
The hurried child: Kathleen McDonnell looks at how children are being pushed on to the fast track to adult success by cynical advertisers and anxious parents - Childhood

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No doubt about it: being a kid just ain't what it used to be. Childhood used to be thought of as a carefree time (at least that's how it looks when viewed through the lens of our collective nostalgia). True, it was the period of learning and preparation for the responsibilities of adulthood. But primarily childhood was supposed to be a time for play, for smelling the flowers, like Ferdinand the Bull in the classic children's story. No more. These days the belief that kids are growing up too fast has gained such wide currency it's become almost a latter-day mantra.

But what do we mean by this phrase: 'growing up too fast'? Usually when people use it, they're talking about the fact that children are exposed to aspects of adult life that used to be hidden from them -- what I refer to in my book *Honey, We Lost the Kids* as the 'unholy trinity' of sex, profanity and violence. And it's true. The lines that used to distinguish between adulthood and childhood are growing blurred, and the evidence is all around us: six-year-old girls dressing up in navel-baring outfits a la Britney Spears. Eight-year-old boys playing computer games that simulate mass murder. Kids hearing frank sex-talk on primetime sitcoms like *Friends*, and listening to hip-hop CD's with raw language that would have been unthinkable even a few years ago. Childhood used to be a protected sphere, a walled garden where adult gatekeepers could control what and when children learned about the grown-up 'facts of life'. But the mass media have changed all that. Television and, more recently, the internet have made it impossible for us to keep what the renowned social critic Neil Postman calls the 'cultural secrets' of adulthood from children.

There are many forces that contribute to this phenomenon of the 'hurried child', as psychologist David Elkind has dubbed it. And as Elkind shows in his book of the same name, the pressure isn't only coming from the mass media, but from adults themselves.

In fact, many of the same grown-ups who bemoan the loss of traditional childhood are all-too-willing participants in the sped-up pace of modern childhood. More and more parents are imposing adult standards of success and achievement on children, jumping on the early-learning bandwagon and pushing their kids to excel at earlier and earlier ages. And whole sectors of the economy have sprung up to exploit parents' fears that unless their kids get on the fast-track they'll end up losers in the high-tech competitive marketplace.

Booming business

Not all the examples in the fanciful tale at the top of this article happened to one child. But they're all drawn from real life. There's so-called 'lapware' programs like Jump Start Baby, computer software for children as young as six months. Tutoring services and computer camps report booming business. A US couple really did seek therapy for their 13-year-old son because he lacked the 'killer instinct' for success. A private-school teacher in Toronto is setting up a franchise called 'Success for Kids', offering weekly group meetings (at \$20 a pop per child) that ape business motivational seminars. Even birthday parties have become opportunities for self-improvement. Tutoring centres offer all-inclusive party packages, with computer games and loot bags filled with pencils and math puzzles. Meanwhile, more and more of these over-programmed kids are suffering from burnout. Too much homework, too many extracurriculars -- no time to play, no time to be bored, no time just to be.

Kids are being rushed out of childhood in other ways, too. They're becoming consumers at earlier ages than ever, and cradle-to-grave marketing is becoming a fact of contemporary life. One thing that characterizes today's kids is their unprecedented level of brand-awareness. Even babies know those wads of white absorbent material wrapped around their bums are called Huggies and Pampers. The seeds of this brand-awareness are sown early via the technique known as 'character marketing'. Very young children form emotional attachments to the characters on their favorite TV shows like Barney and Teletubbies; characters whose likenesses are then used to market

everything from pajamas to lunch boxes. Kids grow up identifying not just with these lovable characters but with the idea of branding itself. So when they encounter GAP and Old Navy they're well-primed to develop brand loyalty.

There's now an entire industry devoted to youth marketing. Children's media outlets like Nickelodeon in the US and YTV in Canada periodically run focus groups for pre-teen kids to try to find out about upcoming trends, then sell their findings to advertisers and marketing consultants. (Both broadcasters have come under criticism for recruiting kids for their focus groups through the public-school system.) One technique that's growing increasingly popular with youth marketers is 'buzz marketing'. In an effort to generate word-of-mouth buzz for its new hand-held video game POX, for example, toy giant Hasbro recently gave away free games to 1,600 Chicago boys aged 8-13 who had been identified as 'trendsetters', acknowledged leaders in their peer groups. And youth's influence extends far beyond kiddie products. Via a phenomenon marketers have dubbed 'kidfluence', kids today have a big say in family purchases and exert a growing impact on adult buying patterns. For example, pre-teen kids are known to be 'early adopters' of a whole range of new-technology gadgets like pagers and cell phones, and companies target them in their ad campaigns for these products.

Tech no-kids

However, we shouldn't make the mistake of thinking that kids are just the brainwashed puppets of youth marketers. They're responding to pressure from advertisers, but they're also clamoring to get into the marketplace themselves. Which shouldn't surprise us. Young people can be excused for concluding that, in our culture, the status of personhood is attained by becoming a consumer. They're surrounded on all sides by the message that the marketplace is where the action is: I buy, therefore I am.

Many forces in the modern world are bending childhood out of shape, and a lot of people would like to turn back the clock to a time when life seemed less complicated. But it's not that simple. One response that I think we should be particularly wary of is 'old-fartism', a knee-jerk resistance to newfangled technology. Many adults are

appalled by kids' enthusiasm for cell phones and pagers, for example, and think these ubiquitous devices are responsible for the wholesale coarsening of public space. But the kids I talk to don't share that view at all. To them, it feels perfectly normal to be always on-call and available. (Probably the first home telephones were viewed by a lot of people as the same kind of invasive abomination back in the early twentieth century.) There's also a widespread belief that playing computer games has spawned an entire generation of kids with attention spans of zero. But experts like MIT sociologist Sherry Turkle argue that what looks to adults like a case of mass Attention-Deficit Disorder might in fact be the emergence of a new form of intelligence that's more discontinuous, less linear than we're used to.

For all that, some things haven't changed. Kids still need our time and attention. Though they sometimes act like they couldn't care less and avoid us like the plague, kids deeply value their relationships with parents and other adults. And yet, for all our material wealth, time is the very commodity that the modern family is most squeezed for. Parents say they have less and less time to spend with their kids and pay attention to their needs. Many people chalk it up to work pressures, but that only glosses over the deeper problem -- namely, that our culture puts a greater value on work than it does on family and community life. Added to that is the fact that we're the first society in history to expect parents alone to shoulder all the responsibilities of child rearing. In most cultures and through most periods of history, childbearing was seen as the job of the whole community.

It was considered normal and natural that relatives and other adults should be intimately involved in children's lives. But in the modern developed world the nuclear family is seen as a fortress unto itself, and the rearing of children depends entirely on 'parenting'. We need to take back control of our time, not only so we can spend it with our children, but so we can work on rebuilding and re-cementing the social bonds that will allow them to grow up in real communities and have contact with a variety of interested, caring adults.

Once upon a time there was a baby who was happy to sit in her bounce-chair, sucking her fingers, kicking her legs and watching the leaves flapping in the breeze. But her parents thought she needed something to jump-start her development, so they bought an early-learning program for the family computer. It had brightly colored animal characters with funny voices, and the baby loved it. Her parents, too, were pleased -- so pleased that they didn't even mind it when she banged on the keys and drooled all over the keyboard.

When the baby grew into a young girl, she went to the public [state] school down the block. She did well in school, but her parents were worried that she wasn't learning enough. So they arranged for her to go to a tutoring centre, and when summer came they enrolled her in a computer camp. The parents were pleased that their daughter was acquiring the skills she'd need in the competitive global economy. But the girl gazed out the window of the computer centre and wished she was outside playing with her friends...

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Kathleen McDonnell is a Toronto-based author specializing in the issues of childhood. Her latest book is *Honey, We Lost the Kids* published by Second Story Press, 2002.

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