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RESEARCH

'Childhood': are reports of its death greatly exaggerated?

PHILIP DARBYSHIRE, RSCN, MN, PhD
Chair of Nursing, Department of Nursing and Midwifery Research and
Practice Development, Children, Youth & Women's Health Service,
University of South Australia and Flinders University, Australia

Abstract

What is happening to our children's childhoods? Is childhood itself disappearing as children become increasingly 'adultified' and commodified and as the lives and worlds of children's experiences seem to shrink in the name of protection and safety? Are contemporary concerns justified about children becoming less active and more comfortable playing Gameboys rather than games and exploring 'Sim City' rather than their own real one? Or, are these simply adult 'moral panics' about childhood based on little more than nostalgia for a mythical childhood suffused with innocence and happiness? This article explores some of the current concerns regarding the changing state of childhood and links these to some of our current child health and well-being concerns. It concludes by suggesting some small-scale 'local' initiatives that parents and adults could support relatively easily, which would help to enrich childhood.

Keywords   childhood • children's play • commodification of childhood • death of childhood • parenting

Introduction

One of the heartening movements of recent years has been the burgeoning interest in 'New paradigm childhood research' (Prout and James, 1997), 'The new sociology of childhood', and 'The geographies of childhood' (Aitken, 2001a; Holloway and Valentine, 2000; Phillips, 2001; Skelton and Valentine, 1998). As a researcher interested in child and youth health, I see these areas not as some 'other worldly' academic fascination but as scholarship and knowledge vital to

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grasping the 'big picture' of contemporary childhood which can be eclipsed easily in any busy health care setting.

This article seeks to establish why understanding contemporary debates about the 'death of childhood' (Buckingham, 2000; Lombardo, 1997; Postman, 1994[1982]) are important for child health nurses and professionals. It then moves on to draw out some of the main threads in this debate in order to highlight how the changing nature of childhood has an impact on contemporary concerns about children's well-being.

Children in families

Just as most children live within families, families exist within a matrix of neighbourhoods and communities and, for children, this 'social geography' has a profound effect on their childhoods and well-being (Cramer, 2001; Cummins and Jackson, 2001; Davis and Jones, 1996; Drukker et al., 2003; Jutras, 2003; Landrigan et al., 1998). In one of her 'Australian of the Year' addresses, Professor Fiona Stanley spelled this out clearly:

> So it seems that there is evidence that if we neglect the early years of child development then there can be profound effects on a range of problems. Family environments then are crucial to the issues we are discussing. Most parents want to be good parents and want the best for their children but they need to be equipped and capable to do so. We also need to look beyond the family to neighbourhoods, workplaces, the social and economic policies and environments and to ask what is it about modern Australian communities which are what we might call 'family-disabling'? (Stanley, 2003)

This article takes up this point in order to ask: 'What is it about modern society that is 'childhood disabling'? What may be contributing to the 'death of childhood'?

The 'death of childhood'

While we may have real concerns about childhood disappearing or dying, for so many children across the world it must seem as if it has never taken place. Children grow up where they witness, are victims of, or perhaps may be complicit in (or coerced into) violence, conflict and brutality. Where extreme poverty, danger and deprivation are the norm, children have little understanding, experience or even use for the concept of 'childhood' in the ways that we would understand it. Published accounts of the lives of children – from street children in Africa (Cheney, 2005) or South America to children who grew up during 'the Troubles' in Northern Ireland (Smyth, 2002) – reveal some of what Neil Postman

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described in his influential book, *The Disappearance of Childhood* (1994[1982]). Postman argued that in the collapse of ancient Rome and the move into the Dark Ages, several things happened that are relevant to the history of childhood:

> The first is that literacy disappears, the second is that education disappears, the third is that shame disappears. And the fourth, as a consequence of the other three, is that childhood disappears. (Postman, 1994[1982]: 10)

What/when/how is childhood?

Understanding the concept of 'contemporary childhood' is not easy, as there seem to be as many differences of opinion as there are children. We know that seeking a formalized dictionary-style definition of childhood is pointless. We may know to ask 'What is a child?', but not 'When is a child' or 'How is a child?' We know that trying to trap it chronologically will not work. As the poet Edna St Vincent Millay wrote:

> Childhood is not from birth to a certain age, and at a certain age
> The child is grown and puts away childish things. (St Vincent Millay, 1934)

Any adolescent worth their hormones takes great delight in using the paradoxes and absurdities of chronologically-based childhood definitions to highlight adult stupidity. 'I can be having sex at 16 but can't watch it in the cinema until I'm 18 – Duh!!!!'

I do not subscribe to the glib postmodern reflex that everything in the world is socially constructed, but childhood certainly is, in that its meanings, practices, ceremonies, parameters, rights, responsibilities and expectations have changed dramatically throughout history and are sensitive to a host of economic, cultural and social influences. As Buckingham notes:

> The meaning of childhood is subject to a constant process of struggle and negotiation, both in public discourse (for example, in the media, in the academy or in social policy) and in interpersonal relationships, among peers and in the family. (Buckingham, 2000: 6)

Of course, considering 'the meaning of childhood' is not merely a detached, academic concern. How do you deal with a 12-year-old child who says that she definitely does not want more chemotherapy? How do you react when the 'children' who burgled and trashed your house are deemed 'too young' to be legally responsible for their actions? How should soldiers react when faced with a nine-year-old 'rebel soldier' aiming their rifle at them? Is the 10-year-old, the primary carer for his mother who has multiple sclerosis, still a child?

If we cannot understand childhood chronologically, then perhaps we can do it existentially. Perhaps an answer lies in the life and work of being a child. This

may be partly true, but it may not be the answer that the adult world wants to hear. The childhoods of today's children have been changed significantly and give rise to the concern that childhood may have disappeared or even died. Typologies of childhoods (the 'something' child) are widely discussed throughout the literature on childhood and can be an extremely useful device for understanding the conceptual and perceptual changes that shape our understanding of children and childhood (see Hendrick, 1997, for an excellent example). Some of the major changes that have been identified and which are perplexing for different reasons are the 'unchildlike child', the 'sexualized child', the 'violent child' and the 'indoor/outdoor' child.

The unchildlike child

Aitken's (2001b) notion of the 'unchildlike child' is helpful as it encompasses some of the perceived changes in both children and childhood that are so contentious and troubling for adults. Aitken focuses particularly on child violence and child labour, but a further disturbance of cherished notions of childhood occurs with the sexualized child.

The sexualized child

The sexualization, especially of young girls, not only troubles parents but crystallizes many of the tensions and debates in childhood studies. The rose-coloured, sentimental and fundamentally conservative view of childhood as being a state of almost prelapsarian innocence fails to recognize the harsh realities faced by many children (Jenkins, 1998; Kitzinger, 1997). Embracing the rhetoric of nostalgia (Moran, 2002) for some lost 'innocence' also offers adults an unassailable moral high ground as 'protectors of children', regardless of the perniciousness of their proposed idea or legislation.

Neil Postman began his book by noting:

> As I write, 12 and 13 year-old girls are among the highest paid models in America. In advertisements in all the visual media they are presented to the public in the guise of knowing and sexually enticing adults, entirely comfortable in the milieu of eroticism. (Postman, 1994[1982]: 3)

If Postman was shocked by the commercial exploitation and sexualization of 12 and 13-year-olds *then*, we can only guess at how he would have reacted, 20 years later, to the pornography and commodification of childhood which has spread to increasingly younger children – what Walkerdine (1998) calls 'The eroticization of little girls'. For many North Americans the death of childhood seemed to be the dark shadow behind the cultivated smile of six-year-old 'beauty queen' JonBenet Ramsay, who was killed in the basement of her Colorado home in 1996 and who sadly became a kind of cultural icon of lost innocence and the

perils of precocity. Giroux's (1998) trenchant critique of child beauty pageants shows the moral poverty of a culture that celebrates such exploitation as 'harmless fun' or 'community events'. The sexualization and commodification of children, and especially young girls, is part of what Heath calls the 'relentless appropriation of the child and its childhood as the fulfillment of the parent or parents' (1997: 26).

Any parent of young children knows all about what the advertising industry calls 'pester power' – the ability to draw ever-younger children into the web of consumerism. The marketers want nothing less than the hearts, minds and pocket money of ever-younger children and have created almost a fourth stage of labour – the delivery of a new 'consumer'. Quart reports in her book *Branded: the Buying and Selling of Teenagers* (2003) the vision of one 'Donna Sabino, group director of research and market development for the Nickelodeon Magazine Group', who enthused:

> What we are doing here is starting in-the-cradle-marketing: A toddler goes from Nick Jr. to Nickelodeon to TEEnick to MTV to Nick at Night. (Quart, 2003: 66–7)

The corporations and advertisers know that the 'tweenies' or 'tweenage' market (Russell and Tyler, 2002) is one of the fastest growing and profitable market sectors, and they also know that it is impossible to capitalize on this market by selling the fashion and cultural equivalents of 'sensible shoes'. Sex sells, even to five-year-olds. Kate and Ashley Olsen are not famous by virtue of unique talent, but because they could deliver a generation of pre-teens with disposable income – and parents who cannot bear the thought of their little treasure's disappointment at not having everything that they want – into the waiting arms of the corporate world.

Just as it has become something of a social faux-pas to suggest that children and adults are different and that perhaps their worlds should be so, it seems quaint and old-fashioned (if not actually demeaning) to think that there *should be* what Elkind (2002) calls 'societal markers' between younger children and adolescents. As he notes:

> Many markers of child and adolescent development were simply eliminated. Even pre-schoolers now wear designer clothes, and make up kits for girls aged from 5 to 7 are no longer toys, but the genuine articles. (Elkind, 2002: 65)

Just as the markers between adolescence and adulthood have disappeared (the cringeworthy, 'My son/daughter is my best friend' syndrome), so the ripples spread downstream.

The violent child

Heath (1997: 25) identifies precisely the moment, for those from a UK background at least, when it seemed as if the violent child or media-dubbed 'monster'

(Woodson, 1999) had finally precipitated 'the death of childhood'. It was 3.42pm on Friday 12 February 1993 in Merseyside, when surveillance cameras in a shopping centre recorded, in grainy imagery, two-year-old Jamie Bulger being led away by two 10-year-old boys to be beaten, tortured and murdered on a nearby railway line for no reason that anyone could fathom.

This was both a tabloid field day and a cataclysmic event for people in the UK who struggled to comprehend the incomprehensible, who tried desperately to bring reason to bear on an event that was simply beyond reason. The familiar refrain was that this demonstration of the violence of which young children were capable marked the 'death of childhood' and 'the end of innocence'. At lesser points on the spectrum, stories of youth crime, gang activities and 'feral kids' are part of the staple diet of Australian television and newspaper reporting, and there too the refrain is familiar: 'What is happening to our kids?' usually followed by 'I don't know what their parents are playing at'.

Parents are, of course, the easiest of targets. The instrumental and technological understandings that have driven society in the last few decades also have influenced parenting, turning it from a previously presumed 'natural' role (or at least one that most people could learn fairly well as they went along) into the valorized position of being 'the hardest job in the world'. Such instrumentalism pervades our understandings of the place and care of children within both families and wider society (Darbyshire and Jackson, 2004). The generation of 'solution-focused', 'results-driven', thrusting adults has created a performance-measured world where children can't 'just play' – they must have 'structured activities'; where they cannot just kick a football around or 'shoot a few hoops', they must have early exposure to a 'sports enrichment' programme; where they cannot just daydream and fantasize, lest they demonstrate 'off-task behaviour'; where parents of kindergarten kids demand evidence of their 'productive work'; where a toy shop puffs itself up into an 'early learning centre'; where even foetuses *in utero* must have their potential maximized by being introduced to the virtues of classical music, doubtless accompanied by a sales pitch that this will 'ensure' that they have a 'head start' or 'competitive edge' – the absurdity of Amadeus through the amniotic for the aspirational.

The indoor/outdoor child

Just as the violent and sexualized child threatens and disrupts our understandings of childhood, so increasingly does the 'outdoor child', and so, as Tim Gill (2004) observes, we increasingly 'trap children indoors'. The 'indoor child' is deemed safe, good and responsible, no doubt hard at work in their own home office that used to be a bedroom, creating the latest A+ school assignment with all of the electronic accoutrements of the supposed 'new literacies'. The 'outdoor child' in contrast, is a potential accident or symbol of social threat, especially if this child is 'outdoor' with a group of friends rather than being 'appropriately

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supervised' by parents or other adults. Children's childhoods have been moulded to conform to the adultist strictures of a harm-minimized 'adventure play-ground' that is as much fun as cabbage or the corporatized theme parks that deliver children into the brand-outstretched arms of advertisers, retailers and fast-food parlours (McKendrick et al., 2000). Ask your friends and colleagues about the things that they used to do as kids, the places where they used to play and have fun. Then ask them to compare that with their own children's breadth of experience. Watch for the look of regret. The sociologist Frank Furedi may not have overstated his case in titling his book *Paranoid Parenting* (2002).

Only in an instrumental culture that valorizes work and adult achievement over children's fun could we entertain the notion of parents timetabling in some 'quality time' with their equally 'overbooked' children (Elkins, 2003), while convincing themselves that children are 'resilient' and thus unaffected. Rosenfeld critiques this 'over-zealous' 'hyperparenting', calling it, 'America's most competitive adult sport' (Rosenfeld, 2004; Rosenfeld et al., 2001a, 2001b). There is now some compelling evidence showing that children's play and fun has been hijacked by adult notions of purposeful activity, competitive sport and 'extra-curricular activities'. A recent review of 1981–97 US data (Doherty, 2005) shows that children's free time declined by 12 hours per week, playtime decreased by three hours per week and unstructured outdoor activities fell by 50 percent. At this same time, structured sports time doubled to five hours and 17 minutes per week and studying increased by 50 percent.

At Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the USA, prospective students were listing as many as 12 extracurricular activities in their applications, assuming presumably that this made them attractive propositions. Marilee Jones, Dean of Admissions, asked a group of students: 'What do you daydream about?' One student replied: 'We don't daydream. There's no reward for it, so we don't do it' (Young, 2004: 110). Sadly, if unsurprisingly, these young people could not articulate anything that they did 'just for fun'. The reason is simple. Why do something just for fun? Where is the outcome-focused, quality-assured, added value in that? You can almost hear the young people practising the answer to an imaginary question that asks them to describe what they have done to maximize the effectiveness and efficiency of their childhood, as if to demonstrate that they have not wasted it. To MIT's credit, they have now changed their admission process to ask specifically what applicants do just for fun and enjoyment, in order to find what they call 'real people rather than activity automatons' (Young, 2004: 110). As Alvin Rosenfeld notes of this mentality:

> High school students are sleep deprived as they busily rush from activity to endless homework, to tutors, to volunteering at charities to shape their resumes so they will fit what elite colleges are supposedly looking for. (Rosenfeld, 2004: 16)

If this seems bizarre, it actually gets worse. In America a family organization now feels the need to promote a revolutionary concept in parenting and child

care: an 'Eat Dinner with Your Children Day' as a special event (http://www.casafamilyday.org).

A modest proposal for making childhood more fun

In ecology there are notions of biological 'indicators', the idea that finding a particular species of frog in a pond is a sign that the health of that ecosystem is good. What could be our indicators that childhood is not in fact dead, but thriving? In the modest proposal presented here are three metaphorical frogs in the pond of childhood. Their presence and growth strike one as good signs and their absence suggests that we are losing something elementally precious in childhood.

Dens, cubby houses, wendy houses, tree houses

Childhood is a place of secrets (van Manen and Levering, 1996) and a common childhood practice is (or was) the creation of kids' dens or 'cubby houses' (Kjørholt, 2003; Kylin, 2003; Sobel, 2002). These may begin as a simple sheet draped over a couch or a few chairs and graduate to a woodland structure in the back garden or further afield, but the excitement was always the same – a place to create, pretend, hide, get away, a place to be a child. Significantly, the first sign usually hung on the makeshift door said words to the effect of 'Adults Keep Out'.

The challenge, of course, for today's parents would be to trust themselves, their children and the world enough to encourage their children to have these kinds of places and spaces that are 'theirs'. But fear and paranoia strike deep. Where children's places and spaces have not been removed by killjoy adults for 'health and safety' or 'legal' reasons, they have been transformed perceptually. As there is no higher court than perception, this may be even more damaging. For example, is a playground a place for children's fun, play and enjoyment – or is it a potential crime scene or a lawsuit waiting to happen? Is this a place where kids can have fun, exercise, get some fresh air and meet friends, or is it a place where danger always lurks, where the broken bone is only an unsupervised slip away, where the infected syringe lies just below the surface of the woodchip or where the predatory paedophile watches from behind a bush?

The single biggest factor limiting children's opportunities for free and active play are parents' perceptions of danger. 'Stranger Danger' campaigns have been frighteningly successful, i.e. in creating the perception that all strangers are potentially dangerous and thus by definition, so is the entire outside world. The 'at-risk' child is now a familiar part of this understanding. As Frank Furedi wryly observes, we do not even need to ask 'At risk from what?', because the answer is simply 'Everything' (2002: 45). Of course, the tragedy is that it may take years to create a culture of trust and freedom for our children but only one highly-publicized abduction or child murder to send us back to square one.

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Kids walking to school

The new child health 'epidemic' is childhood obesity. As with most health problems, there are several causative factors. Diet is important and so are children's activity levels. Here unfortunately, pessimism is in order. Children are becoming less fit (Dollman et al., 1999), a trend noted in children's activity research in several countries (Saakslahti et al., 2004; Wedderkopp et al., 2004). Being physically active is important for children's overall physical, emotional and social health and well-being – a positive benefit that extends into adult life (Saakslahti et al., 2004; Wedderkopp et al., 2004). However, there is evidence echoing international trends that fitness has been declining in Australian schoolchildren over the last generation (Dollman et al., 1999).

The latest South Australian data on four-year-old children also shows a 'significant rise in obesity rates' between 1995 and 2002 (Vaska and Volkmer, 2004: 355). Encouraging physical activity in young people is important, but we are missing one of the most obvious ways to help children to be active: by walking to school. Hillman and Adams' (1992) UK study discovered the effects of parents' fear of traffic. In 1971, 80 percent of seven to eight-year-olds got to school on their own (by walking, cycling or bus). In 1990 this had dropped by 71 percent to 9 percent.

However, this is not simply about physical activity. Consider the social activities and processes that take place when kids walk to school, meet friends, get a copy of the maths homework answers – all of things that you will never get in the back of the family four-wheel drive as it jostles with all of the other semi-armoured vehicles clogging up the roads to school, paradoxically in the name of 'children's safety'. Recent feminist campaigns to 'take back the night' and 'reclaim the streets' were ways in which women stated that they were not prepared to be excluded from the public places and spaces that make up cities, towns and neighbourhoods because of the violent or threatening behaviours of a minority. For this indicator to improve, adults and parents need to help children to 'reclaim the streets' and to regain the opportunity to get themselves to and from school.

Children's free play

This may well be the most important frog in the pond. Free play that is child-focused, controlled and directed rather than adult-initiated and controlled is not only socially and developmentally valuable, but is *fun*. In introducing her study of kids and sport, Singer observes:

> When I asked 4th through 8th grade recreational players why they played basketball, not a single player said 'Because I want to be socialised' or 'Because I want to learn the value of healthy competition and teamwork'. If you ask kids why they play, they are most likely to tell you how much fun it is. (Singer, 2004: 207)

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Children need to get out and play rather than being ferried to a variety of adult-sanctioned and controlled activities. They need to rediscover the leisure time that David Buckingham describes as having been 'increasingly privatized and subjected to adult supervision over the last fifty years' (2000: 70). Children's leisure time has moved from the public sphere and public spaces to the private sphere, to the home and bedroom. Instead of going round to a friend's house, knocking on the door and asking if John or Mary is coming out to play, there is more likely to be a firestorm of text messages sent or an attempt to schedule something via Outlook. Children themselves are often unfairly blamed for this gravitation towards indoor and electronic pursuits, but this conveniently absolves adults of their complicity and ignores the many other social and parental influences at work.

It may not be too great an exaggeration to suggest that one of the most important social and public health services that we could provide for children would be to try to influence families, neighbourhoods, communities and children's services so that children could experience the freedom of places, spaces and play once again, and to do what many of their parents have taken for granted.

Neil Postman began his book with the observation: 'Children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see' (Postman, 1994[1982]: xi). What, I wonder, will our messages say about childhood in 2007?

Acknowledgement

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PHILIP DARBYSHIRE has held the Chair of Nursing at the Women's and Children's Hospital, Adelaide since 1996. He heads a research and practice development department based within the state-wide Children, Youth & Women's Health Service, where he has developed a programme of largely, but not exclusively, interpretive and collaborative research exploring young people's and families' experiences related to a wide range of health and social issues. His other main research and teaching activities focus on developing practice-focused research in clinical areas, exploring children's involvement and participation in health care and research and promoting arts and humanities approaches to understanding health and illness experiences.

Correspondence to:

Philip Darbyshire, Department of Nursing and Midwifery Research and Practice Development, Children, Youth & Women's Health Service, University of South Australia and Flinders University, 2nd Floor, Samuel Way Building, 72 King William Road, North Adelaide 5006, South Australia. [email: philip.darbyshire@adelaide.edu.au]