

VIEWSPOINTS

Children's Rights and Adults' Wrongs

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Today's children are more fortunate in many respects than children of previous generations. Witness the rising numbers who now have access to a bedroom with the characteristics of a mini-'bed-sit'; television—for many, one of their own—with its wide range of entertainment; computer games for mental recreation; a mobile phone to maintain contact with family and friends at all times and in all places; and a family car or two, providing safe and effortless parent-chauffeured means both of daily travel and for weekend and holiday visits to ever more distant destinations and activities. Many are also able to attend the school their parents consider to be the best available for them rather than the one closest to them.

The Quality of Children's Lives

However, there has been a growing downside for children to these seemingly attractive and certainly much appreciated benefits of material affluence, especially that stemming from the spread of our car-based culture and the precautions taken to limit the risk of injury that has come in the wake of this. First and foremost, a steady, albeit unwitting erosion of their rights to a safe and clean environment beyond the boundaries of their home, needs to be highlighted. Compared with their parents and even more so their grandparents when they were children, their lives are now much more circumscribed. Just consider how rare it is nowadays to see children socialising in a relaxed way in the streets or playing football, or just doing shopping for the family.

As the volume and speed of vehicles have increased—and the ability of drivers to accelerate to higher speeds in fewer seconds—so the degree of exposure to danger has risen. We have all had to exercise greater vigilance to avoid physical harm. For children, the effect has been all the greater as speed limits that are well in excess of those that would allow for their safe movement have been set and even these are poorly enforced.

The travel patterns of the current generation of children reveal the most obviously undesirable outcome of this process. Although children are totally reliant on walking and cycling for getting about on their own or with friends, the priorities attached to the different methods of travel have resulted in a traffic environment in which death or injury on the

roads is far more likely when they do so by these non-motorised means than when in a car or bus.

Over the last few decades, more and more effort has been put into road safety education aimed at alerting children and their parents to the growing danger, to the point at which a Minister of Transport asserted that parents who do not escort their children are irresponsible—a view widely shared today. It is now commonplace to hear conversations in which the role of accompanying children, not infrequently older than 10 years, is referred to as if it were a basic requirement of child-rearing. Parents are increasingly locked into the time-consuming and costly lifestyle of chauffeuring their children. Indeed, a recent ICM survey has recorded that two in three parents drive their children to their friends' homes, parks and sports, half take them to and from school, and two in five drive them to cultural events. Another survey found that parents typically drive 5000 miles each year on these escorting journeys.

As a result, walking and cycling are becoming far less common. The proportion of journeys to school made on foot has fallen steadily whilst those by car have risen sharply. Most children of primary school age are now taken to school by car, in the interests of minimising the risk of them being injured in a road crash, increasingly in 4×4 s—the cars safest for the 'inmates' rather than for the 'outmates', that is other, more vulnerable road users. Yet opinion surveys record cycling to be children's preferred form of travel. Indeed, it used to feature as their ideal form of independent travel: one has only to look at the travel of children in countries such as Denmark or the Netherlands which have made safe provision for it, to appreciate its attractions as well as its appropriateness. However, it hardly registers in surveys in the United Kingdom of children's travel.

Not only has traffic growth led to increased danger on the roads, it has also encouraged the view that they are exclusively for motor vehicles. And, in parallel with the wider adoption of car-oriented patterns of travel, streets have become depopulated: their social function has been almost totally overlooked other than in specifically designated places such as pedestrian precincts. This has led to their being fewer people out and about on foot to provide the 'hands-off' form of social control of children which used to allow for their naturally exuberant and occasionally unruly behaviour outside. Where it appeared to be getting out of hand, intervention by 'strangers'—adults not known to the children—was possible through verbal reprimand or physical restraint.

The street, together with adjacent open spaces used to act as children's outdoor informal classroom where what they had learned in school and at home about the 'right' way to do things could be put into practice. There are now fewer opportunities for children to develop these invaluable coping skills from direct experience, to exercise their imagination, extend their physical competence and capabilities, and to give rein to their instinctive desires to enlarge their geographical boundaries. Contact with the natural world—fauna and flora—and their link to the seasons is also being lost.

Limiting children's exposure to the outside world unless accompanied by an adult also affects the development of their social and emotional skills. It takes some of the excitement out of their lives as well. One has only to see the thrill they enjoy when first allowed to do things on their own. Instead, they are less able to be spontaneous and to initiate their own socialising. Their day has become increasingly structured by adults. Their confinement also sends out a message that their locality may contain within it elements of danger to which they should not be exposed. At the same time, it inculcates in their impressionable minds a grossly misleading perception that we, as responsible parents, consider that they should distrust people they do not know and that therefore it could be dangerous to enter into conversation with them. The natural consequence of this is that children are told not speak to 'strangers'. And, as a corollary to this, the

'strangers', that is *us*, are fearful of talking to children we do not know either because we fear that our motives may be misconstrued or because we have learnt to expect obstreperous behaviour from them—without being able to respond as we would with our own children.

A further outcome of this mild form of alienation is that children have been made *more* vulnerable by reducing their exposure to risk of injury. Children need to acquire road safety skills and take risks to learn at first hand how to cope with them and, with unexpected situations, to find where their personal and the public's boundaries lie, and when to exercise caution. In any case, it may be questioned whether society should be aiming to eliminate risk from their environment. It could be observed that taking risks has been a key element in evolution. How else are children going to learn how to deal with the outside world on their own and be encouraged to think for themselves laterally and originally? A sanitised environment free of risk is one where these desirable attributes are unlikely to flourish.

Parents have been restricting their children from going on their own, even in their local surroundings, until a much later stage in their childhood than was previously thought necessary. A Countryside Agency report noted that nearly all parents are worried that playing outside is dangerous and a recent survey has revealed that one in three children under the age of 11 years *never* play outside. The benefits of that freedom—being able to go out *unaccompanied*—appear to have been largely forgotten. By comparing the quality of life of children growing up in the relatively safe environments of two generations ago with those of the great majority of children in typical environments today, it is very apparent that literally millions of them are being denied what are so obviously preferable lifestyles from the point of view of their autonomous development.

The effects of these limitations on children's freedom represents a high a price for them to pay—and may be counter-productive. There is insufficient recognition of the fact that a stimulating environment beyond the confines of the home is highly influential on a child's progress, and in the same way that resistance to germs is promoted by *exposure* to mild levels of infection, so too is coping with bullying, intimidation and other unwished-for events, best promoted by developing defensive mechanisms based on *personal* experience as well as sound advice.

It could be argued that excessive caution has been exercised in pursuit of an understandable wish to minimise children's exposure to the risk of road injury, allied to concerns about molestation by strangers, its frequency often much exaggerated by media over-reporting. In fact, children are far more at risk from their parents or someone known to them than they are from strangers (unless the strangers are behind steering wheels!).

The other significant adverse consequence of these altered travel patterns is that children are getting less *regular* exercise leading to considerable concern about the effects on their health and about the longer-term implications of an obesity epidemic. Department of Health figures show that almost a third of those under the age 15 are overweight, including one in six classed as clinically obese. This reflects a 50 per cent increase in less than a decade in the proportion with weight problems. A recent UK Secretary of State for Health has urged that children should become more involved in making healthy choices about how much exercise they take and the National Consumers Council has been given a central role in finding out how best to influence them in this regard by presenting them with alternative lifestyles so that they change their behaviour. However, their choices are very much constrained by influential factors way beyond their control, for instance, traffic danger and parental restrictions imposed in light of this.

A strategy of adopting alternative policies of *withdrawing danger* from children to reflect their rights to a safe environment outside their home and the benefits that would come in the wake of this does not appear to have been seriously contemplated. Parental fears and the perceived need to accompany children on their journeys wherever possible have been translated into *withdrawing children* from the increased danger and into instilling in them the need to defer to its source—the motor vehicle. Would not other groups in society feel justified in taking up arms if they were obliged to live within the boundaries that are now set for children?

Though unintended, a disturbing consequence of this process is that children's lives have been evolving in ways that, in some key respects, could be said to mirror life in prison. Criminals too have a roof over their heads, regular meals, licensed entertainment—but most of their waking hours are spent under surveillance and they are not allowed out on their own. Their enforced detention, and restrictions on how they spend their time, are intended to—and do—seriously diminish the quality of their lives. The removal of such a basic freedom is generally justified in the case of criminals but not in that of children. Its relevance to children's development is no less important simply because it has been so widely overlooked—and for so long.

Making Amends?

It is only in the last 10–15 years that the harmful effects of this unwitting process—in effect treating children as second-class citizens—have begun to be recognised. But the approach aimed at compensating children for these undesirable outcomes can be seen to be far from adequate. The underlying message for both children and their parents is that the world out there is so dangerous that in order for them to survive they must take exceptional care.

From this perspective, it seems logical to put more and more effort into improving children's road safety skills as if children can be trained to be as careful as adults and as if they have equal responsibility for preventing injury to themselves. Thus the Child Accident Prevention Trust has urged children to use roads that are well lit and to remember that drivers may find it hard to see them in the dark for which reason they should wear reflective clothing! This represents a classic case of victim-blaming. If a child is injured in a road crash, it is then implied that there is a degree of contributory negligence either on the part of the child's parents for letting their inexperienced child out unaccompanied or of the child for not taking adequate care. The effect of this approach is to exonerate to some extent the driver for not travelling at a speed that allows sufficient time for avoiding action in the event of a child being careless—a perfectly natural aspect of child behaviour.

A second reflection of the insufficiency of policy change to redress the imbalance resulting in the steady erosion of children's rights is the concession made to their needs with the development of *Safe Routes to School* projects. Though representing progress, it is important to bear in mind that children's journeys to and from school combined only account for a third of all their journeys and for only *one* in ten of their fatalities in road crashes. Moreover, this apparently laudable concept implies that children have no independent *leisure* lives outside the home. Why not also plan *Safe Routes to Leisure Destinations* or, better still, *Safe Routes for Children*?

A third example is the Home Zones concept in which it is safe for children to play as vehicles can only be driven at slow speeds. However, the justification for this solution rests on the questionable assumption that only the limited geographical catchment of the Home Zones is essential for children's safety. Allied to this albeit

desirable acknowledgement of children's need for a safer environment is the provision of adventure playgrounds. These are dedicated to their freedom of expression in the outdoor environment 'where they can discover themselves'. But here again, children are in effect being offered safe play but only in prescribed places predominantly under adult supervision.

A fourth example is reflected in the effect of parental decisions motivated by what is seen to be in their children's best interests—now being able to choose the school the children attend. Not surprisingly, this has led to extending the distance that children have to travel. This has made it less likely that they will be able to do so on foot or by bicycle and more likely that parents will see the attractions if not the perceived need to take them by car. In view of the consequential increase in road congestion, local authorities and schools have attempted to encourage use of school buses. Indeed, it has been argued that travel in this way allows children opportunities to socialise with their peers, gain greater independence and self-confidence (and learn how to read a timetable!). One may wonder how these opportunities compare with those associated with walking or cycling, particularly when it is borne in mind that the children in school buses have to be belted in their seats!

However, it is important to note that, from a child's perspective, this strategy has a number of disadvantages. Unlike the door-to-door convenience of cars, travel in school buses tends to be very time-consuming. The buses are slower, have to follow circuitous routes and stop at intervals to pick up and drop off their passengers. Most of the journey represents wasted time which children would otherwise be able to spend in more rewarding ways. The buses have to run at prescribed times, precluding flexibility to allow for children's after-school activities. And all too often it is seen to be necessary for supervising adults to accompany younger children from the bus to the school and vice-versa. And a substantial cost is entailed: current calculations suggest that it is unlikely that a charge for this service can be lower than £45 a week. Finally, where children travel by bus, in common with that by car, they do not benefit from the daily health-promoting exercise that walking (or cycling) allows.

In light of the perceived dangers even for children living close to their schools, a further relatively recent innovation has been the 'walking bus', an arrangement whereby children walk to and from school with an adult at front and at rear in order to direct them especially when crossing roads and to supervise their behaviour. However, it puts out an insidious message for the children, inculcating fear in their impressionable minds that if they step out of line or away from the 'safe' route, they will be injured or their lives put at risk from strangers intent on abducting them.

There are clear dangers stemming from aiming for an ideal world which is risk-free and in which children act like responsible adults. That world does not exist. It is an approach running counter to the progressive one that parents need to adopt of giving their children more and more licence as they grow older. Children should not be expected to behave civilly at all times and only in games or relationships which are being directed or sanctioned by an adult. Nor should they be expected not to engage in mischievous behaviour. And simply hanging about the streets is a very reasonable social activity that children should be free to initiate and enjoy.

It is almost as if there has been a conspiracy to lower the quality of the lives of children and to make more difficult their transition into responsible members of society. Indeed, setting ever tighter constraints on their freedoms, resentful of the control that parents can exercise over them, and making them distrustful of adults they do not know, could be seen as disturbingly effective ways of inducing alienation, disaffection and anti-social behaviour.

A Better Future

Given the full spectrum of policy changes which affects children's development and the quality of their lives, a strategy can be proposed to reverse the process of the last few decades which has so obviously been disadvantageous in the respects discussed in this chapter.

Transport and Safety

- More road space and resources should be allocated to create safe networks for walking and cycling *and* for practical manifestations of the social function of streets.
- Road danger needs to be monitored in a more comprehensive way than by examining casualty statistics alone—any reduction in the number of road injuries may well be explained by the fact that fewer children are allowed out on their own owing to parental fears about the rising danger on the roads from more traffic!

Planning

- The local neighbourhood must be deliberately planned to provide a safe environment in which children can develop their basic physical and social skills without adult supervision.
- The practice of land-use planning should include its traffic implications sufficiently to ensure that transport policy objectives in relation to children's well-being are given due consideration in decision-making.

Health and Education

- Interaction between children and adult 'strangers' needs to be encouraged, rather than discouraged, in order to promote neighbourliness and a more community-oriented society.
- More effort should be put into improving children's health by educating the public about the substantial short- and long-term benefits for children of walking and cycling on a daily basis.
- The public must become more involved in taking responsibility for keeping an eye on other children.
- The media need to be encouraged not to exaggerate the risks to which children are exposed through over-reporting of the very rare unpleasant incidents of them coming to harm.

Behaviour

- Policy needs to be directed to bringing about a profound change in children's circumstances, to altering attitudes to children so that they are treated far less as second-class citizens, and to a wider acceptance of mild misbehaviour by children rather than towards adopting a zero-tolerance approach.
- A measure of progress in this regard would be revealed in surveys focussed on the extent of children's travel unaccompanied by an adult. It would also be reflected in evidence that children are spending more of their leisure time outside the home *on their own* or with friends, and improving their health by burning off excess calories in outdoor activity.

Conclusions

For all too long we have condoned a fundamental infringement of the rights of one of the most vulnerable groups in society and one particularly deserving of our efforts. We must ensure that there is a fulfilling, safe, child-friendly and healthy environment accessible to children outside the home. It should be free of overt adult supervision and rich in opportunities for stimulating their interaction both with friends *and* strangers so that they can best develop socially and emotionally as well as physically. Such an environment should have the characteristics that enable them to get about on foot or by bicycle, on their own or with their friends—as adults are able to.

Policies which are the outcome of informed discussions on issues such as those posed in this chapter should be aimed at reversing the process which has so seriously diminished the quality of life of children. The success of such policies is likely to be seen in many beneficial forms—a generally more relaxed and friendly community, with more people on the streets and less crime; with more children getting about on their own; more of them becoming 'streetwise' *and* mixing with 'strangers'; and, not least, developing faster physically and mentally into the stages of coping adolescence and competency in adulthood.

Relevant Publications by the Author

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