

What Do Children Want?

CHILDHOOD

By Melvin Konner.
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By Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

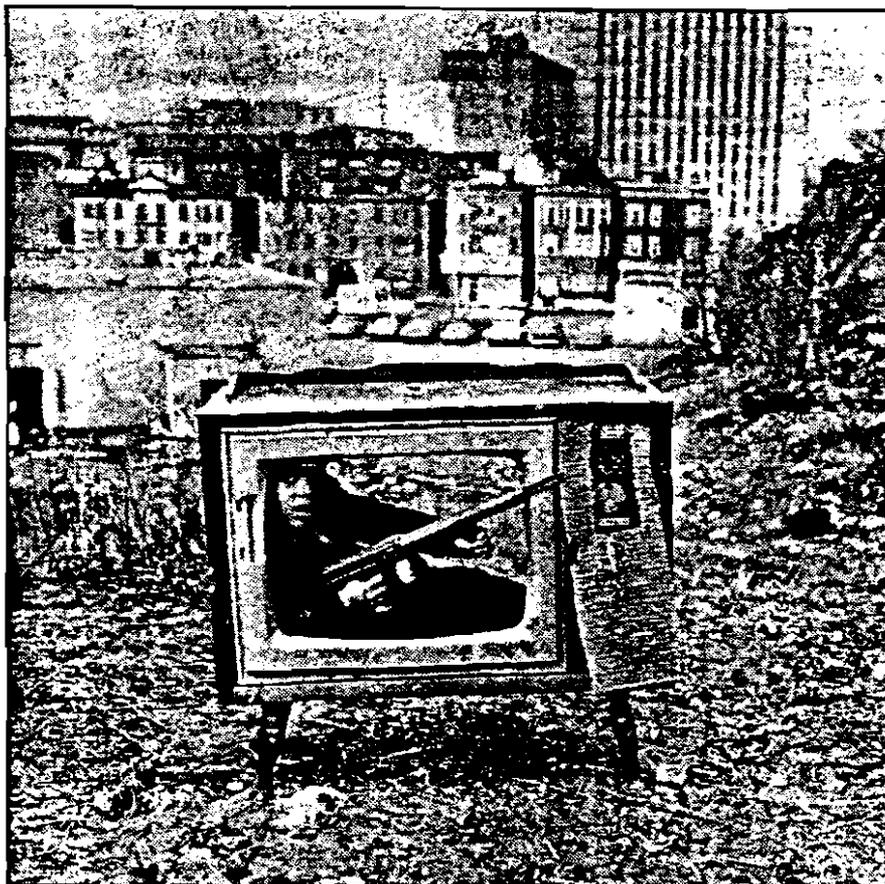
PHILIPPE ARIÈS, a French historian of human development, once observed that until the 20th century Europeans paid scant attention to their children; they did not even notice that a baby's body was not simply a miniaturized version of the adult body. Presumably they ignored their children below 7 or 8 years of age to save themselves a lot of emotional distress. At a time when infant mortality was high, it made sense for parents not to bond with their children until their most perilous years were over. Such neglect extended all the way to the richest and most powerful families. Even Louis XIV was brought up by servants and nearly drowned in a pond because no one was watching him.

That situation has changed drastically in the last hundred years. As infant mortality began to drop, parents began to pay more and more attention to their young. The scientific study of children grew apace. At the end of the last century, the psychologist G. Stanley Hall began to observe systematically the development of children. His student Arnold Gesell filmed more than 12,000 youngsters of various ages to establish the average timing of maturation. Margaret Mead's anthropological investigations showed the wide variance in the way different cultures bring up their children. And Jean Piaget's work opened the floodgates to a deluge of child development studies in the 1950's.

Despite this recent interest, it is fair to say that the average adult today does not understand children much better than earlier generations did. After all, most parents don't care, say, at what age infants can understand object constancy — the idea that objects do not cease to exist when they are out of sight. What parents want to know is whether natural childbirth is safe, whether breast feeding is better than bottle feeding, whether to let babies cry or to try to pacify them, and whether day care is pernicious or sound. Above all else, they want to know how to raise children who will grow up to be happy and successful adults. Unfortunately, the enormous research literature is not very helpful with these practical issues. And even when scientific studies have generated concrete suggestions, they have often contradicted one another.

In 1928 the behavioral psychologist John B. Watson adamantly said that parents should never kiss or hug

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ARTHUR TRESS/MAGNUM/FRON CHILDHOOD

their children — a handshake first thing in the morning was more than enough to express affection. About the same time, Margaret Mead was castigating our culture for its aloofness and describing with eloquent nostalgia the emotional effusiveness of parents in New Guinea.

Even in more recent times, obstetricians and child psychologists seem to have reversed themselves on the most basic questions. Where once they argued that women should not give birth in a nonmedical environment, they now believe home birth is safe and provides a more natural bond between newborn and parents. A similar reversal took place in attitudes toward breast feeding. And Dr. Benjamin Spock, whose "Baby and Child Care" has sold more than 30 million copies since it first appeared in 1946, has now changed many of his earlier views about discipline.

Given the cacophony of advice, what can parents do to understand children better? A good first step would

Because of his interdisciplinary background (he teaches anthropology and psychiatry at Emory University and is a doctor with a specialization in neurology), he has the kind of synthetic vision the task requires. His book moves with ease and grace from describing the universal biological changes of childhood to noting how children are reared in such diverse settings as the Kalahari Desert in Africa, a kibbutz in Israel and a village in Russia. The text is leavened with eloquent literary excerpts and an unusual variety of illustrations.

Throughout the book, Dr. Konner displays his unassuming erudition and rare common sense, even though he is sometimes a little too "politically correct." Few books achieve this level of scholarly sophistication while conveying such an unabashed awe and appreciation of the miracle of human growth. Despite its clarity, though, I suspect many readers will find it

too detailed, too preoccupied with scholarly puzzles at the expense of practical concerns. It is not, after all, a manual of friendly advice. On the other hand, specialists in child development may be disappointed that there is not much that is new in this volume. Because it is the companion volume for a P.B.S. television series, some of it reads more like a script than a book. As the author states in the first chapter, he is not developing a new theory or perspective of childhood.

What Dr. Konner does very elegantly is bring together contemporary knowledge about the way children mature, learn and in general change — physically, mentally and emotionally — from conception to adolescence. If there is a theoretical slant here it is the idea that genetic predispositions are important. This is not to say that Dr. Konner takes sides with the "nature" faction in the nature-nurture controversy. Indeed, he explicitly states that genetic instructions can be modi-

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fied through learning and experience. But by carefully attending to the shaping force of biological inheritance, he counteracts the tendency of many developmentalists to dismiss it completely.

As a neurologist he describes the preset programs that determine how the mind and body grow regardless of what we do to change them. As an anthropologist he describes the programs that can be aborted or enhanced by our choices. For instance, he shows how the sequence and timing of embryonic development is the same, the world over, and presumably has been the same for millions of years. Yet he also shows that what a pregnant woman does — what foods she eats, whether she drinks or smokes — often determines whether her baby develops normally.

ALTHOUGH extremes of abuse and deprivation will stunt any child's growth, Dr. Konner argues persuasively that very different styles of child rearing can yield similar outcomes. The young !Kung bushmen who are always in contact with their parents, have no responsibility for chores and are allowed to play and explore as much as they like, seem to grow into normal adults with the same range of personality characteristics as those who are raised on a kibbutz, away from parents, with strictly programmed duties and little opportunity for free exploration.

Dr. Konner is fond of writing of the resiliency of children. For instance, he tells of a pair of twins in Czechoslovakia, reared in total isolation from 18 months to 7 years of age. Though they were barely able to walk or talk and were terrorized by everyday objects when they were discovered and placed in a normal foster home, they recovered completely, and by age 20 had good jobs, girlfriends and above-average I.Q.'s. Such a story should be a welcome antidote for parents who fear that every little setback might damage their children's chances.

Liberating as it may be, though, too strong a faith in genetic determinism can lead to an equally dangerous fatalism, as Dr. Konner points out. A belief that a child's future is bred in the bone can justify a great deal of neglect and abdication of responsibility.

The most difficult task Dr. Konner sets for himself is that of providing coherent values for parents to follow in dealing with their children. In some respects "Childhood" is a work of secular humanism in search of a soul. It asks the intractable question: given what we know about human development, what should we do? Many scientists shy away from exploring values, because they believe there is no way of

getting from *is* to *ought*; from knowing how the body and the mind grow to concluding how they should grow. It is to Dr. Konner's credit that he struggles valiantly to bridge the gap. And it is not his fault that his efforts are not entirely convincing. We are all still rather inept at justifying the leap from empirical facts to ethical convictions.

What Dr. Konner does is provide lists of desiderata: healthy prenatal nutrition; parental protection and support; absence of physical and sexual abuse; safe, orderly, nurturing and challenging schools; protection from premature pregnancy and parenthood; and so on. These are certainly all sensible, if rather general, goals. He also supplies us with a broad range of incidental wisdom about childhood by thinkers ranging from Kahlil Gibran to Rousseau, from St. Mark to Nietzsche. Most important, he reflects on his own experiences in rearing children, thus providing a common-sense model for child care.

All of this is fine, and perhaps nothing more should be expected. Yet the book might have been stronger had the author confronted more directly some praxiological questions: Why should we marvel at the process

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that transforms a fetus into a teen-ager? Why should we care for growing children? What should be the priorities in child-bearing? Dr. Konner's answers to such questions derive from a more or less implicit Bergsonian evolutionary ethic, in which life itself is the greatest good and children are valuable because they are the standard bearers in the continuation of life.

But can we really build a valid system of beliefs on the absolute value of life? With overpopulation and overcrowding, with the environmental degradation caused by unbridled human activity, with the social chaos and conflict created by blind self-interest, it no longer seems so reasonable to become dewy-eyed at the miracle of life as such. What we need is a clearer idea of what is a life worth living and how we can improve the quality of existence. From this, a more coherent notion of children's needs will follow. And while we wait for this new vision, "Childhood" will provide us with a great deal of useful and pleasurable information. □