



art reddin

We're all living here at the same time .

— 8 yr. old

Before starting this article on childhood I wish to point out that the article from last paper is continued on page 7 (actually this is a plot to gradually take over the rest of the paper, but don't tell Dave!)

A couple of years ago at St. Jean's Elementary in town, I was tutoring a 12 yr. old who was having reading problems. The cause became apparent quickly enough, although I'm not sure his teachers recognized it. It was simply that his real life was so much more exciting and interesting than the domesticating teacher-student relationship and environment of school. In school he was looked at as a child, yet we used to talk about his work at the Guardian-Patriot and on the milk truck, his adventures with women, or about the truck he and four of his friends had bought for \$25. One day we were discussing reading and I was trying to turn him on to the idea. "But what about your parents? How would they be if they couldn't read?" It struck a strong response in him, and it kind of dawned on me that it was probably the first time in school I or anyone else had said something that implied that he was an adult and deserved that dignity (although he was much livelier than most).

The quote at the top of the page was in response to the classic put-down of a young person - "You'll know better when you grow up". This is often used to dismiss young people's views or attempts to undertake problem-solving. For many young people childhood is an oppressive time when people are either asserting power over them or else trying to give them therapeutic help which they have no power to refuse.

Those who most strongly defend childhood usually fit into two categories: those who want children as objects to love and to "help" and wish that "children would be free to have their childhood"; and those who need children to boss and mold into obedience and subservience. Our language is full of common sayings which we would strongly protest if they were directed

at us - "Children should be seen and not heard", "For proper upbringing we must have discipline and control"

In many places young people in fact are strongly protesting as we find out when we let them be heard.

"Some of us had a happier time than others, but we all ended up in another system of absolute authority, with the young people at the bottom. We could only be as free as our parents allowed us to be. They punished us for refusing to obey. And, just like school, the police would come after us if we tried to get away. Our lives are considered the property of various adults. We do not recognize their right to control us. We call this control ADULT CHAUVINISM, and we will fight it."

Yet, 'twas not always thus. Childhood is a new invention. For most people in this world the idea of childhood came in with free compulsory public schooling after the Second World War and expanded with educational inflation. The concept has its roots in the upper middle class roughly three hundred years ago, although it was restricted to this 2 to 5% of the population for most of these years. It is doubtful other young people felt a loss at missing out on this. Painters until the 17th century didn't even have an eye for the proportions of a baby, portraying him as a miniature adult. Young people's clothes were no different from adults and separate children's toys didn't come in until the 18th century.

Wide-spread and extended childhood wasn't really predominant until after the turn of this century. My father knew of many men who had gone to sea when only ten or twelve. And to use a more recent example until the early Sixties in the Roman Catholic church a person was a full member and was fully responsible for his wrong-doing after age seven, which had been almost universally considered the age of reason.

In non-Western countries extended childhood has a more direct relation to schooling. I suspect that this was because of the competitive nature of schools where young people were rigorously compared to each other and graded, and became not only manipulated dependents in school but a reflection on the worth of their parents.

The nuclear family was also instrumental in creating some of the worst effects of childhood in our society where young people

are the property of their parents. In the not too distant past, the community (which was safer and more open than today) was responsible and the young person had many other adult contacts, as in the extended family.

There are many indications that the child today is a heavy burden in time, worry, and money. In a recent survey 70% of American women interviewed said that they didn't ever wish to have children. Many women spend most of their waking hours looking after young children or else institutionalize them in day-care, and the school is often referred to as a baby-sitting institution. Young people nowadays are forced to receive "beneficial" services they often don't want, where once they held useful jobs at that same age.

Incidentally, on reading about childhood in the past, one is also struck by the surprising playfulness and sense of fun of the adults. If this is what loving adults wish for young people when they defend childhood, then more power to them and may this spread and put some life into this often joyless society. However, I strongly protest if their intent is to lock young people into an artificial, useless, and meaningless world. Those who defend childhood as a mandatory process through which people must go to prove they deserve civil, human, and legal rights, or who

treat young people as domesticated and obedient slaves, I have nothing but contempt for

The following is a Bill of Rights adapted from Escape From Childhood by John Holt.

- 1) RIGHT TO SELF-DETERMINATION OVER ONE'S LIFE
- 2) RIGHT TO BE TREATED NO WORSE THAN ADULTS AT THE HAND OF THE LAW
- 3) FULL HUMAN AND CIVIL RIGHTS INCLUDING THE RIGHT TO VOTE
- 4) RIGHT TO CREATE AN AUTHENTIC CULTURE OF OUR OWN MAKING
- 5) RIGHT TO FINANCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND INDEPENDENCE
- 6) RIGHT TO DIRECT AND MANAGE ONE'S OWN EDUCATION
- 7) RIGHT TO TRAVEL, MAKE ONE'S OWN HOME, AND ENTER INTO QUASI-FAMILIAL RELATIONSHIPS
- 8) RIGHT TO RECEIVE ANY MINIMUM INCOME GUARANTEED TO ADULT CITIZENS
- 9) RIGHT TO DO WHAT ANY ADULT MAY DO

From what I've read and see it seems that young people are not at all reluctant to combine reflection and action and are willing to fight hard for the rights as well as for fundamental change in society. Incidentally, FPS magazine (Youth Liberation, 2007 Washtenaw, Mich.) brought in 1976 with an article on "Taxation without Representation". Insignificant? Well, the U.S. went to war on the very same issue two hundred years

Ten forty-three.
In exactly TWO MINUTES
I'll ring the
FIRST BELL and
they'll all
stand still!

All, that is, except
your potential DEVIATE!
Your fledgling REBEL!
Your incipient BOAT-
ROCKER! THEY'LL try
to move all right!
THEY'LL have to
learn the HARD
way not to move!

So I'll SCREAM at 'em
and take their NAMES
and give them FIVE
DETENTIONS and EXTRA
HOMEWORK! NEXT time
they won't move
after the first
bell!

Because when they've
learned not to question
the FIRST BELL, they'll
learn not to question
their TEXTS! Their
TEACHERS! Their
COURSES!
EXAMINATIONS!

They'll grow up to accept
TAXES! HOUSING DEVELOP-
MENTS! INSURANCE! WAR!
MEN ON THE MOON! LIQUOR!
LAWS! POLITICAL SPEECHES!
PARKING METERS!
TELEVISION!
FUNERALS!

Non-movement
after
the first
bell is
the
backbone
of Western