

Viewpoint

A 'new deal' for children

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We need to change the way we think about children. They are not just a private, family matter. What happens to them in early childhood, at school, in the community, how they are affected by the workplace, the media, and society at large is of vital importance to everyone, not only their parents. This *Viewpoint* makes the case for this change, and suggests a framework for thinking about how we might bring it about.

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Conflicting images of childhood

Many adults—politicians, parents and public—are confused about children today, holding many conflicting attitudes. That confusion leaves change to chance, where many children are doomed to fall behind in the race to become adequate human beings. It's time for a 'New Deal' for all children (Moore 2008).

Many examples can be given about the contradictory views we hold about children. Adults drool over baby pictures, yet despair over howling babies and recalcitrant children. They allow children to dress and behave like little whores, yet deplore the drunkenness, violence and premature sexuality of young teens. In the United Kingdom recently, one school stopped parents from attending the school sports day because it could not guarantee that an unsupervised adult might not molest a child (Haydon 2009)—they perceived children as 'victims'. In an unrelated incident, a specialist music school warned teachers against having any personal interaction with their students, because 'adolescents may be unable to differentiate between fantasy and reality. They may even be temporarily insane, and can thus present a danger to even the most careful teacher' (Russell 2009)—the child here is conceptualised as a wild animal. In stark contrast, a National Health Service leaflet distributed to teenagers carried the slogan 'an orgasm a day keeps the doctor away', claiming that regular sex would relax them and improve school performance (Grimston 2009). It is no wonder that parents are confused about children.

The Save the Children Fund's recent *State of the World's Mothers Report* (Save the Children 2011) ranks Australia 27th out of 43 developed countries on the children's index, while the OECD finds we have among the lowest paid childcare and preschool staff among member countries as well as one of the lowest access rates, at 61.5% (OECD 2009). Further, Australia has 203,700 jobless one-parent families and 74,800 jobless two-parent families (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2009), leaving one in every eight children to an inter-generational legacy of being outside the labour force. If predictions are correct, there will be many more. Small wonder that the *State of the World's Mothers* report claims that an alarming number of children are at risk of failure in school because they are not getting the care and support they need in their early years.

Confusion about the education of children

Much has been written about the vital importance of the years from birth to age three for proper brain development: the infinite flexibility of the brain's synapses, the value of exploratory play in testing life's hypotheses, and the importance of a rich and stimulating environment in those early years (Shonkoff & Phillips 2000). There are concerns that many children are being 'hot-housed' by their parents, and there is a whole industry of 'child Einstein' tapes and DVDs, such as playing Mozart to the womb. Yet our education policies barely mention how parents and communities

might nurture the brains of children by surrounding them with imaginative, safe and stimulating neighbourhoods or about how urban design might play into a child's thinking and development process.

The so-called 'Education Revolution' in Australia is disconnected from the mass media, the greatest educator of all. Educators often fail to see how the media affects children's learning, and they regard television, computer games and iPods as mere entertainment of no value to the learning process, and more likely to be harmful than helpful. The new National Curriculum Framework for Early Childhood (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations for the Council of Australian Governments 2009a) addresses formal teaching staff, not parents whose interventions at home in those early years are crucial for proper brain development, and barely pays lip-service to quality media content for children and the way new technologies hold out hope for more effective learning. There is currently insistence on testing children (for example, for literacy and numeracy) when the research tells us that testing may narrow the curriculum and reinforce family-based disadvantage. The real revolution facing teachers will be in the child's growing ability to learn in their own way at their own time.

Schools are increasingly divided between those launching the lucky child into a success orbit and those whose children are merely in a holding pattern with little hope of ever taking off. Recently Alan Milburn from the United Kingdom touted 'pushy parents' (British Broadcasting Corporation 2009) as the answer, instead of promoting a stimulating community environment and a concerted effort across the board to encourage the intelligences of every child.

Children are not simply fodder for later productivity, to be trained in the skills we will demand of them when we grow old; they are not simply engine parts for a changing economy. If we insist too much that the goal of parenting and teaching is to produce competent adults, the implication is that children are incompetent. We risk devaluing their skills and competencies as they are now if we only keep a future 'productivity' goal in mind. Further, the language of investment, future productivity and preparation for adulthood can devalue the experience of childhood itself, distracting us from meeting children's needs as they are in the present.

That does not mean, however, that we can shirk 'preparation' as a goal; the future that today's children face is different to previous generations, and education must lead them towards the skills they will need to be capable citizens able to adjust to rapid change and serve the economic and social purposes of society—it would be naïve to think otherwise.

Policy confusion about 'servicing' families and children

It's not just in education that confusion reigns. There is also much confusion in the service sector. There is a vast complex of separate, categorical 'services' delivered

top-down to children and families, rather than a co-ordinated attempt to resource families and communities so that every child has access to the resources necessary for full development of their learning potential. The focus is on changing faulty or unsafe parenting behaviour, rather than teaching parents about childhood development and creating a context in which doing better as a parent is easier. A child-friendly community should be the goal, not just kind and helpful, or even 'pushy', parents. Millions of dollars are poured into one-on-one professional interventions and unevaluated 'child protection' services when we know it is impossible to have enough dollars to cover every problem. The real aim must be providing the best possible conditions for positive child development.

Why such mixed messages?

The confusion exists because the place of children in society has shifted. That shift is not simply a shift in values, but is driven by demographic, economic and social changes. We need to rethink the structures and processes we use in dealing with children if we are to effect real change. Unfortunately, Maggie Thatcher's assertion that there was no such thing as society stuck, and we are repeatedly assailed by the mantras of individual responsibility, freedom of choice, the rights of the individual, the so-called free market and the central goal of achieving personal happiness. It is not only the corporate or financial world that pushes this ethos; it has permeated our discussion of ethics, social policy, education and family life.

Most people have no idea of the structural limits to their own freedom. If you fail, you have to blame yourself. The family and the task of parenting have effectively been privatised, despite the fact that modern society out-sources many of the tasks of raising children. This trend de-contextualises and de-politicises the process of raising children and presents the privatised family as the cause of failure instead of the community which should share responsibility for the raising of future generations.

Demographically, parents and children are a shrinking minority in the developed world. Parents are in general older, have chosen to have fewer children, value them highly and lavish them with every possible advantage, desperately trying to be the ideal parents raising perfect children on their own. The dividing lines between parent and child have become blurred and there is a lack of confidence in being a good parent. As a result (helped along by the new media) the family itself becomes atomised, no longer a unit of shared responsibilities within the context of wider community values.

This privatised family world is circumscribed by two other forces affecting our values. First, the world of economic rationalism with its values of commercial greed and consumerism puts company profits and the individual first, rather than communal belonging and well-being. Self-gratification and sleaze dominate advertising. Commercial television discovered that children were a vast new market and even public broadcasters

like the Australian Broadcasting Corporation have succumbed to commercial pressures. Happiness seems to be defined by what you own, not what you do. Children are now segmented into babies, toddlers, pre-teens, tweens and teenagers, all primed to buy food, toys, clothing and goods targeted carefully at them. Their parents are confused about what is quality children's television, whether computer games are dangerous and whether they can do anything about it all anyway. Teachers lag behind their pupils in understanding the power and value of the new media at their disposal.

Second, such media-driven values set norms of behaviour for a growing group of young adults living a life of self-exploration and excitement that makes them indifferent, or even hostile, to the needs of children and their parents but makes them a model for the life to which younger children aspire. This group of 'solos' does not identify with the mantra 'Children are our future' and often resent what they see as the favouritism of family-friendly workplace programs or family-oriented tax breaks (Zukerman 2009). For them the present is what matters and gloomy predictions of environmental or economic catastrophe simply confirm their view that children have no future anyway, so enjoy life while you can (Templeton 2007).

Children are thus sexualised earlier, ape the clothing and manners of the 'solos', and resent being held back by parents fearful for their wellbeing. Grown-ups are, in turn, frightened by this new breed and moral panics about drinking, drugs and sex produce knee-jerk policy responses. The key to ensuring the wellbeing of all children is to surround families from every side, show them how to nurture the best in children as partners in the learning process and ensure each community has the resources necessary to produce the best outcomes for all children.

Neither our schools nor our service systems are aimed at providing those conditions, or at reducing inequality—instead they attempt to patch up the damage caused by it. While part of the solution is more equitable incomes, it also requires policies that foster people's capabilities to live meaningful lives, no matter what their family origins. That means universal provision of parental leave, quality child care, quality children's media programs, the best schools we can provide and, of course, access to quality health and parent support services. Given that so much brain development occurs in the years from birth to age five, the conditions for healthy development have to be in place.

What can be done to change the way children are valued?

First, we need to change the way we think about children. They are not just a private, family matter. What happens to them in early childhood, at school, in the community, how they are affected by the workplace, the media, and society at large is of vital importance to everyone, not only their parents.

We need a new archetype of childhood, which presents children as a new but special minority, as real people, with real brains, real emotions, and real human needs that

should be given room for expression; of young people as competent, powerful, determined, sometimes nasty and in need of firm guidelines for conduct as citizens of the world.

Today's children are not innocents, nor passive victims in need of protection. The majority of them are active, aware, and sophisticated learners, often ahead of their parents and teachers, exposed to much that was previously seen as adult knowledge, and they are much more capable than many give them credit for. We have to stop talking down to them, both in language and expectations.

Perhaps we should drop the myth of innocence and teach children resilience, because the world they face will demand it. We should allow them to be the decision-makers they are capable of being in their own right. As my five year old grandson put it after I'd been explaining some topic to him, 'Yes, Don, I know that. You're not the only one that knows something'. Moreover, if children have rights, then they have responsibilities too, just as have adults.

Second, we need a new community-based model of childhood. Urban planning is capable of designing much better housing estates: the return of the backyard or strip park, or small vacant lot playgrounds in local neighbourhoods could be mandated. We need car-free streets, shady trees, linked walking paths and safe public transport.

Learning takes place from the moment of birth and is affected by every element of the child's environment. We need to stop the top-down delivery of services and create what I call 'children's resource zones', neighbourhood-sensitive areas where every facility, every service, and every effort is focused on drawing children and parents into the learning and development process. This is similar to Geoffrey Canada's Harlem Children's Zone, which was evaluated in a five-year study (Grossman & Curran 2003). Recognising the new brain research on the importance of early childhood, this zone did away with piecemeal reform efforts and linked in a co-ordinated way parenting classes, pre-kindergarten classes of high quality, special tutoring, dance and sport classes, food co-ops, social services, and help with housing and health. The aim was not just to 'prevent' problems, but to transform the lives of the next generation. This combination of community transformation, high-quality teaching and parental support has raised children's achievement levels and closed the racial gap in performance by transforming the way parents see their children's life chances. The Harlem Children's Zone approach starts where it matters most—with the plasticity of babies' brains—and is trying to recreate, in homes and in the community, what children in prosperous households already get—sustained care and concern over a lifetime. Unlike other piecemeal measures like Head Start in the United States, or Sure Start in the United Kingdom, the Children's Zone starts with, but does not stop at early childhood after one or two years, but provides continuity through the education system, sustaining family involvement and resourcing.

Schools should become community centres, the core for resourcing families in the cause of better child development and learning. Schools would become 'family learning centres', or what the Victorian Catholic Education Office calls 'schools as core social centres', not just places where children go for a few hours a day and where learning is defined as what the teachers do with them. George Otero of the New Mexico-based Centre for Relational Learning argues for a complete change in the relationship between teacher and learner (Otero 2001), and Professor John West-Burnham of Manchester University's Centre for Educational Leadership insists leadership must shift from a top-down approach to one that engages people at every level of decision-making, including children (West-Burnham 2009).

Every school should be a source of information and learning for children and their parents; even what we now call adult education could be more closely linked with the schools and the needs of local families. If the schools were to become family learning centres, the full range of family support services and resources would be centred round them. Indeed, we must replace the concept of 'servicing' families with the concept of 'resourcing' them so they can draw on a range of information, physical resources and specialist services as they require them, preferably integrated within neighbourhood hubs and 'children's resource zones' focused on networks of schools and linked services, rather than narrowly targeted, and run by separate arms of government and private agencies which seldom talk to one another.

In the state of Victoria, we have moved some way towards this model of integration. Early childhood has been integrated into the education system, schools are becoming hubs for family and children's services, with co-location and encouragement of inter-service co-operation. The annual report on *The State of Victoria's Children* (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2009) enables better planning at the local level, with child outcomes data that can be matched to resources, services and other local initiatives. Every local government is required to draw up an early years plan and soon will be involved in developing action plans for vulnerable youth, aimed at involving young people directly in pinpointing local issues and being active participants in how to respond. Above all, youth need positive, meaningful relationships with others, and a stake in what they do with others rather than a passive role in being 'treated', 'serviced' or 'protected' from harm.

Fortunately, both state and federal governments are moving towards a whole-of-government approach to educating and caring for children and families. Children's hubs, integration of services around schools, the UNICEF-inspired Child-Friendly City movement, the constant reminders from the Australia Institute (Eckersley 2008) and others that wellbeing and happiness do not stem from money alone, and the current attempts to have Australia emulate the Canadian Index of Wellbeing (Canadian Institute of Wellbeing 2009), all point in a more positive direction.

The danger is that the power of the consumer market, plus the increasingly minority status of children and parents, will overwhelm initiatives such as the Australian National Development Index (Salvaris 2009) unless there is a clearer political stance on the value of childhood. Thus policies about media and communication must be updated. We need updated standards for quality children's television, computer games and new media programs and communication policy, which should be seen as integral to the education revolution. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation and the Australian Communications and Media Authority must be made accountable to our national curriculum framework so the media serve the true needs of today's children.

Those working for children need to come together with agreed values, within a coherent, co-ordinated framework, rather than the current fragmentation. Above all, a more active political philosophy is needed, one which asserts that every child has the capacity and the right to learn to the optimum of their ability. A whole-of-government children's policy is needed, not piecemeal actions by separate departments. Child policy as an afterthought is no longer acceptable. A whole New Deal is needed for our children.

Suggestions to provide a framework for a new deal for children

- Children and youth don't need protecting; instead they need exposure to the realities of the world and education in how to cope with those realities.
- Children don't need just love and nurturing, they need guidance and limit-setting.
- Children don't need time just to be themselves, they need experiences that teach them who and what they might become.
- Children don't need praise for being 'smart', they need encouragement to further effort and how to achieve more.
- Children don't need content free 'self-esteem', they need a sense of competence based on actual achievement.
- Children don't need just literacy and numeracy, they need the skills required to make the world an ecologically sustainable place in which equality is the goal of every policy and program.
- Children need the chance to develop every aspect of their potential intelligence and to discover their unique strengths and weaknesses.
- Children don't need to be valued simply in their own right, but as future citizens who will have to make tricky decisions affecting everyone.

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