

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. At worst, they may face a life of constant struggle—marginally literate, unable to find or keep a job, chemically dependent, or a parent without the skills or resources to parent effectively—perhaps destined to pass their troubled legacy to their own children.

"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.¹

The fact that adults permit many children to live in deplorable conditions

"shows that we don't place a high value on our children," says Joan First of the National Coalition of Advocates for Students, a consortium of youth advocacy groups. "That's been true for a long time, but it's gotten seriously worse during the last decade."

Although politicians and opinion-makers pledge that "our children are our future," their rhetoric falls flat given the decline in youth well-being on a variety of indicators. Some argue that in the "me-first" climate that took root in the 1980s and persists today, children are forced to take a back seat. Few put it more forcefully than Marian Wright Edelman, president of the Children's Defense Fund:

Our children are growing up today in an ethically polluted nation where instant sex without responsibility, instant gratification without effort, instant solutions without sacrifice, getting rather than giving, and hoarding rather than sharing are the too-frequent signals of our mass media, popular culture, business, and political life. . . . Nowhere is the paralysis of public and private conscience more evident than in the neglect and abandonment of millions of our shrinking pool of children, whose future will determine our nation's ability to compete and lead in a new era.²

Where polio and other infectious dis-

eases once ravaged the young, one expert calls psychological disorders "the new morbidity of childhood." Nearly 1 in 5 children ages 3-17, 10.2 million all told, experience one or more developmental, learning, or emotional disorders (a delay in growth or development, a learning disability, or an emotional or behavior problem that lasts three months or more or requires psychological treatment). The high divorce rate, the increase in the number of children living in conflict-filled families, the survival weight of extremely low-birth-weight babies, and prenatal exposure to drugs are among the factors linked to these high numbers. "Clearly, the psychological disorders rank among the most prevalent health conditions of modern childhood," says a report by the National Center for Health Statistics.³ One indicator of the most severe form of youth hopelessness—the suicide rate—has tripled among 15 to 19-year-olds over the past 30 years. And 6 percent of 13 to 19-year-olds in a recent poll reported having attempted to commit suicide; another 15 percent said they had "come very close to trying."⁴

A Hollow Echo?

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.⁵ 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

seem unduly concerned with expensive clothes or hedonist pop stars, we can appreciate the fact that youth service projects are growing in popularity, and teens actually volunteer more frequently than adults.⁵ In the world's most prosperous nation, it's hard for some to believe that the well-being of numerous American children is very much at risk. But, some experts contend, that is precisely the case.

Consider the following conditions affecting alarming numbers of children:

- Poverty, with all its attendant ills, afflicts American children more than any other age group, with 20 percent of kids living below the poverty line. This gives the United States the poorest mark in child poverty among eight industrialized nations.⁶ Black children, especially those in single-parent families, are particularly vulnerable in this regard. Forty-four percent of black children live in poverty, and a whopping 87 percent of black children under age three in families headed by never-married women live below the poverty line.⁷

In inner cities, especially, the effects of poverty on children and their parents can be numbingly grim. In Los Angeles, where one in four children lives in poverty and one in seven lives in dire poverty, "families choose between clothes and transportation, but not both," says Jackie Goldberg, school board president of the L.A. Unified School District. "They choose between rent and food, but not both." The free school breakfast and lunch programs are the only meals some children will eat all day. Meanwhile, the city is facing financial crisis. "Even those of us who have been working with kids 20 years have never seen anything like it," Goldberg says.

- Although the United States now has as a national education goal that by the year 2000 every child will arrive at school "ready to learn," many are behind before formal education ever starts. The Education Commission of the States recently examined preventable conditions associated with children's

Where polio and other infectious diseases once ravaged the young, psychological disorders are now labeled "the new morbidity of childhood."

development of learning problems: low birthweight, maternal smoking, prenatal alcohol exposure, prenatal exposure to drugs, lead poisoning, child abuse and neglect, and malnutrition. "A troubling 12 percent of children—more than 450,000 additional children each year—suffer damage that prevents them from

learning as well as their natural endowments would allow," ECS reported.⁸

Schools are just beginning to deal with the legacy of the crack cocaine epidemic, which began in earnest in 1985. Babies born addicted to crack are now starting school. According to Janice Hutchinson, formerly a senior scientist with the American Medical Association, teachers describe them as "a new breed": in constant motion, disorganized, very sensitive to stimuli, slower to crawl, stand and walk, loathe to smile or make eye-contact. "They do not seem to know how to play with toys or with others," says Hutchinson, "and nothing you do for them seems to matter or help."⁹ Crack has helped to boost the numbers of babies born drug-exposed to an astounding 11 percent of all newborns.¹⁰

- The lives of some children bring them into frequent contact with vio-



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.

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lence. The chance that a teen would die a violent death (by accident, murder, or suicide) increased 12 percent from 1984-88.¹¹ 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.¹² 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.¹³

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."¹⁴

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."¹⁵

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 fam-

ily 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."¹⁶

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.¹⁷

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.¹⁸ After a divorce, the mother's income can be expected to drop 30 percent.¹⁹ 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.²⁰

Moreover, the "stay-at-home" mother is fast disappearing: economic necessity and expanded opportunity mean many more women are now in the labor force.²¹ The proportion of children under age 6 whose mothers worked grew from 29 percent in 1970 to 61 percent in 1988.²² 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.²³

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-

ality. Almost 20 percent of 6th-12th graders in one poll said they had not had a 10-minute conversation with a parent within the last month; another survey finds that fewer families are eating dinner together frequently.²⁴ The difficulty of balancing jobs and families was underscored in a recent *Fortune* magazine cover story: "Can Your Career Hurt Your Kids?"

Although schools and other providers offer an increasing array of extended-day and other custodial care programs, at least 2 million "latchkey kids" ages 5-13 must care for themselves after school, and that figure may well be underreported.²⁵ "Kids probably have a lot less supervision today than they've had in the past," says Fischhoff. "They just have more time when they're not being given guidance." At least one study suggests that children left unsupervised are more at risk of substance abuse: an American Academy of Pediatrics report of 5,000 8th graders found that latchkey kids were twice as likely as their supervised peers to smoke, drink alcohol, and use marijuana.²⁶

Increasingly, children are estranged from other adults who made up the traditional "extended family" and who served as role models and mentors in local neighborhoods. Child welfare expert James Comer of Yale University speaks movingly of growing up in close-knit neighborhoods where any adult, not just a cop or school official, might stop and question a youngster who was on the streets during school hours. Few adults would now presume to do so.

University of Chicago sociologist James Coleman has advanced the theory that today's children are affected by the gradual loss of what he terms "social capital"—the norms, values, and human resources that parents and adults in the community must make available to children for their educational and social development. With the advent of single-parent homes and high-pressure careers, Coleman believes, social capital is eroding. In a growing number of

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families: "the adult members are well educated and individually capable, but for a variety of reasons—divorce, involvement with other adults in relations that do not cross generations (as is typical in most work settings), exclusive attention to self-development—the resources of the adults are not available to aid the psychological health and the social and educational development of children."²⁷

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-Améri-



The temptations to test their budding independence—by experimenting with drugs and sex, for example—carry far heavier consequences for today's youth than for those of previous generations; but as in the past, guidance from caring adults can help them make it through the difficult teen years.

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.

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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 very 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 some 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.¹

¹E. Werner, (1982), *Vulnerable But Invincible: A Longitudinal Study of Resilient Children and Youth*, (New York: McGraw-Hill).

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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?"³³

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 disorder³⁴) to the merely leviathan (many experts are calling for integrating a wide range of children's services, with schools as a hub working with numerous other agencies³⁵).

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."³⁶ 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."³⁷ 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 re-

sources 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.³⁸

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. □

³¹National Commission on Children, (1991). *Beyond Rhetoric: A New American Agenda for Children and Families*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office).

³²Children's Defense Fund, (1991), "The State of America's Children 1991" (Washington, D.C.: Children's Defense Fund).

³³N. Zill and C. Schoenborn, (November 16, 1990), "Developmental, Learning, and Emotional Problems: Health of Our Na-

tion's Children, United States, 1988," advance data from Vital and Health Statistics of the National Center for Health Statistics.

³⁴Associated Press, "Six Percent of U.S. Teen-Agers Report Trying Suicide," appearing in the *New York Times*, April 7, 1991.

³⁵United Press International, "Teen Philanthropy Abounds, Survey Finds," appearing in *Christian Science Monitor*, December 6, 1990.

³⁶Children's Defense Fund, op cit.

³⁷Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, (1990), "The Declining Status of Black Children: Examining the Change, Summary of Findings," (Washington, D.C.: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies).

³⁸Education Commission of the States, (1991), "Every Child a Learner: Reducing Risks of Learning Impairment During Pregnancy and Infancy," (Denver: Education Commission of the States).

³⁹J. Hutchinson, (Spring 1991), "What Crack Does to Babies," *American Educator* 15, 1:31-32.

⁴⁰Education Commission of the States, op cit.

⁴¹The Center for the Study of Social Policy, (1991), "Kids Count Data Book: State Profiles of Child Well-Being," (Washington, D.C.: The Center for the Study of Social Policy).

⁴²Children's Defense Fund, op cit.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴J. Dryfoos, (1990), *Adolescents at Risk: Prevalence and Prevention*, (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc.).

⁴⁵M. Kirst, (April 1991), "Improving Children's Services," *Kappan* 72, 8: 615-618.

⁴⁶M. Wright Edelman, (May/June 1991), "Kids First!," *Mother Jones* 16, 3: 31-32, 76-77.

⁴⁷H. Hodgkinson, (1985), "All One System: Demographics of Education, Kindergarten through Graduate School," (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Educational Leadership).

⁴⁸Children's Defense Fund, op cit.

⁴⁹A. Waldron, (May 14, 1991), "Post-Divorce Baggage: How Adult Children Can Cope With the Aftermath," (*Washington Post/Health*, p. 16)

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Sociologist 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.

⁵²N. Zill, (1991), "U.S. Children and Their Families: Current Conditions and Recent

Trends, 1989." (Washington, D.C.: Child Trends).

²Children's Defense Fund, op cit.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵K. Labich, (May 20, 1991), "Can Your Career Hurt Your Kids?" *Fortune* 123, 10: 38-68.

⁶J. S. Coleman and T. Hoffer, (1987), *Public and Private High Schools: The Impact of Communities*, (New York: Basic Books, Inc.).

⁷S. Fordham and J. Ogbu, (1986), "Black Students, School Success: Coping with the Burden of 'Acting White.'" *Urban Review* 18, 3: 176-206.

⁸B. Brown, (1990), "School Culture, Social Politics, and the Academic Motivation of U.S. Students," paper presented at the Of-

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⁹I.V.S. Mullis et al., (1990), *America's Challenge: Accelerating Academic Achievement*, (Princeton, N.J.: National Assessment of Educational Progress).

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¹¹B.A. Krier, (January 15, 1991), "Playing Dress Up," *Los Angeles Times*.

¹²F. Gosman, (1990), *Spoiled Rotten: American Children and How to Change Them*, (Milwaukee: Bashford and O'Neill).

¹³F. Jenifer, (January 27, 1991), "For Children at Risk, a Sanctuary," *Los Angeles Times*.

¹⁴M. Kirst, op cit.

¹⁵U.S. Department of Education, (1991), "America 2000: An Education Strategy," (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office).

¹⁶G. Down, (March 10, 1991), presentation to the National Association of Secondary School Principals Convention in Orlando, Fla.

¹⁷Committee for Economic Development, (1991), *The Unfinished Agenda: A New Vision for Child Development and Education*, (Washington, D.C.: Committee for Economic Development).

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