

Their One and Only Childhood

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"We must plan and act in terms of building culture rather than of inducting the young into a culture already defined," declare Lorene K. Fox, of Queens College, Flushing, New York, and Peggy D. Brogan, of Agnes Russell Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York.

MOST of the difficult problems children face today grow out of the fact that they live with *us*, the adult interpreters of their culture. The way in which they see their world, the way in which they think of themselves, and the way in which they view their problems, depend significantly not upon what we say but upon what we do.

And at a time when old values no longer are appropriate to existing conditions, we are ourselves unsure. A part of the difficulty lies in our traditional way of looking at the cultural heritage. It stems from the belief that culture can be viewed and evaluated in terms of fragments rather than the total situation. We focus on the specifics of a given age in comparison with the specifics of another age to provide the basis for "different from" or "better than." For example, we say that transportation today is different from and better than transportation of an earlier time. It is faster, it can take us more places, it is far more comfortable, it is varied. We feel no compulsion for considering ways in which the new transportation is used

in terms of people's living. It is new transportation, it is better transportation, it is progress,—take us where it will!

Separate Teachings Are Inadequate

This fragmented way of looking at the culture down through the years has dictated the patterns for education. We have separated what we want children to *learn* from the total environment in which they live.

We have even divided among separate institutions the responsibility for passing on the selected teachings. The assumptions were:

- That children would learn only those parts of the culture which adults selected to be taught.
- That children could learn ways for living through the vicarious and verbal.
- That by the time children reached adulthood they could pull together and apply for successful living, the separate teachings of church, home and school.

Today's events are forcing us to realize the inadequacy of these assumptions. No matter which parts of the culture we may wish to teach, children learn what is grounded in experience.

¹ Ideas in this article are being developed more fully by the authors in a book on elementary education to be published by The World Book Company, fall of 1952.

As one harassed mother put it, "When I see Tommy and the other boys playing with machine guns, I shudder. I want to say to them, 'Can't you boys ever play anything else? It's so wrong to shoot and kill!' Then I think, what's the point? Everything they see and hear is war. And I don't see any end to it!"

This is the picture facing us adults,—the generation who believed children would learn primarily what we chose to teach them in school! In the midst of the tension and confusion, then, we are forced to look at the larger cultural picture. And we are horrified at the one certainty that we see: while for generations we have been teaching about peace, our wars today are more frequent, more pervasive, more destructive than they have ever been in the history of mankind. All of the scientific and technological wonders of the day, which we have credited with making our generation different from all others, are spelling out this difference *not* by helping to abolish war as a way for people to solve problems, but only by making war more widespread, more destructive, more threatening to civilization itself.

The real measure of what one generation passes on to another has to do with the quality of human relations, the basic conditions of human living. The specifics of science, technology, deliberate education, which we pass on from one generation to another, serve only to implement the ways of living together which make up the real cultural heritage.

AS CHILDREN VIEW THEIR WORLD

If there is one common contribution made to children by the specifics of

this age it is confusion and frustration. They are in on our problems, our inconsistencies.

Also, persuasive appeals of the day made directly to children are putting them under severe strain. In the store windows, over television, in the newspapers, in their own comics and even in the direct mail from riding camps, book publishers and toy manufacturers, high power salesmanship has children at its mercy. At the same time—when understanding adult help is so badly needed—the hollow precepts of home, school and church, developed out of a day when no such pressures existed, add to the frustration and guilt: Do not steal. Save your money. Use self control. Make your own decisions. Never mind what the other children have.

We Add to Children's Confusion

Nor is it only the commercial world that exploits children in this way. Those of us most concerned with their welfare are restricting children's choices through subtle persuasion, although certainly without deliberate intent. After-school hours are generally thought of as the children's own. But in our great desire to encourage children to follow interesting constructive pursuits, we provide a galaxy of music lessons, adult-organized group meetings and other community activities, which, worthwhile enough in themselves, throw children into conflict by vying for their loyalty and free time.

Out of sheer exasperation Doris exploded to her friends, "I wish my mother'd make up her mind! She buys me a bicycle and hardly lets me ride it anywhere. Same thing with television. We bought a beautiful television set,

and she's all the time trying to keep me from watching it."

School people seem unable to give help here. Indignant ourselves at the encroachment of television, for example, on children's time—highly legitimate from the children's viewpoint—we have taken the defensive for the school schedules and programs which are threatened. "How deplorable for children to be watching television when they should be outside in the sunshine!"

If we are really close to children we will discover that it isn't that they no longer want to play outdoors. Their answer might well be: "Give us our good healthy play time during school, when the sun is high, when the kids are all here, when there is plenty of space and equipment, when we can get help if we need it, when we don't have to worry about disturbing the neighbors or keeping out of traffic or breaking someone's windows."

It gives us pause to think what frustration is being built in our boys and girls as we put them in conflict situations where pressures lay guilt for any but the "right" choice.

Unmet Needs Spell Hostile World

These frustrations are the cultural heritage as uniquely shaded by the specifics of today. A contemporary viewing of older more persistent frustrations growing out of our failure to meet basic needs of children will show that many children are taught to think of their world as essentially unfriendly and hostile.

At a time when the wealth and resources of our nation are at their highest, when for the first time in history it is possible to have decent standards of

living for everyone, a large proportion of families still receive inadequate incomes. Since the quality of such basic human requirements as health services, food, clothing and housing, are dependent upon purchasing power, this will continue to be a significant and widespread source of frustration. A large number of children still are denied sufficient food to keep them well, adequate homes to live in, needed health protection and care, wholesome places to play and to work. That general progress along these lines is so outstanding in this country and that so many people share the benefit only serve to highlight the problem.

The tragedy is that the particular children who know this kind of deprivation are living in this way their one and only childhood. It is significant that included in the Pledge to Children, drawn up at the White House Conference, were these two statements: "We will work to lift the standard of living and to improve our economic practices, so that you may have the material basis for a full life . . . We will protect you against exploitation and undue hazards and help you grow in health and strength."

Nor can we be concerned for the health of children in America alone. As one of the UN workers expressed it, "We are living in a time of world echoes." The fact that two-thirds of the world is on the brink of starvation, and one-half unhealthy and prey to disease, spells an unhealthy world community for all.

Children Need Roots

Children who are denied the friendship and protection of grownups, of a

genuinely understanding community, are children who know the world as essentially unfriendly or hostile. Sometimes both parents are working, sometimes the home is broken through divorce, through war, through employment demands. These children have less opportunity for the reassurance and understanding that come with close family association.

The concentration of population brought about by modern conditions forces many children into the anonymity of large city housing developments. This is in direct contrast to the childhoods spent in smaller, more stable communities where friendly neighbors were almost like part of the family and felt free to take over some of the responsibilities. As one grownup recalled, "Why, when I was a child there were at least forty houses where I could get a meal if I wanted to, and at least a dozen where I could get a good spanking."

As many as eight million school age children in America are members of families, who, for employment reasons, must constantly move from place to place, make new friends, live in quarters furnished by other people,—children who have no way to get the feeling of belonging to any community.

Even the large consolidated school, designed to solve some of the problems of children, has created other problems. In many instances, the small farm neighborhoods have been scattered by the disappearance of their country schools which through generations have served as the center of community life, and the families are left on the fringes of the larger, more impersonal community. The long, long days of even the youngest child, when he has to board

the school bus of an early winter morning and does not return until almost dinner time, deprive him of some of the intimate hours of family life.

AS CHILDREN SEE THEMSELVES

An unfriendly hostile world has many ways for saying to a child that he is not accepted, that he is inadequate.

Probably the most common cultural basis for this feeling of inadequacy, partly brought about by the shape of technological developments, is the way in which they have been denied an important role in society. Urbanization, mechanization, increased services now purchasable have crowded out the necessity or even the opportunity for children to perform tasks of social importance. In an important sense, children are coming to be liabilities rather than assets.

Consider in this light also the children living in crowded city apartment buildings who actually come to think of themselves as threats to their families' security. Neighbors complain of the noise. Landlords complain of their running on the grass, playing on the steps, investigating the heating plant. In some places the family is given a demerit for each of the children's offenses and these may lead to actual eviction. In other cases would-be tenants are refused apartments because they have children. Children have no way for knowing they are victims of inadequate play space, construction of buildings which do not provide for the spontaneous, boisterous, inquisitive activity so natural and so essential to wholesome childhood. They come to think of *themselves* as the problem, rather than the conditions causing the "problem behavior."

Many children are forced to think of themselves as inferior because they live on the wrong side of the tracks, because they belong to a particular race, nationality, religion, economic group, social class, that is not genuinely accepted.

Schools, Too, Make Children Feel Incompetent

In school as well, we have perfected techniques for convincing many children that they are incompetent. While we have not intended to do so, the results are so effective that it sometimes seems we have deliberately planned to encourage or reinforce any other environmental teaching of inadequacy. Ability grouping, promotion policies, tattle-tale letters to parents, competitive activities where success is limited to the few, systems of awards, testing policies, remedial programs—these are procedures which allow children to think of themselves and be labeled as, “slow learners,” “poor sports,” “poor thinkers,” “lazy people,” “cheaters.” When eight-year old, highly intelligent David was asked the question, “With whom would you like to sit?” he responded, “Alone. If I sat next to someone he might be smart and I’d copy his paper.” Already he had learned that he was incompetent, unreliable.

A defeated child is a frustrated child, —a child whose environment has taught him that he is incompetent both as an individual and as a group member. Unless other vital experiences later modify this evaluation, he goes through life with this sense of frustration.

At the time when children are feeling conflict they are seeing war, thus giving them every possible chance to translate their experiences with what they see of

adult action. Most children today cannot remember a time when war was not the accepted way for respected adults to solve their important problems.

Children Also Face Opportunities

If most of the difficult problems children face today grow out of the fact that they live with *us*, the adult interpreters of their culture, so do the opportunities which are available to children. Perhaps the most important realization to emerge from this discussion of children’s problems, is that if we are to break the chain of war from one generation to another, we must plan and act in terms of *building* culture rather than of inducting the young into a culture already defined.

No *fragmented* view of the job to be done—of the problem, resources or means—can work in the direction of building a culture. If war is to be replaced, then the persistent drive in people to solve their problems within whatever framework they are permitted to operate, must find an even fuller, a more creative expression in peace than in the all-out, action-with-purpose, problem-solving endeavor that is war. No more significant contribution can be made to this gigantic task than the one which lies within the realm of those of us most interested in and intimately engaged with the education of children.

Subsequent articles in this issue bear out the fact that this does not mean that the responsibility belongs to teachers alone, parents alone, even adults alone. Building a culture becomes education grounded in experience, the whole community and ever-widening community living.

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