A Generation Adrift?

As families and institutions change, the road to adulthood is strewn with more obstacles than ever. Many kids may not make it intact.

JOHN O'NEIL

From the inner-city child forced to get by on a single meal a day to the suburban teen who cuts class to "party" at a friend's house, numerous American children are finding their futures dimmed.

Some—for example, the poverty-bound or the abused—are mired in conditions over which they have little control. Others, the habitually truant, sexually precocious, or chemically dependent, make poor choices that can lead to lifelong consequences. The end result is that large numbers of American children are at risk of not realizing their potential to lead fulfilling adult lives.

"If we measure success not by just how well most children do, but by how poorly some fare, America falls far short," asserts a new report from the National Commission on Children. Fresh from the most comprehensive study ever done on the status of America's children and their families, the commission recommends a broad array of changes in health, education, and other policies—and slaps a $50-billion plus price tag on beginning to reverse the decline in child well-being.

There's nothing especially new, of course, in fretting over whether the well-being of each new generation of American children will be better or worse than the last. And many, if not most, of today's youth will undoubtedly lead lives as productive and happy as adults of any generation. If their achievement results don't match up with those of Japan, we can still take heart that our very top students, particularly in mathematics, science, and technology, are solving problems undreamed of a generation ago. And though many of today's students may
Where polio and other infectious diseases once ravaged the young, psychological disorders are now labeled "the new morbidity of childhood."

Should schools stick to academics, or should they try to counteract the effects brought on by the many stresses of life today—stresses that can take their toll on even the youngest children in their care? Opinions vary on the school's role in this area.

The lives of some children bring them into frequent contact with violence.
lence. The chance that a teen would die a violent death (by accident, murder, or suicide) increased 12 percent from 1984-88. And the daily toll of violence in some neighborhoods is part of the fabric of life: one survey of 535 elementary school children in Chicago's South Side found that 26 percent had seen someone shot and 29 percent had seen a stabbing. Schools often provide a safe haven, but they are hardly immune. Every day, nearly 135,000 students carry a gun to school, and during 1987, 415,000 violent crimes occurred in and around schools.

Poor Choices

While poverty and other environmental conditions translate into more children at risk, children of every conceivable background make daily choices that can alter their life's course. The widespread availability of crack, which can kill or seduce into addiction even a first-time user, and the possibility of contracting AIDS through unprotected sex are just two of the reasons the consequences of children's decisions are so weighty. "There are things that you can do that can change your life more irrevocably than in the past," says Carnegie Mellon University's Baruch Fischhoff, who is one of a team of researchers studying how adolescents make decisions.

Joy Dryfoos, an expert on adolescence and problem behaviors, estimates that as many as one-half of 10- to 17-year-olds can be classified as moderate to very high risk because of their level of involvement in delinquent behavior, substance abuse, early sexual intercourse, or problems in school. Those most at risk have problems in more than one of these areas. "A new class of 'untouchables' is emerging in our inner cities, on the social fringes of suburbia, and in some rural areas," according to Dryfoos: "young people who are functionally illiterate, disconnected from school, depressed, prone to drug abuse and early criminal activity, and eventually, parents of unplanned and unwanted babies. These are the children who are at high risk of never becoming responsible adults."

Why do so many children seem so troubled or within harm's reach, and how is their education affected? One factor seems to be the burden of having not one or several, but multiple stresses on children and their families. In an article supporting an integrated approach to youth services, Stanford University's Michael Kirst puts the matter succinctly: "Johnny can't read because he needs glasses and breakfast and encouragement from his absent father; Maria doesn't pay attention in class because she doesn't understand English very well and she's worried about her mother's drinking and she's tired from trying to sleep in her car. Dick is flunking because he's frequently absent. His mother doesn't get him to school because she's depressed because she lost her job. She missed too much work because she was sick and could not afford medical care."

To which one might add: Jimmy couldn't stay awake in class and didn't turn in his homework because he worked eight hours the night before at his part-time job at the mall; he's saving to upgrade his car stereo and needs another $400 for the limo, hotel room, and "entertainment" at the Senior Prom.

More experts are concluding that an array of factors—including everything from broken homes to the influence of the mass media in glamorizing sex—might play a part in leaving children across income levels or locales more "adrift" than before. "Children of rich and poor alike are growing up amid family breakdown, divorce, and easy access to drugs and sex, without any sense of direction," says Edelman. "Physical poverty is killing our children's bodies, but spiritual poverty is squashing their souls."

Changes in Family and Community

The biggest influences of all—home and surrounding community—are changing dramatically in ways that leave some children with less support than before.

In 1955, 60 percent of households consisted of a working father, a homemaker mother, and two or more school-age children. That family now represents less than 10 percent of our households.

Divorce, now more common than generations ago, leaves many children with new stresses and fewer resources to help them cope. One in every two marriages now ends in divorce, and more than half of all children born today will spend at least part of their childhood in a one-parent home. After a divorce, the mother's income can be expected to drop 30 percent. In addition, one expert estimates that as many as 40 percent of noncustodial parents never see their children, and of those who do maintain contact, fewer than half see their children an average of once a week.

Moreover, the "stay-at-home" mother is fast disappearing: economic necessity and expanded opportunity mean many more women are now in the labor force. The proportion of children under age 6 whose mothers worked grew from 29 percent in 1970 to 61 percent in 1988. By 1995, researchers estimate that two-thirds of all preschool children and three-fourths of all school-age children will have mothers in the work force.

In the hectic homes of dual-career families or single-parent working mothers and fathers, where food is often gobbled on the run and household chores sandwiched on weekends and evenings, communication can be a casu-
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Peers, the Media, and $100 Sneakers

With fewer adults to guide them, many children are left to draw upon peers, the mass media, or other sources for the norms and values that shape their decisions—choices that can have a lasting impact. Doing well or poorly in school is one of many factors influenced by their choices.

Peers can be a major influence pushing a student to excel in school, but only if the peers that student chooses to affiliate with value academic achievement. Among some subcultures—youth gangs or drug-using cliques, for example—doing well in school is often ridiculed. There is evidence that an anti-school achievement ethic may persist among some groups of minority students as well: researchers John Ogbu and Signithia Fordham, for example, have reported that among some African-American...
can students, excelling academically is derided as "acting white." 28

Studying more than 12,000 high school students in Wisconsin and California, Bradford Brown of the University of Wisconsin-Madison found that while peers may not pressure each other to place a low priority on studies (the conventional wisdom), neither do they strongly support academic excellence. Brown found that peers generally supported getting a diploma and earning reasonably good grades—but that this could as easily be accomplished by cutting corners (for example, cheating, cajoling teachers into lowering expectations) than through hard work (which could lead to being labeled a "grind"). 29

The mass media also influence students' opportunity for and values about academic achievement in at least two ways. For one, time spent watching TV, simply put, is time not studying. Forty-eight percent of the seniors tested by the National Assessment of Educational Progress found time to watch three or more hours of TV each day, but only 29 percent report doing two hours or more of homework each night.

Younger students, who presumably are assigned less homework, are more likely than seniors to report watching three or more hours of TV a day (69 percent in 4th grade and 71 percent in 8th grade). 30

Second, many are concerned about the influence that the music, videos, and TV kids watch have on their attitudes and decisions about such issues as use of drugs and alcohol, sexuality, or academic achievement. High achievers on TV, when not totally dismissed as geeks, are frequently cast as lovable if misguided nerds who don't know when to drop the books and cut loose.

Youngsters are exposed to countless implied or realized sexual encounters on TV, in movies, and in pop music, but few are ever linked with some semblance of sexual responsibility. In beer ads, the guy drinking the right suds never fails to land the (bikini-clad) girl. Elvis and the Rolling Stones, risqué in their time, now seem hopelessly saccharine. Heavy metal enthusiasts may now flip on songs promoting suicide or satanism, and Madonna fans were recently enticed in prime time by a TV host who breathlessly reported that the pop icon had promised her new movie "will contain sex, profanity, and nudity" (for those, evidently, worried it wouldn't keep pace with the typical R-rated fare). Adults, particularly those who cash in on youngsters' need to own the latest toy or identify with the right "crowd," are partly responsible for this state of affairs. American children ages 4-12 spend about $8 billion each year, according to one source; another says adolescents spend $40-45 billion on themselves. 31 In some cities, youngsters are killed for their jackets or their sneakers, and youngsters flush with drug money set a fashion standard nearly impossible to meet through honest means. Sometimes, the desire to ape current stars, especially among young children, raises eyebrows. The Los Angeles Times reports on a battle among 1st grade girls over lipstick; the article goes on to say that "4th graders have arrived wearing pantyhose and high heels . . . and 8-year-olds have been known to win Madonna look-alike contests by their schools." Seizing on the trend, perfume and jewelry manufacturers, the Times notes, have begun to target pint-sized clients in earnest. 32

Parents also must share some blame. Fred Gosman, a Milwaukee father of two, toured the country last spring to talk about his new book. He found audiences resonated to his thesis: that parents today are more prone to yield to

Some Resilient Kids

Is there hope for a generation of children confronted with less support at home and greater temptation to go astray?

Happily, there is evidence that some children are able to navigate serious trouble during childhood and emerge relatively intact. Emmy Werner, a professor at the University of California-Davis, is one of several researchers around the world studying what she calls "resilient" children—those able to overcome odds in family and environment to lead healthy adult lives. Werner's research is more long term than most: she has been following a cohort group of 700 children born in 1955.

One-third of Werner's sample were considered "high risk" because of their family or environmental conditions—

children who would be considered less likely to find success as adults. However, at least a third of that third proved resilient, Werner found, and as she tracked the original sample into adulthood, others who ran into trouble early on righted their course. An additional piece of good news from Werner's research is that the children studied—who came of age during the 1960s—faced many of the same pressures confronting today's youth, such as the erosion of the family and social institutions, loosened conventions regarding drugs and sex, and so on. 33


—John O'Neill
their children's demands without demanding enough of them in return. Perhaps feeling guilty for not spending "quality time" with the kids, parents overspend on kids' whims and extend fourth and fifth "chances" after an infraction. "So much of what we do is well intended, but it just isn't working," says Gosman. "Does anyone really think our kids are happier today than before?"

What Can Schools Do?

Given the enormous changes occurring in families and society, it's no surprise that schools are being asked to move beyond their traditional boundaries. Free breakfast and lunch programs are now a fixture; newer efforts include special classes for teen parents, health clinics, and child care centers. The programs proposed to rescue U.S. children range from the extreme (Howard University President Franklyn Jenifer has called for "urban residential schools" for at-risk inner-city children whose homes are in disorder) to the merely leviathan (many experts are calling for integrating schools as a hub working with numerous other agencies).

While acknowledging children's needs, some experts are uncertain how far schools can delve into family and social issues without losing a focus on academics. "Schools are not and cannot be parents, police, hospitals, welfare agencies, or drug treatment centers," the Bush administration argued in its America 2000 education plan issued this year. "They cannot replace the missing elements in communities and families." Graham Down of the Council for Basic Education made a similar point at a recent education conference: "Unless we concentrate on the essential function of schooling, then we can't lay claim to distinction in our public education." With the country in recession, there is even less hope that schools can provide or serve as a broker for a greater array of services. "With resources stretched thin, it's not surprising that in many schools neither the academic nor the social agenda is being fully realized," says a recent report by the Committee for Economic Development.

Others say that schools have little choice but to play a more prominent role in alleviating the social and family problems that have a direct bearing on children's ability to learn. "I firmly believe that the American school is the last hope" for teaching children societal values and norms that they may or may not be taught at home, asserts Francis Ianni of Teachers College, Columbia University. "We can't expect schools to deliver, on site, all the services that kids might need," says First of the National Coalition of Advocates for Students. But they should better coordinate their services with other agencies to ensure that fewer children and families slip through the cracks. "No matter how much educators may grouse about it... schools are where the kids are," First notes.

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"Children's Defense Fund. op cit.


"Education Commission of the States, op cit.


"Children's Defense Fund, op cit.

"Ibid.


"M. Kirst, (April 1991), "Improving Children's Services," Kappan 72, 8: 615-618.


"Children's Defense Fund, op cit.


"Ibid.

"Sociologist James Coleman, among others, notes that although the shift to women working outside the home is currently attracting attention, it follows a similar trend over the past two centuries of men's jobs moving from home to more distant locales.

"N. Zill, (1991), "U.S. Children and Their Families: Current Conditions and Recent
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