The New Childhood

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the existence of a new childhood experience. The childhood that many children experience today is very different from that which adults remember. Statistics are given to show the extreme nature of some childhood problems. Viewpoints of childhood are also discussed to explain how some of today's perceptions came to exist. Explorations are made into the effects of media on a child's innocence. Also explored are the changes in society's expectations and how these expectations effect the family unit. Following these discussions, the results of such changes are examined. Medical implications and stress factors are shown.
Sometimes there is a shift of air, or a smell, or a distant sound that releases a latch on a secret door in my mind. And sometimes I go in for just a moment. Varied things await me there: crisp September school mornings, afternoon tea parties, the touch of loving hands, an overwhelming sense of security and warmth. A blink and it is gone - the door is closed, and my childhood memories retreat into their sacred dwelling place. It is not often that I can visit them with the full force of all of my senses for that one fleeting second. Most often, I do not consciously think of them. Yet some intense force or spirit radiates from the place where they stay. It evades my thoughts, my actions, and my entire being. I am in all ways convinced that the person I am today is a result of the existence of those times.

For this reason I am terribly concerned for the many children in today's society who do not have such carefree, protected childhood experiences to look back on. The circumstances that account for the absence of such memories are many: lack of parental concern or attention; necessary acquirement of adult responsibilities; the push to grow up faster, learn more quickly, act like adults as soon as possible. What base do these children have to model their lives after? What necessities of emotional growth did they miss and how will such absences affect them? Do they have imagination? Have they ever pretended, believed the
unbelievable, dreamed for the unattainable? What effects will our society’s “new childhood” have on our future adults?

David Elkind, a leading child psychologist, states “The child is a gift of nature, but the image of the child is mankind’s own creation” (Miseducation 52). Certainly the way children are perceived has a great deal to do with the changes that have taken place in childhood. Although perceptions have changed greatly throughout history, many of the ideas can be found in our view of children today. One such belief is that of children as miniature adults. This belief enables society to use children for labor, treat children as adult consumers, and create heightened expectations of their abilities. This perception still exists today in the prevalence of adult-like clothing, interests, and behaviors in a child’s world (Elkind, Hurried Child 6). Another view of children is that of property. This belief has been around throughout all of history and still exists today in parents who deny rights to their children through abuse or neglect (Elkind, Hurried Child 7). A third belief is that children are like growing plants. This belief states that children need to be nurtured to grow. It is a positive idea that is accepted by many parents and educators today (Elkind, Hurried Child 4). A fourth belief is that of tabula rosa or blank slate. This belief states that children are born with clean, clear minds which can be filled with information. This idea gave the adult world a reason to educate - any mind could become what you made of it.
There are children today who still experience what may be termed as a normal childhood. The shift of society's view, however, has affected all families. The media, the schools, the idea of an ideal family have all changed over the years, and the statistics are frightening. More than half of the young child population are enrolled in some kind of day-care program (Elkind, Miseducation 5). Many of these programs are inappropriate to a child's ability, providing rigorous prereading programs and formal education (Elkind, Miseducation 10). Aside from these pressures and stress of forced achievement, children must also experience stress from violence. Almost 282,000 students are physically attacked in America's schools each month (Elkind, Hurried Child 17). Students are carrying guns, and many children are afraid to go to school (Elkind, Hurried Child 17). Almost fifty percent of secondary school students are sexually active (Elkind, Hurried Child 13). In the last several decades, substantial increases have been found in teen pregnancy and childhood venereal disease (Postman, 137). Surveys show that younger and younger children are using drugs and alcohol in ever-increasing numbers (Elkind, Hurried Child 12). Psychologist Neil Postman says, "If America is drowning in a tidal wave of crime, then the wave has mostly been generated by our children" (134). Some children earn the respect of their friends, earn their self-worth through illegal activities. Popularity is not as simple as
being a football player or a team captain. In fact, children are not participating in activities that exercise their bodies as much anymore. Sixty-four percent of children today failed to meet the President’s Council on Fitness and Health standards (Elkind, Hurried Child 15). Obesity is on the increase, as are the risks of heart disease and high cholesterol (Elkind, Hurried Child 15).

The statistics are indeed frightening. Perhaps most frightening is the fact that these tragedies are becoming common place. They are becoming normal. The average family has seen these things. We have all seen them. The media has become an incredible force. Television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and movies reach all people. This is especially disturbing to some parents who are not able to screen everything that reaches their children. Equally disturbing is the fact that many parents do not even attempt to screen the things their children see. Some parents use the television as a babysitter and are not at all concerned with what their children ingest (Winn, Plug-In 148). In an average child’s life, more time is spent watching television than is spent on any other activity (Winn, Plug-In 5). Through this exposure to television, children see shows that deal with sexual relationships, alcohol and drug abuse, adult humor, and violence. The new “reality” shows such as “Cops” and “Rescue 911” give explicit views of the violence and trauma that occur in everyday life. Cartoons average forty eight acts of violence per hour (Elkind, Hurried
The existence of cable channels makes the screening of material even more difficult for parents. Marie Winn, an expert on children and television states, "A disturbing possibility exists that the television experience has not merely blurred the distinctions between the real and the unreal for steady viewers, but that by doing so it has dulled their sensitivities to real events" (Plug-In 105). Children can become almost accustomed to tragedy so that if it happens in reality, they react less emotionally. They react as spectators. (Winn, Plug-In 105). Almost more disturbing than the exposure of children to television's content is the effect television has had on the family. Many families eat dinner in front of the T.V. (Winn, Plug-In 143). It has taken the place of talking and reading. It has replaced family rituals and has caused some parents to withdraw from the socialization of their children (Winn, Plug-In 148).

Television is not the only form of media that needs to be monitored. Movies carry a slight advantage for parents due to the rating system that exists. However the ratings are often ignored or overlooked by theater workers and parents who accompany their children to movies that are inappropriate. The advent of movie channels and video stores has also made the attempt to monitor content frustrating to concerned parents. Books, while obviously beneficial for their literary value, must also be screened. Children's books and young adult novels can discuss any topic from death to abuse to sex, even same-sex relationships. All of these
books could be useful in certain situations, but parents and teachers should be aware of the child’s stage and readiness when choosing valuable literature (Elkind, *Hurried Child* 83-85).

The stage and readiness of the child should be considered when dealing with many childhood related topics. Children are growing up so fast in the present times. This push to educate as soon as possible, to get a good start, to excel at an early age is spreading to all families, to all aspects of society. It is a sad phenomena because it is usually attempted with the best of intentions. International competition has America rechecking its education system. Much of this discussion has centered around standardized testing scores. This is not an appropriate idea. America’s education goals need to be reassessed to provide the best educational program possible. This should not be done, however, at the expense of the children. Children should not be trained for each test, only learning enough to answer the question, perhaps not understanding the basic concept at all (Elkind, *Hurried Child* 53-54). Studies show that pushing a child to learn a skill before they are capable can cause a sort of “burnout,” a dislike or fear of school due to related pressure felt there. (Elkind, *Hurried Child* 33). This burnout is usually experienced by the third grade (Elkind, *Hurried Child* 33). It is better, these studies say, to let a child progress at their own rate. Therefore, a child who learns to read at age four, although a prize to parents, could have equal skill upon reaching
adulthood as a child who learned at age six (Elkind, *Hurried Child* 33). Many experts feel that the push to educate at an early age is a fallacy. Elkind states, "When the first grade curriculum is pushed down into the kindergarten, and the kindergarten curriculum is taught to four-year-olds...we see the results of this false concept of young children's competence" (Elkind, *Miseducation* 59). Young children need to expend so much energy in the realization of objects, sounds, shapes, and relationships of things to each other. They develop skills such as holding a pencil, using scissors, and matching related objects. It has been said that some children's eyes are not even ready to read until first grade age. Children develop at different paces. It is as basic as that. It is these facts that make the miseducation of children seem so obvious, so wrong (Elkind, *Hurried Child* 25). Each child should follow his own agenda. The greatest thing a teacher can remember is that children are children. They progress and think differently than adults. They should be taught to take pride in their work, take responsibility for their work, and hopefully enjoy that work (Elkind, *Hurried Child* 38).

Marie Winn says "Once upon a time, in the Age of Protection, adult realities were purposefully kept hidden from children. Today the formerly closed door between childhood and adulthood has been pushed ajar, sometimes torn from its hinges entirely" (*Children* 59). This quote exemplifies the disappearance of any barriers between childhood and the
adult world. Many children lose the spontaneity of childhood to the responsibility of adult life. There are a great many single parent homes in America today, and many children are taking on the role of the missing partner in many ways. Children cook, clean, raise siblings, do shopping, and make important decisions concerning the family unit. With these responsibilities, it is extremely difficult to experience the frivolity of youth (Elkind, *Hurried Child* 41). With this added responsibility comes a feeling of being adult. Many children are confidants to their single parent. Children use adult language, discuss adult topics, know adult secrets. Winn states, "The indoctrination of children into the former secrets of adult life cannot help but make children feel differently about themselves and adults...they feel themselves more equal, somehow" (Children 72). Postman says, "The idea of deference to one who is older has become ridiculous" (133). Adulthood has lost its authority. Disrespect reigns. This shift can be seen in even the most "respectful" families today. Parental casualness is the norm. It has become so much a part of our society, of our lives, that the extent can only truly be seen when present families are compared to those of the 1960s and 1970s (Elkind, *Miseducation* 77).

Even the appearance of children has changed since that time. There are virtually no true "children's clothes" now. Clothing manufacturers create miniature versions of adult fashions to fill their shelves (Postman,
Many children wear designer brands, and the need to be "in," to wear the right clothes and own the right things has invaded even the kindergartens and preschools. Many parents purchase designer clothes, enter their children in the trendiest classes, and push sports and arts instruction to impress others with their economic surplus (Elkind, Miseducation 77). Their children become lost, somehow in the process. They forget how to be a child. They forget how to be.

Many children have misplaced the whole idea of childhood. Children do not play as they used to. Not too long ago, children could be distinguished from adults by the nature of their desires. Today, children diversions do not differ greatly from those of an adult (Winn, Children 75). Not all children have lost the desire to play. However, it has become "not cool" to play kid's games. The desire to conform makes it extremely difficult for those children who wish to remain innocent to do so. Parents have reported that their children seem ashamed to play in conventional ways and will sometimes hide the fact from their peers (Winn, Children 77). Even organized games such as baseball and football have changed. They have become too organized. Children very seldom participate in a pickup game of baseball in a neighbor's yard. They are too busy attending Little League practice and training for games (Postman, 130). Postman states, "...children's play has become an adult preoccupation. it has become professionalized, it is no longer a world separate from the world
of adults" (130).

The effect of all these factors - perceptions, parents, school, and media, is a child who is pushed to grow up, expected to take on adult responsibilities, and exposed to the world at a very early age with no buffers, no protection, no innocence. Psychiatrists and doctors have observed in recent years an increase in such afflictions as depression, exhaustion, and ulcers caused from stress in young children (Winn, *Children* 82). Stress affects many children, changing their perceptions of school, family, and themselves. Some stress is caused by responsibility. Not necessarily jobs around the house, but feeling responsible for taking care of siblings, the home, and sometimes even the parents (Elkind, *Hurried Child* 151). Change or Adaption Overload is another form of stress. This occurs in children who are taken to day-care or baby-sitters and must adapt to several situations. Some children experience more than four transitions a day (Elkind, *Hurried Child* 151). Emotional overload is a third stressor, often caused by quarreling parents, distressing family situations, divorce, abuse, or separation (Elkind, *Hurried Child* 152). These stresses on a child can create anxiety, school burnout, and a situation known as learned helplessness in which children view circumstances as out of their control (Elkind, *Hurried Child* 176). This belief causes children to not try and to not take responsibility for their actions. This is most often brought about by a traumatic experience in
which children are helpless. Or, as in a school setting, the continuous failure of a child who tries (Elkind, *Hurried Child* 177-78).

Clearly, all children are not subject to stress. It seems, however, that the direction our society is moving - more formal education, higher divorce rates, more single parent homes - is making society a more stressful place for children to grow. Children know about violence, sex, and divorce at very early ages. They must process this information before they are ready. It cannot be fully understood what effects this “new childhood” will have on adults. We, as parents and educators can only attempt to promote an atmosphere of security and love. We can let children be children. I recently asked a group of four-year-olds what they would like for Christmas. “For my daddy to come home,” said one. “That my dad would be nice to my mom and us,” said another. “For a Christmas tree with lots of lights,” said another little girl. I sat, stunned, for a moment and then redirected their attention to another activity. I couldn’t forget their hopeful, wishful faces, and it broke my heart. At age four, I would have asked for a pony.
Works Cited


