

The Culture of Childhood: We've Almost Destroyed It

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I don't want to trivialize the roles of adults in children's lives, but, truth be told, we adults greatly exaggerate our roles in our theories and beliefs about how children develop. We have this adult-centric view that we *raise*, [socialize](#), and *educate* children.

Certainly we are important in children's lives. Children need us. We feed, clothe, shelter, and comfort them. We provide examples (not always so good) of what it's like to be an adult. But we don't raise, socialize, or educate them. They do all that for themselves, and in that process they are far more likely to look to other children than to us adults as models. If child psychologists were actually CHILD psychologists (children), theories of [child development](#) would be much less about parents and much more about peers.

Children are biologically designed to grow up in a culture of childhood.

Have you ever noticed how your child's tastes in clothes, music, manner of speech, hobbies, and almost everything else have much more to do with what other children she or he knows are doing or like than what you are doing or like? Of course you have. Children are biologically designed to pay attention to the other children in their lives, to try to fit in with them, to be able to do what they do, to know what they know. Through most of human history, that's how children became educated, and that's still largely how children become educated today, despite our misguided attempts to stop it and turn the educating job over to adults.

Wherever anthropologists have observed traditional cultures and paid attention to children as well as adults, they've observed two cultures, the adults' culture and the children's culture. The two cultures, of course, are not completely independent of one another. They interact and influence one another; and children, as they grow up, gradually leave the culture of childhood and enter into the culture of adulthood. Children's cultures can be understood, at least to some degree, as practice cultures, where children try out various ways of being and practice, modify, and build upon the skills and values of the adult culture.

I first began to think seriously about cultures of childhood when I began looking into band hunter-gatherer societies. In my reading, and in my survey of anthropologists who had lived in such societies, I learned that the children in those societies—from roughly the age of four on through their mid teen years—spent most of their waking time playing and exploring with groups of other children, away from adults (Gray, 2012, also [here](#)). They played in age-mixed groups, in which younger children emulated and learned from older ones. I found that anthropologists who had studied children in other types of traditional cultures also wrote about children's involvement in peer groups as the primary means of their socialization and [education](#) (e.g. Lancy *et al*, 2010; Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1989). Judith Harris (1998), in a discussion of such research, noted that the popular phrase *It takes a village to raise a child* is true if interpreted differently from the usual Western interpretation. In her words (p 161): "The reason it takes a village is not because it requires a quorum of adults to nudge erring youngsters back onto the paths of righteousness. It takes a village because in a village there are always enough kids to form a play group."

I also realized, as I thought about all this, that my own childhood, in Minnesota and Wisconsin in the 1950s, was in many ways like that of children in traditional societies. We had school (which was not the big deal it is today) and chores, and some of us had part time jobs, but, still, most of our time was spent with other children away from adults. My family moved frequently, and in each village or city neighborhood to which we moved I found a somewhat different childhood culture, with different games, different traditions, somewhat different values, different ways of making friends. Whenever we moved, my first big task was to figure out the culture of my new set of peers, so I could become part of

it. I was by [nature shy](#), which I think was an advantage because I didn't just blunder in and make a fool of myself. I observed, studied, practiced the skills that I saw to be important to my new peers, and then began cautiously to enter in and make friends. In the mid 20th century, a number of researchers described and documented many of the childhood cultures that could be found in neighborhoods throughout Europe and the United States (e.g. Opie & Opie, 1969).

Children learn the most important lessons in life from other children, not from adults.

Why, in the course of natural selection, did human children evolve such a strong inclination to spend as much time as possible with other children and avoid adults? With a little reflection, it's not hard to see the reasons. There are many valuable lessons that children can learn in interactions with other children, away from adults, that they cannot learn, or are much less likely to learn, in interactions with adults. Here are some of them.

Authentic communication.

I don't know if this is or isn't true in traditional cultures, but in modern Western cultures adults are terribly condescending toward children. Their communications with children, especially the well-intended ones, are frequently dishonest. Consider for example, the adult who asks a four-year old, "What color is that?" while pointing to a red toy fire engine. This is not an honest question. Unless the adult is blind, or color blind, the adult knows perfectly well what color it is. A child would never ask such a stupid question. Almost all the questions that teachers ask, through all the grades of school, are dishonest; the teacher knows the answer (or thinks she does because she read it in the teacher's edition of the textbook), so her question is not really a question; it's a test.

Or consider the adult who says, "Oh, that's beautiful, what a wonderful artist you are," while looking at the child's latest scribbling. Children never give such false praise to one another. Even as children grow older, adults tend to engage them in ways that suggest that either the adults or the children are idiots, and often their comments have more to do with trying to teach the children something, or control them in some way, than with genuine

attempts to share ideas or really understand the child's ideas.

Little children communicate with one another largely in the context of play, and the communications have real meaning. They negotiate about what and how to play. They discuss the rules. They negotiate in ways very similar to the ways adults negotiate with one another. This is far better practice for future adult-adult communication than the kinds of "conversations" that children typically have with adults.

As children get older, and especially once they are in their teen years, their communications with one another have ever more to do with the emotions and struggles they experience. They can be honest with their friends, because their friends are not going to overreact and try to assume control, the way that their parents or other adults might. They want to talk about the issues important in their life, but they don't want someone to use those issues as another excuse to subordinate them. They can, with good reason, trust their friends in ways that they cannot trust their parents or teachers.

Independence and courage.

The ultimate goal of childhood is to move away from dependence on parents and establish oneself as one's own person. Already by the age of two—the "terrible twos," when children's favorite word is "no"—children are clearly on this path. Typically by the age of four or a little later, children want to get away from parents and other adults and spend time with children, where they can try out ways of being that they couldn't try in the presence of adults.

Children's cultures often set themselves up as if in opposition to adult culture, often quite deliberately and adaptively. Even young children begin to use scatological, "naughty" words, deliberately flouting adults' dictates. They delight in mocking adults and in finding ways to violate rules. For example, when schools make rules about carrying even toy weapons into school, children bring tiny toy guns and plastic knives to school in their pockets and surreptitiously exhibit them to one another, proudly showing how they violated a senseless adult-imposed rule (Corsaso & Eder, 1990).

The anthropologist Collin Turbull (1982) noted that children in the

hunter-gatherer group he studied would build their own play huts, well away from the main encampment, and would spend some of their time there mocking the adults by exaggerating their blunders and poorly constructed arguments. To learn adaptively from adults, children must not just absorb the good that they see but must also judge and digest the bad, and they can't freely do that when adults are present.

Part of gaining independence is gaining courage—courage to face the challenges and deal with the emergencies that are part of every life. In their play groups, away from adults, children everywhere play in ways that adults might see as dangerous and might prevent. They play with sharp knives and fire, climb trees and dare one another to go higher. Little children, in fantasy play, imagine themselves dealing with trolls, witches, dragons, wolves, and other kinds of predators and murderers. In all such play, children are learning how to manage [fear](#), a crucial skill for anyone who intends to stay alive and well in the face of the real life dangers that confront everyone at some points in their lives (more on this, [here](#)).

In play amongst themselves, children create their own activities and solve their own problems rather than rely on a powerful authority figure to do these for them. This is one of the great values of playing away from adults. In such play they have to, as it were, *be* the adults, precisely because there are no adults present. Play is the practice space for adulthood. Adults spoil this large purpose of play when they intervene and try to be helpful.

Creating and [understanding](#) the purpose and modifiability of rules.

A fundamental difference between adults' games and children's is that adults generally abide by fixed, pre-established rules, whereas children generally see rules as modifiable. When adults play baseball, or Scrabble, or almost anything, they follow or try to follow the "official" rules of the game. In contrast, when children play they usually make up the rules as they go along (Youniss, 1994). This is true even when they play games like baseball or Scrabble, if there is no adult present to enforce the official rules. (For my story of how I learned this lesson, about Scrabble, from two 9-year-old girls, see [here](#).) This is one of the ways in which children's play is usually much more creative than

adults' play.

The famous developmental psychologist Jean Piaget (1932) noted long ago that children develop a more sophisticated and useful understanding of rules when they play with other children than when they play with adults. With adults, they get the impression that rules are fixed, that they come down from some high authority and cannot be changed. But when children play with other children, because of the more equal nature of the relationship, they feel free to challenge one another's ideas about the rules, which often leads to negotiation and change in rules. They learn in this way that rules are not fixed by heaven, but are human contrivances to make life more fun and fair. This is an important lesson; it is a cornerstone of democracy.

Practicing and building on the skills and values of the adult culture.

Even while differentiating themselves from adult culture, children import features of that culture into theirs. Children incorporate into their play many of the skills and values that they observe among adults. This is why children in hunter-gather cultures play at hunting and gathering; why children in farming cultures play at farming; and why children in our culture play at computers. It is also why hunter-gatherer children do not play competitive games (the adults in their culture eschew [competition](#)), while children in our culture do play competitive games (though not to the degree that they do when adults are involved).

Children don't just mimic, in play, what they observe among adults. Rather, they interpret what they observe, try out variations of it, and in that way strive to make sense of it. Children's play is always creative, and in their play they experiment with new, creative variations of themes derived from adults. This is how each new generation builds upon, rather than simply replicates, the culture of their parents' generation.

Children are naturally drawn to the newest innovations in the larger culture around them. Adults are often suspicious of such changes, but children embrace them. This is illustrated today by children's eagerness to learn how to use the latest computer technology; they are often far ahead of their parents on this. Children's culture focuses, quite naturally and adaptively, on the

skills important to the world they are growing into, not the world as it was when their parents were growing up. Adults in every generation seem to bemoan the fact that their children don't play the way they played when they were kids. That's one more of the reasons why children have to get away from adults to play most adaptively.

Getting along with others as equals.

The main difference between adults and children that affects their interaction has to do with power. Adults, because of their greater size, strength, status, experience in the world, and control of resources have power over children. So, children's interactions with adults are generally unbalanced ones, across a power gap. If children are going to grow up to be effective adults, they must learn to get along with others as equals. For the most part, they can only practice that with other children, not with adults.

Perhaps the most important function of the culture of childhood is to teach children how to get along with peers. Children practice that constantly in social play. To play with another person, you must pay attention to the other person's needs, not just your own, or the other person will quit. You must overcome [narcissism](#). You must learn to share. You must learn to negotiate in ways that respect the other person's ideas, not just yours. You must learn how to assert your needs and desires while at the same time understanding and trying to meet the needs and desires of your playmate. This may be the most important of all skills that human beings must learn for a successful life. Without this ability it is not possible to have a happy [marriage](#), true friends, or cooperative work partners.

The need to learn how to deal with others on an equal power footing is the primary reason why children need to grow up in a culture of childhood. It underlies all of the rest of what children learn best with peers. The reason why children's communications with other children are more authentic than those with adults, why they can practice independence and courage with other children better than with adults, why they can learn about the modifiability of rules with other children better than with adults, and why they can more freely practice adult skills with other children than they can with adults is that their relationships with other children are relationships of equality rather than relationships of dominance

and subordination.

The adult battle against cultures of childhood has been going on for centuries.

Hunter-gatherer adults seemed to understand that children needed to grow up largely in a culture of childhood, with little adult interference, but that understanding seemed to decline with the rise of agriculture, land ownership, and hierarchical organizations of power among adults (Gray, 2012). Adults began to see it as their duty to suppress children's natural willfulness, so as to promote obedience, which often involved attempts to remove them from the influences of other children and subordinate them to adult authority. The first systems of compulsory schooling, which are the forerunners of our schools today, arose quite explicitly for that purpose.

If there is a father of modern schools, it is the Pietist clergyman August Hermann Francke, who developed a system of compulsory schooling in Prussia, in the late 17th century, which was subsequently copied and elaborated upon throughout Europe and America. Francke wrote, in his instructions to schoolmasters: *"Above all it is necessary to break the natural willfulness of the child. While the schoolmaster who seeks to make the child more learned is to be commended for cultivating the child's intellect, he has not done enough. He has forgotten his most important task, namely that of making the will obedient."* Francke believed that the most effective way to break children's wills was through constant monitoring and supervision. He wrote: *"Youth do not know how to regulate their lives, and are naturally inclined toward idle and sinful behavior when left to their own devices. For this reason, it is a rule in this institution [the Prussian Pietist schools] that a pupil never be allowed out of the presence of a supervisor. The supervisor's presence will stifle the pupil's inclination to sinful behavior, and slowly weaken his willfulness."* [Quoted by Melton, 1988.]

We may today reject Francke's way of stating it, but the underlying premise of much adult policy toward children is still in Francke's tradition. In fact, social forces have conspired now to put Francke's recommendation into practice far more effectively than occurred at Francke's time or any other time in the past. Parents have become convinced that it is dangerous and irresponsible to

allow children to play with other children, away from adults, so restrictions on such play are more severe and effective than they have ever been before. By increasing the amount of time spent in school, expanding homework, harping constantly on the importance of scoring high on school tests, banning children from public spaces unless accompanied by an adult, and replacing free play with adult-led sports and lessons, we have created a world in which children are almost always in the presence of a supervisor, who is ready to intervene, protect, and prevent them from practicing courage, independence, and all the rest that children practice best with peers, away from adults. I have argued elsewhere (Gray, 2011, and [here](#)) that this is why we see record levels of anxiety, [depression](#), [suicide](#), and feelings of powerlessness among adolescents and young adults today.

The Internet is the savior of children's culture today

There is, however, one saving grace, one reason why we adults have not completely crushed the culture of childhood. That's the Internet. We've created a world in which children are more or less prevented from congregating in physical space without an adult, but children have found another way. They get together in cyberspace. They play games and communicate over the Internet. They create their own rules and culture and ways of being with others over the Internet. They mock adults and flout adult rules over the Internet. They, especially teenagers, share thoughts and feelings with friends through texting and social media, and they stay several steps ahead of their parents and other adults in finding new ways to maintain their privacy in all of this (more on this [here](#)).

Of course, the hew and cry we keep hearing from so many educators and [parenting](#) "experts" now is that we must ban or limit children's "screen time." Yes, if we all did that, while still banning them from public spaces without adult supervision, we would finally succeed in destroying the culture of childhood. We would prevent children from educating themselves in the ways that they always have, and we would see the rise of a generation of adults who don't know how to be adults because they never had a chance to practice it.

See also my book [Free to Learn](#), [self-directed.org](#) ([link is external](#)) (to find out about the Alliance for Self-Directed Education), and join me on [Facebook](#) ([link is external](#)).

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