



A Modest Proposal: Let's Stop Consuming Our Kids

Time and Space for Children

By Elizabeth Goodenough

"There only remains 120,000 children of poor parents annually born. The question therefore is, how this number shall be reared and provided for, which, as I have already said, under the present situation of affairs, is utterly impossible by all the methods hitherto proposed. . . . / shall now therefore humbly propose my own thoughts, which I hope will not be liable to the least objection. I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricasee or a ragout."

Jonathan Swift, *A Modest Proposal*, 1729.

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on "Secret Spaces of Childhood" and editor of a new series at Wayne State University Press, "The Child and the City." She has written the following essay in the hope of nurturing children's studies at Michigan.

How societies use and create spaces for children—whether day care centers, schools, theme parks or video games—determines how the next generation will see reality. Those who design kids' software, or the play areas at fast food restaurants or stores, replicate some mental picture of the users' joy. Conceptions of childhood past, present and future and the corresponding worlds constructed by adults "for the kids" revolve around such issues as innocence or deviance, safety or abuse, contemporary kinderculture or the "disappearance" of childhood.

But in our highly programmed and commercial world, little is known about down-time or away-space. What makes children gravitate to certain locales in search of comfort, security, excitement, community, self-awareness or beauty, and avoid other areas?

When babies play peek-a-boo or children hang by their knees, play house and capture insects in small cupped hands, they are refraining the universe, teasing their imagination to find its own dimensions. Schools exhort pupils to seek, but children know the importance of hiding out, of finding the "just for me" place where they feel safe and can't be seen. Secret spaces may be found inside or outdoors—in a tree fort or den of snow, on the roof, behind the stairs, or wrapped in curtains.

Secure and Special Spaces

David Sobel, from Antioch New England Graduate School, spoke last year at a U-M Residential College Symposium on Children and their Environments about the critical role of hideouts in trees, bushes or play forts during middle childhood. His cross-cultural research in environmental education suggests that between the ages of 6 and 12 what girls and boys want most of all is to "make a world in which to find a place to discover a self."

We like to imagine that when this place of discovery is outdoors, kids will find that the best things in life are still free: dirt, air, trees, animals, rocks. Too many of our assumptions about childhood reflect romantic ideals of the past, not the white noise of today's advertising and mass media, which assault them with labels and "lifestyles" of the rich and famous. In reality, according to the last Census, fewer than 2 percent of Americans now grow up in the country.

Architects, real estate developers and city planners are increasingly aware of the needs of children in welloff suburban areas, but they rarely consider the civic needs of low-caste children or those for whom home is not safe. Yet many millions of young people are growing up on a sterile street without a backyard and often without a nearby and safe park or playground. As vicarious pursuits, virtual pets and synthetic playgrounds take over, shouldn't we worry that a

world where children have minimal engagement with animals and plants might also be threatening to nature itself?



Asphalt, Concrete and Barrenness

Just as the high rise "projects" of the 1950s offered playscapes of asphalt gyms and concrete towers, the relentless destruction of vegetation by developers and the mailing of recreational spaces indicate how little adults sincerely care or understand about children's contact with living things or the social isolation of the very poor.

One reason adults overlook the spatial and tactile needs of children is that they often do not recall what they most cherished or desired in childhood. As Coleridge lamented in *Biographia Literaria*, after the age of 6 the glories of childhood dim, and it is as if we were "dipped in the Lethe, which has produced such utter oblivion of a state so godlike." Thus writers and artists, children's books and environmental life writing become critical resources in restoring our touchstones of childhood memory. They deserve a lot more serious appreciation for those contributions.

As our sense of endangered survival on this shrinking planet becomes acute, children are our last frontier. A fitting focus for the year 2000, they represent 20 percent of our population but 100 percent of our future. To the degree that we can envision them as triumphant gobetweens or heroic survivors, they shelter the imagination and sustain the hope of adults.

Yet the bodies and minds of children—the very spaces they inhabit—are under assault. Cuts in all sorts of public funding (and not just in welfare, the "umbilical cord through which the mainstream society sustains the isolated ghetto society" as journalist Mickey Kaus puts it) have, altered lives. Firearms kill 15 children in the United States daily, and incidents of violence are

changing the rules for play even at elementary schools as well as middle and high schools. The majority of teen mothers have suffered rape or other sexual abuse.

The Child as 'Menace'

On one hand we see childhood perceived as increasingly threatened, invaded, polluted or "stolen" by adults. On the other, we see adults characterizing children as menaces to society. Vagrant minors around the world search for safety in their hideaways, if they can find them, and street children from Cairo and Bogota to Seoul are seen but not heard. U-M anthropologist Sharon Stephens, who died in 1998, noted how easily "at risk" and "out of place" children—at work, in war zones, and refugee camps, in prisons and the media—become problematic "risky children" who need to be "eliminated... controlled, reshaped, and harnessed" in a rapidly changing global order.

One of the motives for controlling children is to make them well-behaved not as social beings with manners but as economic beings with wealth. The Kaiser Family Foundation has noted that children today constitute the fastest-growing consumer market in the United States and "influence half a *trillion* dollars in consumer spending a year." Child's play is increasingly moving indoors and on screen or into commercial and corporate realms. Other families, "stranger danger" and our own backyards are perceived as potential hazards, yet children, even in gated communities, gain access to zones in cyberspace once off limits to adults.

Children from low-income families face other problems, however. In a global village where the fierce devour the small, what future awaits those now shunted aside without adequate prenatal or nutritional care, housing and family support? Children can't join or support their largest lobby, the Children's Defense Fund, which had a \$15 million budget in 1996. (By contrast the American Association of Retired People in the same year spent \$449 million.)

Funds for maintaining school playgrounds have shrunk. Many schools have cut recess and gym from the curriculum, and some new schools are being built without playgrounds. Jack McCallum reported in "Gym Class Struggle" (*Sports Illustrated*, April 24 issue) that "only seven states require elementary schools to have certified phys-ed instructors" and 40 percent of high school students "are not enrolled in gym class of any kind."

A Worthy Project for U-M

In the complex ecology of growing up, children today can be impoverished in many different ways. Finding space for imaginative reconstructions of childhood—institutionally and internationally—in legal as well as academic and poetic discourse, is a project worthy of the University of Michigan.

To catalyze the rebuilding of urban communities, knowledge that is now being used to advance specialization and pragmatic programs must be organized to address social suffering in

a less fragmented fashion. Children's health, development, welfare, education—as well as related ethical, legal, economic and religious issues—tend to be approached through separate disciplines and institutes. But as one of the world's top academic centers for social research, Michigan is in a leading position to develop an integrative, interdisciplinary focus on children and youth from birth to age 18.

Such an initiative could invite new courses, comparative research and collaborations from all its departments and units as well as those at other universities, community colleges, hospitals and schools. Partnerships like these could have a significant impact on public policy for the state, nation and beyond.

Already, U-M scholars and clinicians from Pediatrics, Anthropology, Education, English, Sociology, Film Studies, School of Information and Social Work are raising questions about the social construction of childhood, examining local and national child cultures from an international perspective and encouraging fresh approaches to thinking about the children in this century.

A core of relevant courses already exists, including "The Socialization of the Child," "Childhood Narratives," "Earth-Centered Children and the Virtual Age," "Anthropology of Childhood," and "Writing for Children and Young Adults."

The "umbrella theme" of Children's Studies could also capitalize on the insights and implications of numerous other University projects, including the following:

- The recent conference on the Multidimensions of Urban Children held at the Ginsberg Center for Community Service and Learning,
- The Law School's Child Advocacy Law Clinic
- M Meetings at the Center for Human Growth and Development organized by Director Betsy Lozoff to establish a Universitywide committee for children,
- The Child and Adolescent Network fostered by the School of Nursing,
- The National Science Foundation developmental sciences proposal spearheaded by the Department of Psychology and the Institute for Social Research,
- Matthaei Botanical Gardens, Kelsey Museum and Nichols Arboretum programs for children,
- The School of Information's Internet-focused Cultural Heritage Initiative for Community Outreach, and
- The Residential College's Emerging Voices: Coming of Age in Detroit intergenerational oral history project.

Detroit: an Influential Neighbor

Li confronting intractable problems as well as opportunities facing those who grow up in this country's metropolises, the University must respond to the life patterns of Detroit; it is the

big city the University is most linked to, and many of its youth are growing up in an economically stressed environment. One result of this is that although the number of Detroit youths has been declining since 1970, the proportion of new juvenile offenders, as opposed to repeat offenders, grew from 38 percent of the total in 1975 to 61 percent in 1990, before dropping in recent years.

To help the Universitywide endeavor suggested here, and outside child-serving agencies and programs as well, a curricular roadmap and guide to current faculty research would be very useful. A listing of current child-related offerings across the University would also encourage undergraduates, graduate students and alumni/ae to collaborate and build on each other's work across disciplinary terrains. This venture should have a Web page and newsletter to disseminate information and to support the development and achievement of children through a dynamic synthesis of the University's research, teaching and outreach functions.

The goal of an inter-faculty initiative in Children's Studies would be to make visible "best practices" in the field, to raise child-related questions in diverse academic areas and to investigate connections between projects already under way. What is the best forum to disseminate findings such as ISR sociologist Sandra Hofferth's on play, psychologist Albert Cain's insights on bereaved children or Stephen Kaplan's on children's cognitive mapping? What is the implication to U-M's intellectual leadership of the projected population shift that could make Latinos the largest ethnic group in 2010? What is the impact of U-M researchers' findings on how violence in the media and violent behavior and thinking induced by arcade and online killing games are affecting young people?

At the base of these myriad inquiries and projects is the fact that academics, lawyers, social workers, health care professionals all need a greater understanding of how adults conceptualize childhood as well as how research, policy and current events influence the lives of actual children. The concentration of these energies could evolve into an experimental endeavor reflective of the wholeness of childhood, drawing on the wide range of talented people and diverse disciplines to hold a mirror up to us—the people who form a child's human and material environment. **MT**

ON OUR COVER



Self-portrait by Antonio Turijan, who was 7 years old when he created it at the California Living Histories after-school project in Los Angeles, sponsored by the California Council For the Humanities and the LightBringer Project. The project is featured in the July Michigan Quarterly Review, The MQR's second issue on Secret Spaces of Childhood. We thank project directors Elizabeth Converse and Brad Macneil.