



Understanding Childhood

The good old institution of childhood is growing up fast in a world in which adulthood is being thrust upon youngsters ever-earlier. How can parents meet the challenge of raising the new children? It's a question of "why" versus "why not" . . .

□ In the past two decades the institution of childhood in the western world has been changing at such a snowballing pace that adults in general and parents in particular are becoming more and more bewildered about it. To put it in the vernacular, nobody seems to understand kids any more. Perhaps adults never did understand them very well, but in times past, most parents at least managed to raise their own offspring to the satisfaction of both parties. Today, however, the lives and attitudes of children are so beset with complexity that the efficacy of traditional methods of child-rearing has been thrown into serious doubt.

Whatever happened to childhood? The short answer is nothing more or less than what has happened to western society in general. The old institutions, the old social *mores*, have been shaken by the onslaughts of the new rebelliousness and the "me" generation, and nothing new has come to reinforce them or take their place. The watchword of our society has become "why not?" and all the answers appear trite and stodgy beside the glitter of the wonderful promise of untrammelled freedom. If "why-notism" has caused disorientation among adults, it has left children at sea in a storm of contradictions and inchoate ideas.

To add to all the age-old agonies of growing up, today's youth faces a formidable array of fresh psychological pressures. The New York psycho-

analyst Dr. Ira Mintz describes the new forces weighing on children's lives as "widespread violence, excessive permissiveness, excessive sexual stimulation, and the cynical hedonistic values of the 'art' culture". Children are also under pressure to rebel against authority, meaning their parents and the educational system. They can hardly help being caught up in the general drive for fuller rights for all kinds of minorities.

And the fact is that children *are* oppressed and maltreated in many parts of the world; this has been recognized by the declaration of 1979 as "The International Year of the Child" by the United Nations. In general, those in the more fortunate countries of the west do not appear to be downtrodden, but many authorities on the subject insist that this appearance is deceiving. They say that the most defenceless members of our society remain the farthest away from equality. They are encouraging the advance of "child power" and children indeed are becoming more forward in asserting their real or imagined rights.

Yet when it comes to a little bargaining with children, many adults are helplessly incompetent. Their own upbringing has not prepared them to do anything but mount a hostile defensive front. "Adults are usually deeply disturbed at the notion that children are their social equals," writes child behavioural expert Dr. Rudolf Dreikurs. "They

indignantly deny such a possibility. 'Don't be ridiculous. I know more than my child does. He can't possibly be my equal.' No. Of course not. Not in knowledge or experience or skill. But these things don't indicate equality — even among adults. Equality does not mean uniformity! Equality means that people, despite all their individual differences and abilities, have equal claims on dignity and respect."

Dr. Dreikurs goes on to say that North American children are quick to realize that they have a case for greater independence. They have been put in this frame of mind by their own parents, who have allowed them much more freedom than previous generations ever enjoyed. They get out of their homes and out into the world earlier and more often. Many begin junior kindergarten at the age of four, two years earlier than the school-starting age a couple of decades ago. Young children are engaged in other activities outside of the home, such as organized sports and things like dancing lessons. A tangle has resulted because parents, while easing children out of the scope of their authority, at the same time are trying to impose the full range of parental control.

The resultant confusion is such that some parents are turning for help to outside sources. They are enrolling in ever-increasing numbers in courses designed to improve their parental skills. Possibly the best-known of these is Parent Effectiveness Training, developed by Dr. Gordon Thomas of Pasadena, California. In Canada the Alfred Adler Institute of Ontario has organized groups across the country. Among its main aims is to teach parents to deal with their children on a more equal plane.

Is this mere old-fashioned coddling in a flashy new guise? Or a headlong rush to even more permissiveness which the parents will regret later? Neither, say the experts: they are convinced that methods of bringing up children have not kept pace with the times.

One fundamental reason for this, they say, is that children now mature physically much earlier than previously. According to the Menninger Foundation of Topeka, Kansas, they are reaching pubescence as much as two years sooner than children did only ten years ago. Obviously this makes quite a difference in dealing with them. An eleven-year-old today is simply not the same kind of human being as an eleven-year-old twenty years ago.

The pace of intellectual development has also changed — some say for the worse, some for the better. In any case, today's children have been subjected to the full range of the teachings of television; the average child on this continent has watched something like 8,000 hours of TV before he or she even starts school. During their school years they are exposed by the medium of the tube to an imaginary world of ready violence and casual sex, of spurious individuality and hostility towards authority. It is bound to influence, to some extent, their view of life.

Children are now demanding a voice in setting the rules

Through television, children are influenced by the bumptious TV-age social crusaders who never miss a chance to excoriate the "Establishment". Their example of assertiveness may be followed in children's dealings with their own "Establishment" in the home. Right or wrong, children now tend to reject a heavily-authoritarian approach to their upbringing. They balk with vigour and confidence at hard and fast rules as to what they will wear, what they will study, how they will spend their free time, who their companions will be, and how they will generally behave. They are now claiming a voice in these decisions. And the exasperated parent who reacts with rancour towards "uppity kids" not only is unlikely to quell the rebellion, but runs the risk of pushing the prohibited activities underground.

The alternative is to try to understand what youngsters are now going through, and to be prepared to reason with them on their own level.

The institution of childhood is not immutable, and neither are its rules. In fact it did not exist until relatively recent times; family life as we know it today is a quite new invention. Before the 18th century, about 80 per cent of the people in a country such as Great Britain lived in hovels. Children had no special status in these cramped quarters, and most of them got no education. They grew up to emulate their parents because they had little choice.

There is a case for saying we are still too hard on children

Childhood has been through a great deal since, much of it less than a credit to adults. Children were ruthlessly exploited in the Industrial Revolution; and until the turn of this century, their own parents felt entirely free to exploit and use them in various ways. Even later, it was common — and considered commendable — to beat a child for the slightest misdemeanour, some of which were committed only in the parent's imagination. What would be considered arrant child abuse these days was then an everyday routine.

There is a case for saying that we are still too hard on our children, though in a more subtle fashion. John Holt, an American writer, teacher, and child-rights advocate, says that we "lock the young into eighteen years or more of subservience and dependency, and make of them . . . a mixture of expensive nuisance, fragile treasure, slave and super-pet". He makes the point that adults should at least treat children with a modicum of courtesy. He claims that they are subject to an immense amount of verbal abuse day in and day out.

The sort of thing Holt is getting at is nothing new — the off-hand verbal bullying of children. A cartoon in *Punch* in 1872 showed a mother saying to an older child: "Go directly — see what she's doing and tell her she musn't." In the 1930s Ring Lardner began a short story about a father and son with a phrase that gets to the heart of many such a relationship: "Shut up he explained."

What is new is that the frenetic pace of life today has exacerbated the impatience parents have always felt towards their children. People are propelled along so quickly that they don't have time — or think they don't — to worry about what a child might think or feel. On the other hand, it seems reasonable to assume that we in the 1970s are too sophisticated and well-informed to persist in thoughtlessly trampling on children. Yet some teachers and parents continually belittle them as a matter of course.

Much of this is unconscious. The Mormon Church lately has been sponsoring a series of television commercials showing how children are "put down". In one of these a little girl is shown bouncing into the kitchen, having done the shopping and obviously proud of herself. A mother's stern voice says off-camera: "I hope you got everything." In another scene, an excited boy runs into the house and shouts: "I got twenty in my test!" Then we hear his father's voice: "How many times have I told you not to slam the door?"

They have always made easy targets for adults' barbs

Our habit of putting down children goes deep into history. Children have always been the butt of adult gibes, from Shakespeare ("How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child") through Charles Lamb ("Boys are capital fellows in their own way . . . but they are unwholesome companions for grown people") to W. C. Fields ("Anyone who hates children and dogs can't be all bad").

It should be borne in mind that children make very handy targets for adult sniping, whether jocular or serious. Adults tend to assume an arrogance towards them based on no more difficult an achievement than having reached a certain age or the natural act of bringing a child into the world. They will say things to children that they would never say to other adults. They take their woes and frustrations out on their offspring in lieu of anyone else to bait. That old expression, "whipping boy", was not coined without reason. It would be wise for parents to give a little thought to the difference between constructive criticism and gratuitous belligerence in their dealings with their kids.

At the same time, it is true that children seem to possess a special knack for annoying their parents. The deportment, attitudes and habits that come with different ages, especially the early teens, can get under an adult's skin, causing minor incidents to be magnified. Parents are subject to a feeling of disappointment as their children get older and develop their own personalities. Characteristics that were formerly considered "cute" suddenly become flaws of character as boys and girls grow into their teens.

Adult inconsistency can bedevil teenagers' lives

The teens are a crucial period for both the youth and the parent. It is then that the relationship between them later on in life is formed. Oscar Wilde wrote: "Children begin by loving their parents. After a time they judge them. Rarely, if ever, do they forgive them." A typical Wildean overstatement, perhaps, but with enough truth in it to serve notice on parents to be especially sensitive to the problems of their offspring when they reach their teens, if only for the parent's own good.

Contemporary teenagers live in a world which is constantly thrusting the appurtenances of adulthood upon them. For example, the curricula of many Canadian schools put the onus on children to choose their career path earlier than ever before. This is partly because some schools have allowed students to drop key subjects, including English and mathematics, which automatically narrows down their career options. This is changing now, as schools go back to the idea that students should have a grounding in certain "core" subjects. But it makes a nice lesson in how adult inconsistency can bedevil teenagers' lives.

It is difficult, of course, for anyone to be entirely consistent. And it is not necessarily desirable;

adults need to exercise some degree of flexibility to cope with the changes that take place in children themselves. A social worker cites the case of a girl who moves from primary school to high school. Her sweet, affectionate way with her parents turns into hostility and aggressiveness. She stops using "mom" and replaces it with a chilly "mother", with frigid emphasis on the final syllable. The mother concludes that the change must be due to the new school and new friends.

What is actually happening is that the daughter is entering her adolescence, and her attitude towards her parents is changing. She wants more independence, and to get it, she backs out of the emotional ambit of parental control. Her parents need to recognize the signs and to sympathize with her condition. They should allow her the independence she craves a little at a time.

The pitfalls are numerous and difficult to avoid

Adolescence has always been a perilous phase of life for both sexes, and today it is even more so. The pitfalls are more numerous and more difficult to avoid — drugs, alcohol, and promiscuous sex with its threat of unwanted pregnancy, venereal disease, and emotional instability in later years. What can parents do to bring their experience to bear on these dangers? The most powerful device they have on their side is a full and frank explanation of the need to set certain rules.

If authorities on the subject of childhood agree on anything, it is that children are more knowledgeable and more logical than adults give them credit for. So the challenge for parents is one of thinking out what is right and what is wrong for their child — and clearly explaining why. Children have come a long, long way since the days when a straight, stern "no" would lead them to the straight and narrow. Childhood is growing up; and adults involved with it must make a conscious effort to pay more attention to it than in days gone by.