

CHILDREN OVERVIEW

Children have always been seen as the continuance of a family's name and a society's future. Still, in homes and cultures, children are both cherished and neglected.

In domestic hard times and national crisis, because of excessive opulence or poverty, children suffer the most and the longest.

Michael Yaconelli is a life-time youth worker, father, speaker, and writer. In his recent book (*Dangerous Wonder: The Adventure of Childlike Faith*, NavPress, 1998), he lists several characteristics of childhood and childlikeness:

- * Wonder, the dreams of childhood, challenging the ordinary.
- * Risky curiosity, the adventure of childhood learning, challenging complacency.
- * Wild abandon, the recklessness of childhood; challenging rules.
- * Daring playfulness, challenging boring routine.
- * Wide-eyed listening, challenging unquestioning and pedantic "adult" talk.
- * Irresponsible passion, breaking the rules for love and growth.
- * Happy terror, that childlike urge for scary experiences.
- * Naive grace and childlike faith, accepting undeserved help from sources that cannot be proven.

These are the characteristics that must be cherished and nurtured. Not only future hope but present health is to be found in the children around us.

Around the globe there is much suffering among children. The World Health Organization has worked very hard with governments and non-governmental organizations to reduce child mortality and malnutrition. Still, wars, natural catastrophes and poverty have combined in hindering the promise of many children. In the industrialized nations, children are often stripped of their innocence and robbed of healthy and realistic dreams by the obscenities and distortions of the media. They learn to be entertained first by violence and then by sex at a very early age.

In the U.S., there has been a dramatic rise in working mothers and children in need of day care. Until 1960, about three quarters of American mothers with small and school age children were at home and one quarter in the work place. By 1980 those figures were reversed. About three quarters of U.S. mothers with small and school aged children were in the work place and one quarter full-time at home. By the latter 1990s, that figure dropped to around 15%.

In 1998 the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that the number of child-bearing age women working outside the home will reach 44 million by 2000. Thus, approximately 60% of mothers with children under the age of 6 are in the work force and at least 60% of children under age 6 are in some form of child care. More than 70% of all children in child care are entrusted to non-relatives.

A national study by Yale University researchers in 1997 determined 86% of child care centers offering "poor to mediocre care." Another study (in August, 1998 sponsored by the Children's

Defense Fund and Child Care Action Campaign) found 70% of families with children 6 years experiencing extremely difficulty in finding quality and affordable care. Of these respondents, 68% said they would be very likely to vote for candidates who favor supports for child care and preschool activities. In this survey, 73% of Americans want the federal government to support child care as it now does college tuition costs.

Adults and societies that become concerned with the health and welfare of children are enriched in the present as well as being strengthened in the future. All social forces that contribute to a child's growing up to be a healthy and responsible adult are good; all that hinders development to full manhood and womanhood is wrong and ought to be corrected.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What was your childhood like? What do you consider a healthy childhood and what would you consider an unhealthy childhood situation?
2. How do the family, community, media, schools, and other social systems socialize children in your situation? What do you see as the positive and negative factors in this socialization?
3. In what ways do you want your children raised as you were raised, and in what ways do you want it to differ.

IMPLICATIONS

1. Imagine yourself coming into a foreign culture. What they give their children as gifts, how stories are told to children, what music they learn, and the discipline and instruction they receive, will all reveal the health of that society.
2. With further study, we should be able to predict the coming teen culture and the adult culture following it from what is going on in the lives of children today.

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