This is the published version


Available from Deakin Research Online

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30042529

Every reasonable effort has been made to ensure that permission has been obtained for items included in Deakin Research Online. If you believe that your rights have been infringed by this repository, please contact drosupport@deakin.edu.au

Copyright: 2010, Arena Publications
Growing Up on Nero Street

Mark Furlong

On the destruction of childhood

A neighbour works as a health professional and passed on the following story. One of her patients had attended an appointment with her four- or five-year-old son. During this consultation, and with his back towards the adults, the boy removed something from his mother’s handbag and hid this item in his pocket. The practitioner noticed this and, assuming a consensus on parenting policy, a little later asked the boy’s mother, ‘Did you notice your boy taking something out of your bag and hiding it in his pocket?’

‘Yes, I saw Tom do that,’ the mother replied. ‘It was a chocolate bar, but I am not going to say anything.’ Somewhat taken aback, the chiropractor replied, ‘Really, I don’t understand. Why not say something?’ The mother then calmly said, ‘It is a jungle out there, a dog-against-dog fight. As early as possible in life, it’s much better he learns to recognise his opportunities.’

My neighbour, also a mother, saw the boy’s action and even more so the mother’s response as horrifying. ‘I’m not going to say anything, but I reckon it’s likely this kid is going to end up as some kind of psychopath.’

That two educated, motivated parents could take positions which diverge so sharply brings into focus how parenting, like childhood itself, has become a hot zone, an intensely fractious arena. In this uncertain place many parents are struggling to navigate their way through the key ‘policy’ questions that have to be plotted: Do I offer my kids the kind of unconditional back-up (as if this is equated with love) that I never had, or is it better to hold the line and be positive about saying no, to keep some distance and take care not to be too affirming?

The young women — girls? — who have sailed their yachts to public prominence, albeit with different outcomes, have been termed ‘extreme kids’. These high achieving, high risk minors have been encouraged, even hot-housed, by their parents to dare to do what is not only objectively dangerous but what until very recently has been culturally prohibited as inappropriate for children.

Supporting the latter view are those, like Dr Carol Craig, CEO of the United States’ Centre for Confidence and Wellbeing, who argue too much praise is creating a sense of entitlement and self-centredness that will create grown-ups who will be ‘terrible relationship partners, parents and employees’.

Marshalled to advance the cause of the opposing side are a suite of formidable experts, an aggregation that lists arguments from a diverse range of authorities. These sources include the Dalai Lama (‘The most important thing you can give your children is love’) and a phalanx of high-profile psychotherapists, such as Alice Miller, who argues there is a ‘wounded child’ within all those who have problems in their adult lives (and isn’t that all of us?).

Perhaps incited by the logic of Miller’s view, the sense of indignant grievance many current parents have come to harbour about their own childhoods inclines them towards the view that sparing the praise spoils the child.

Yet, this account of there being only two sides to the argument is misleading. For example, the mum in the above vignette is not being sentimental, nor would she in any way see herself as indulging her children. On the contrary, her point is that her son has to learn to be competent — to be tough enough and opportunistic enough to survive in a free-trade zone.

This logic is resonant; it chimes with the times in powerful ways, but it is not an attitude that is new. For example, parents living in rough neighbourhoods often believed that their children needed to grow up tough — if they didn’t they would lack the wherewithal to be able take care of themselves. It was thought sensible to allow, perhaps even
encourage, a degree of violence in the home for the same reason. Similarly, isn’t it best to prepare children for the tough realities of an existence organised around the values of the marketplace? Robert Oppenheimer, the brilliant physicist and atom bomb pioneer, was reported to have said, ‘My childhood did not prepare me for the fact that the world is full of cruel and bitter things. It gave me no normal, healthy way to be a bastard.’ And that’s where the policy issue sits: if a child is to end up well-adjusted, is it necessary to be socialised to be so hard-boiled as to be a kind of acceptable bastard?

In so far as this reality requires one to be a ‘reflexive strategist’—the term high-profile sociologist Lord Anthony Giddens uses to positively describe what might otherwise be labelled sneakily self-advancing—it follows that our kids have to learn this competence. A question then arises: at what age is it developmentally healthy to be a strategist, a thoughtful arranger of opportunities?

Controversy recently broke out over the propriety of allowing sixteen-year-old Jessica Watson to sail around the world. On one side was Dr Simon Crisp, an expert psychologist from Monash University. After Jessica’s arrival back in Australia Crisp wrote in The Age that the community ‘should allow soon-to-be adult children to take risks’ and that Jessica and her parents were modelling the importance of young people learning about ambition and risk-taking. Enveloped in the public euphoria occasioned by Jessica’s success, Dr Crisp’s tone was quietly, but clearly, triumphant.

The alternative position is to sceptically view such heroic success stories. Eulogising single winners masks the possibility that childhood as a period of play, of complex and ambiguous innocence, is being destroyed by the depiction of young people as ‘busting-to-get-out mini-adult entrepreneurs’, junior citizens who could be Richard Branson or Laurel Jackson success stories if only those who inhibit them would back off. As Valerie Krips noted in Arena Magazine 103, understandings of childhood are discourses with material effects. The emerging depiction of childhood as a site of entrepreneurship is a case in point.

More, the neo-liberal parading of the exceptional success story obscures the fact that the great majority of the children who dare to attempt what Jessica Watson did will fail. For example, Abby Sunderland, another sixteen-year-old solo round-the-world sailor, had her yacht disabled in mountainous seas in the middle of the Indian Ocean and had to be (expensively) rescued. Poignantly, Abby Sunderland’s near death experience occurred just weeks after ‘our Jessica’ completed her mission. And it isn’t hard to believe that Abby, like all the other ‘failures’, will forever feel less than a winner.

The young women—girls?—who have sailed their yachts to public prominence, albeit with different outcomes, have been termed ‘extreme kids’. Other members of this growing cadre include, as Lisa White recently discussed in The Age, pre-teenage matadors in Mexico and the thirteen-year-old boy from California who this year became the youngest ever person to climb Mt Everest. There is a new candidate for this club too, Dutch fourteen-year-old Laura Dekker. To the delight of her parents, in July this year a Dutch court overturned an earlier ruling that Laura could not attempt to become the youngest round-the-world sailor. These high achieving, high risk minors have been encouraged, even hot-housed, by their parents to dare to do what is not only objectively dangerous (climb high mountains, fight bulls) but what until very recently has been culturally prohibited as inappropriate for children.

At first glimpse the extreme kids phenomenon is startling. This shock tends to quickly fade as media familiarity leaches out this initial charge. For example, although it features squads of eight to twelve-year-old children performing advanced, graded culinary tasks in an intensely scrutinised environment, Junior Master Chef has rocketed up the TV ratings. Rather than being seen as exploitative, even ghoulish, in its apparent pro-social enthusiasm, Junior Master Chef is seen as ‘inspiring’—which is the highest form of praise on a dying planet.

In the classic text The History of Childhood (1974) Philippe Ariès detailed the ways in which the construction of childhood has radically changed over the centuries. For example, as children in poor families were once understood to be part of an economic unit, it was not thought cruel to send young children to work. That is, these entities were not viewed as children in the way educated persons now understand young people to be. Due to the dissemination of the theories of infant development, particularly those of Jean Piaget and, to a lesser extent, John Bowlby and his associates, ‘educated’ people have come to know that children do not cognitively and emotionally process events as adults do. We now know children must progress through stages of development.

In the time when the child was considered an adult, albeit of a smaller scale, it was self-evident that there was inside the child a kind of homunculus, a rational puppet-master who pulled the strings and called the action. Although earlier figures like Rousseau and Locke disputed this view, in Western nations this view only gave way during the 20th century. The wholesale demise of the view that children are mini-adults opened the way for a
range of different practices and theories—for example, that the role of play in children's development should be valorised and encouraged through non-instrumental activities; and that sociality, spontaneous reveries and non-goal directed games have a profound importance in children's development.

Yet right now children are being intensively encouraged to be aware of their actions and the consequences of their actions, and to be enthusiastic students of time-management as a value and a practice. Never has a generation been told so often and so loudly to make good sensible choices, to know what their 'priorities' are and that it is sensible to plan for, and stick to, the path that will lead to the achievement of their personal goals. In such ways we are inciting the adult within the child to be the master.

It is, of course, acknowledged that children are not mini-adults, that it is inappropriate to send them down the coalmines, or allow them to be exploited as chimney-sweeps (or carpet makers). Yet a new specification has been introduced: children have to be knowing subjects. Therefore, competent parents and good schools will house the young so that they become adept at being aware of, and strategising about, their opportunities.

Unfortunately, this idealised specification tends to lock in inadvertent consequences. At least one is the sexualisation of young females, another the commercialisation of childhood in general. Knowing consumers understand there is no free lunch: you must have something to trade to be able to get what you want. And, as everybody now knows, sex sells.

Even the words 'sex' and 'sexy' have become synonymous with what is catchy and attractive, what is seen to have value and currency. We all remember how critics said the British government had 'sexed-up' intelligence reports on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction; and what is fashionable and fresh, like Apple's iPhone, is said to be 'sexy'. It is smart to look sexy. To be a knowing commodity is to be 'it with a bit'. But, of course, that is only part of the plot line of the larger critical story. The larger story is the argument that children require an environment grounded in ethics and the importance of reciprocity, that it is developmentally sound to have a context with a good-enough quality of containment. Such a context conflicts with an emphasis on amoral choice, which is the value synonymous with the practice of opportunistic strategising. If this consistency is not maintained, if the prevailing conditions are such that the stipulation of strategising is set as a core attribute for developmental health, it can be expected there will be deregulations across a spectrum of internal and inter-personal practices.

Australia's social services demean those who are most reliant on them

Income policies of Australian governments over more than twenty years have been increasingly harsh on Social Security beneficiaries, particularly the long-term unemployed. In 1988 an unemployed single person with no children was paid $10,600 per year. In that same year pensioners were paid $11,250. The $650 annual difference represented a gap of approximately 6 per cent. Fast forward to 2010 and the Newstart Allowance for a single person with no children is $12,212 per year while an annual pension payment for a single person with no children is $17,118. The difference between the two payments is now 40 per cent.

Over the intervening twenty-two years there has been a bipartisan political approach, under the guise of improving the lot of pensioners but rather to punish and break the spirit of Australia's long-term unemployed. This approach has resulted in those on allowances being forced to live on a level of income that is well below the poverty line when housing costs are included. If the person is young or underemployed the impact can be even greater as income and asset tests for beneficiaries are harsher than for other income supports. As a result, some commentators are highlighting the plight of this new underclass on allowances and, increasingly, the growing numbers of 'working poor'.

Punishing the Most Disadvantaged

John Enticott

John Enticott has worked in a variety of community housing settings over the past thirty years.
Copyright of Full Text rests with the original copyright owner and, except as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, copying this copyright material is prohibited without the permission of the owner or its exclusive licensee or agent or by way of a license from Copyright Agency Limited. For information about such licences contact Copyright Agency Limited on (02) 93947600 (ph) or (02) 93947601 (fax)