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