

# Where Have the Children Gone?

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About six years ago I was eating lunch in a diner in New York City when a woman and a young boy sat down in the next booth. I couldn't help overhearing parts of their conversation. At one point the woman asked: "So, how have you been?" And the boy--who could not have been more than seven or eight years old--replied, "Frankly, I've been feeling a little depressed lately."

This incident stuck in my mind because it confirmed my growing belief that children are changing. As far as I can remember, my friends and I didn't find out we were "depressed" until we were in high school.

The evidence of a change in children has increased steadily in recent years. Children don't seem childlike anymore. Children speak more like adults, dress more like adults and behave more like adults than they used to. The reverse is also true: adults have begun to speak, dress and act more like overgrown children.

It is not unusual to see children wearing three-piece suits or designer dresses, or adults in Mickey Mouse T shirts, jeans and sneakers. Adults now wear what were once considered play clothes to many work locations, including the White House.

Education, career choice and developmental stages were once discussed primarily in relation to children and adolescents. Now an increasing number of adults are enrolling in adult-education programs, changing careers in midlife and becoming concerned with their "life stages." Meanwhile, alcoholism, suicide, drug addiction and abortion have become children's issues. Children also commit adult crimes such as armed robbery and murder.

The merging of childhood and adulthood is reflected in the shifting image of children in entertainment. The Shirley Temple character of the past was a cute and outspoken child. Current child stars, such as Brooke Shields and Gary Coleman, seem to be adults imprisoned in children's bodies.

Whether this is good or bad is difficult to say, but it certainly is different. Childhood as it once was no longer exists. Why?

Human development is based not only on innate biological states, but also on patterns of access to social knowledge. Movement from one social role to another usually involves learning the secrets of the new status. Children have always been taught adult secrets, but slowly and in stages: traditionally, we tell sixth graders things we keep hidden from fifth graders.

In the last 30 years, however, a secret-revelation machine has been installed in 98 percent of American homes. It is called television.

Communication through print allows for a great deal of control over the social information to which children have access. Reading and writing involved a complex code of symbols that must be memorized and practiced. Children must read simple books before they can read adult books.

On TV, however, there is no complex code to exclude young viewers. There is no sharp distinction between the information available to the fifth grader, the high-school student and the adult. Even two-year-old children, unable to read or write their own names, find television accessible and absorbing. They watch over 27 hours a week.

While adults often demand more children's programming, children themselves prefer adult programs. In fact, everyone, regardless of age, tends to watch similar programs. In 1980, for example, "Dallas," "The Dukes of Hazzard," "Love Boat" and "The Muppets" were among the most popular programs in *all* age groups in the country, including ages 2 to 11.

The world of children's books can be insulated to present kids with an idealized view of adulthood. But television news and entertainment presents children with images of adults who lie, drink, cheat and murder.

Reading skill no longer determines the sequence in which social information is revealed to children. Through books, adults could communicate among themselves without being overheard by children. Advice books for parents, for example, can refer them to books that would be inappropriate for children. Similar attempts on television are relatively useless because they are as open to children as they are to adults. Advisory warnings on television often have a boomerang effect by *increasing* children's interest in what follows.

Even early conservative programs such as "Father Knows Best" and "Leave It to Beaver" reveal important social secrets to children. They portray adults behaving one way in front of children and another way when alone. "Father Knows Best," for example, reveals to the child viewer the ways in which a father hides his doubts and manipulates his behavior to make it appear to his children that he knows best.

Such programs teach children that adults play roles for their benefit and that the behavior adults exhibit to children is not necessarily their real or only behavior. Television not only exposes adult secrets,

it also exposes the secret of secrecy. As a result, children become more suspicious of adults and adults may feel it no longer makes sense to try to keep some things hidden from children. Television undermines behavioral distinctions because it encompasses both children and adults in a single informational sphere or environment.

Many formal reciprocal roles rely on lack of intimate knowledge of the other. If the mystery and mystification disappear, so do the formal behaviors. Stylized courtship behaviors, for example, must quickly fade in the day-to-day intimacy of marriage. Similarly, television's involvement of children in adult affairs undermines many traditional adult-child roles.

Given this analysis, it is not surprising that the first wide-spread rejection of both traditional child and traditional adult behavior occurred in the late 1960s among the first generation of Americans to have grown up with television. In the shared environment of television, children and adults know a great deal about each other's behavior and social knowledge--too much, in fact, for them to play out the traditional complementary roles of innocence versus omnipotence.

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**ESSAY TOPIC:** What expectations of childhood and adulthood does Meyrowitz reveal in his essay? What do you think of his ideas? In explaining your point of view you may consider your own experience, your observations of others, or any of your reading--including, of course, "Where Have the Children Gone?"