

WHERE HAS CHILDHOOD GONE?

There is a strong trend in current education policies urging 'reality' and 'real life experiences' to be an integral part of the curriculum.

This has developed without consideration for the importance of childhood's essential developmental stages and without an adequate definition of 'reality'.

While children should not be forced to live in glass houses, or completely shielded from happenings within the immediate, and wider environment, they should have the opportunity to grow and develop positive feelings unhindered by adult concepts and considerations.

Children should not be forced into a world of rampant consumerism, nuclear threat, violence and mistrust, poverty and deprivation, and parent worries. Television, videos, war games and the print media do little to reduce these concerns.

Where, then, has childhood gone? Every child should have the chance to experience, enjoy and interact with the wonderful characters that inhabit the world of folk stories. For generations parents and teachers have recited, read, acted and sung folk stories to their children but today, with the ready availability of film and television, many children are missing out on these wonderful opportunities.

Popular author Paul Jennings feels that childhood is being eroded and that 'it should be a time of life when children are protected from worries and be able to enjoy life, day by day'. He believes that children are being robbed of time to play and time to dream. Scholar Maxim Gorky wrote 'In folk tales listeners fly through the air on a magic carpet, walk in seven league boots, build castles overnight; folk tales opened up for me a new world where some free and all-fearless power, reigned and inspired in me a dream of a better life'.

The process of hurrying children along into an adult world starts at birth. Doctor Christopher Green, author of the 'Toddler Taming' series states 'There is more pressure than there needs to be from the parents and community to make children grow up too soon... some parents are always trying to push their children on to the next stage. Childhood passes so quickly, it suddenly evaporates before your eyes'.

Childhood, although it can be most exciting and enriching, is also a most impressionable period. The Jesuits firmly believed that if they had control of a male child from birth to six years of age, he would be under their influence for life. There is much validity in this contention. In such a context it is the early childhood years, rather than the teenage years, that set the tone and standards for school study and success in later life.

Robert Kosky, Professor of Child Psychiatry, believes that the pressure on children to perform has increased considerably over the last twenty years because the spectre of unemployment has motivated parents to push their children to academic success. He states that 'structured educational activities do not develop imagination because they cut back on creativity.. Robbed of freedom and opportunity, children rely more and more on instant television programs, computer games and commercial toys in order to amuse themselves.

Group adventures into the bush and building 'cubby-houses' are becoming things of the past. Children love jokes and riddles but the important role that humour plays in language, logic and human development is not often fully appreciated. Humour directs attention to hitherto unperceived aspects of language and strengthens existing knowledge. While the joke or riddle may be fun - it must be fun if it is to be a good one - it provides an opportunity for serious learning experiences; such as solving number patterns and mathematical or alphabetical codes.

The importance of early childhood experiences is supported by the March 1991 report of the Australian House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training. It states that 'an adult with literacy problems has first been a child with literacy problems'. It expresses the urgent need to assess the effectiveness of methods of reading instruction in the early years of schooling and argues strongly that attempts to remedy the situation at secondary, tertiary and adult education levels are not addressing the cause of the problem - unsuccessful reading instruction in the first years of school.

One State Education Minister reported 'We know from the vast body of available research that unless children learn the basics of reading and writing, listening and using spoken language by the end of year three, they can be disadvantaged for the rest of their lives'.

There is also much peer influence on childhood, with play equalling videos, computer games, shopping for the 'in' gear and visiting fast food outlets. There is so much pressure on children to acquire material possessions that it is not only vital to possess the right toys, but to have the right hair style, wear the right clothes, have the right footwear and be able to discuss the right television programs. One parent was heard to say 'If I could lay my hands on the child who first decides what is 'in' I would cheerfully strangle her.

Teachers must be aware of, and avoid the perils of competitive dressing among their students. School uniforms are a good way of preventing progressive dressing and ensuring that poorer families do not suffer social ridicule. A recent news report told of an early primary school girl being ostracised because she wore the 'wrong' brand of sneakers - was this her sin, or society's?

Figures from the Brotherhood of St Laurence indicate that one in eight Australian children are living in poverty. Mr Kevin Curry, General Secretary, believes that peer pressure in children becomes even more insidious in less affluent families and many parents try to accede to child requests despite their financial limitations.

Doctor David Bennett of the Sydney Children's Hospital has said 'A lot of things are going wrong for young people and changes in society have led children down a path of ill health. Indicators of a system in decline include increases in drug abuse, violent crimes and suicide'. It seems superfluous to mention that Australia in the last decade was second only to America in the highest level of child poverty in the O.E.C.D. countries.

We frequently hear of clothes being snatched, not from clothes lines anymore, but from the wearers abducted from a shopping centre. In one such instance the child was later found unharmed, but stripped of her trendy clothes.

Illustrator Peter Viska believes that stealing childhood from children is routine, but that children are born survivors. 'Children assume technology - they press remote controls, pre-record videos and cope with computers. But fantasy, the retreat time, an important part of childhood, is lost'.

Television tells too much, if there are no gaps in a story, so that we can imagine what will happen next, there is nothing to enjoy. It is vital that, in the highly technical, micro-chip world of today, we give all of our children the opportunities to pause, reflect, create dream

Many children have huge responsibilities at home. At school they respond to being treated as capable individuals but they also need a rest - a break from outside problems.

Are children being systematically stripped of their individuality, their innate sense of fun, their sweetness, their optimism and their belief in dreams? Is society taking from its children the very thing that makes them children - their innocence?