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*A Child Care Information Exchange Classic*

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# Institutionalized Childhoods: Reconsidering Our Part in the Lives of Children

by Jim Greenman

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*Childhood is the world of miracle and wonder: as if creating rose and bathed in light, out of the darkness, utterly new and fresh and astonishing. The end of childhood is when things cease to astonish us. When the world seems familiar, when we have gotten used to existence, one has become an adult.*

— Eugene Ionesco

*The noticeable thing in New Zealand society is the body of people with their inner resources atrophied. Seldom have they had to reach inward to grasp the thing that they wanted. Everything, from material requirements to ideas, is available ready-made. . . . They can buy life itself from the film and radio-canned life. . . . They dried up. From babyhood they had shiny toys put in their hands, and in the kindergarten and infant rooms bright pictures and gay materials. Why conceive of anything of their own? They have not the need. The vast expanses of mind that could have been alive with creative activity are now no more than empty vaults that must for comfort's sake be filled with non-stop radio, and their conversation consists of a list of platitudes and clichés.*

— Sylvia Ashton-Warner

As early childhood professionals, we think a lot about children in making our particular programs work. We focus on children's needs, development, and curriculum. But suppose we held our preoccupation with needs, development, curriculum, and like notions in suspension for a while; long enough for us to think about childhoods — children's lives in a broad context. Of course, childhood is made up of elements that fit into all of these boxes; but perhaps by shifting our focus we may gain new insight into what it is like to be a child today and our part in improving children's lives.

When we think of our own early childhoods — happy or unhappy, chaotic or relaxed — or perhaps even more powerful, the imagined childhoods we might have had or wish for our children, what images surface: what places, experiences with people, moments of pure pleasure, or wonder?

For most of us, images of fluorescently lit group times, worksheets, Legos, magic circles, easel time, and so on cannot hold their own with memories of secret places in the home or yard, moments with our friends unwatched (we thought) by

adults, real conversations and physical intimacy with adults important to us.

Today we have institutionalized our children; there is no other word for it. Many children, almost from birth, are in a world of organized experiences in managed groups — child care, preschool, after-school programs, camps, swim/gym, and other classes.

We have done it for admirable reasons: to keep them safe while we work and go to school, to give them opportunities for learning and new experiences. Like it or not, trends in housing, work, leisure, crimes against children, and nearly all aspects of modern life seem to make institutionalization inevitable. It is hard to quarrel with any of the children's programs individually, but the net effect is disturbing.

We are a society perhaps more attentive to children than any other; but it is a limited attention, most often directed toward parents and children as consumers. Organized around children's *needs* and desires and parents' desires for their children, goods and experiences are packaged, bought, and sold — Cabbage Patch dolls, Suzuki violins,

parent-child classes, computer camp. Needs are defined or created and marketed; goods and services are rushed in to fill the gap.

While we may be in an *age of childhood*, Ivan Illich points out, "If society were to outgrow its age of childhood, it would have to become livable for the young." Rita Liljestrom, speaking of Swedish preschools, echoes Illich: "Let's admit there is something dubious about setting up special sanctuaries for children, about putting children in special preserves with adults who are specialized in looking after youngsters in a segregated child milieu with special furniture and toys for children, . . . in a very real sense the preschool can be seen as expressing a hostility to children in the social development."

What is missing? For many children, it is a sense of the variety of life — the real world of people and nature and machines and an opportunity to explore that world and be a part of it. In the past, children did not need special places for play. They had more free time in houses, backyards, fields, and streets. They lived amidst shops and trades people and mothers and fathers working in and around the home. And they had the time and freedom in their lives to *mess about*, captured beautifully by Kenneth Grahme in **The Wind in the Willows**:

*"Nice? It's the only thing," said the Water Rat solemnly as he leaned forward for his stroke. "Believe me, my young friend, there is NOTHING — absolutely nothing — half so worth doing as simply messing about in boats. Simply messing," he went on dreamily, "messing — about — in — boats; messing —"*

*"Look ahead, Rat!" cried the Mole suddenly.*

*It was too late. The boat struck the bank full tilt. The dreamer, the joyous oarsman, lay on his back at the bottom of the boat, his heels in the air.*

*" — about in boats — or with boats," the Rat went on composedly, picking himself up with a pleasant laugh. "In or out of them, it doesn't matter. Nothing seems to really matter, that's the charm of it. Whether you get away, or whether you don't; whether you arrive at your destination, or whether you reach someplace else; or whether you never get anywhere at all, you are always busy and you never do anything in particular: and when you've done it there's always something else to do, and you can do it if you like, but you'd much better not."*

It is not just that aspects of children's quality of life has changed, but their education as well. It is in messing about that children dream dreams and discover what they might be. Messing about is when children act on the world and discover what it is made of and how it works.

Kenneth Eble, in **A Perfect Education**, describes a perfect education as one that "proceeds by surprises and the promise of other surprises, one that offers most opportunity for discovery." He observes that nature is the area in which our urban society is most lacking. "Even though our tremendously rich, tremendously mobile society gives far more people access to the more spectacular areas of nature than ever before, nature is not an important part of daily experience." He laments this loss because "it was nature, and it above all, that was to be discovered, bounteous, mysterious, unmindful, neither judging nor cautioning nor limiting, but mostly for children at least, infinitely inviting. . . . Zoos and public parks are wonderful as museums. . . . Yet for discovery one needs some things unmanaged, undesigned until a child's eye imposes a pattern."

*Unmanaged, undesigned until a child imposes a pattern by his actions*, here is precisely what is shrinking in the child's experience with both the physical and social world. EVERYTHING is managed and patterned and scheduled and governed by the patterns imposed by the sensible dictates of regulation, insurance, the bottom line, and the compromises of group living.

Cut off from the real world of society — a world of work and machines and production, unmanaged nature, social relationships with a wide variety of adults and children in different settings — and fewer and fewer opportunities to simply *mess about* following one's own inclinations, more and more children of each successive generation are losing opportunities for delight and wonder.

So what are we as early childhood professionals and advocates to do? We can lament the loss of the past, but it will not forestall the modern age. What we can do is think critically about our roles, our places, and our programs in terms of the contexts of the lives that today's children are leading.

Perhaps if we thought more about childhoods and less about needs, some of our programs would look less like schools and more like homes and children's museums, or like fields and parks. We might develop varied places with a genuine sense of place — of beauty, variety, and elements of surprise and mystery; places where adults and children delight at times in simply being together, messing about, and working at the tasks that daily living requires.

If we thought about childhoods, we would notice that Joe's and Maria's and Emma's and Nguyen's are very different. Child care providers

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might accommodate to Joe's needs the strange ins and outs of American culture. There are needs here, as there are the strengths of Joe's adaptability, Maria's determination, Emma's charm with adults, and Nguyen's sense of responsibility far beyond her years.

If we periodically shifted our focus to childhoods, we might temper our clinical approach that views Joe and all the others as an assemblage of needs through the narrow lens of the tiny piece of Joe's life that we administer to. But it is difficult because as we rightly tighten regulations, require credentials and specialized qualifications, develop accreditation and *get our act together* in our programs — all the standardizing actions designed to improve general quality — a secondary effect is often an increased clinical approach (IEPs), more environmental management (no birds, bunnies, or lizards for health reasons), less program flexibility to multi-age groups, and to hire a diverse staff.

Perhaps all we can do here is to examine each issue from a broad perspective and at least recognize that some of our ostensibly sound decisions may form a mosaic that ultimately is not altogether positive.

Critiques like this do not lend themselves to easy solutions. Perhaps together with parents we can look at the quality of a child's life; and in the piece of childhood that we affect, look to establishing warm and flexible settings of space, time, and people that exist to expose children to the wonder and the magic of the world and allow them relatively unfettered opportunities to discover the powers that they have within them to live and love and learn in the world.

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