



# Transformative Education and the Right to an Inviolable Childhood

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**F**yodor Dostoyevsky's earliest memory reaches back to when he was three years old. He was brought into a room by his governess and asked, in the presence of some guests, to say his evening prayers. Kneeling before the icon he began, "Dear Mother! God, all my hope is in Thee—give me shelter under Thy wing." This prayer he never forgot. He taught it to his own children and repeated it throughout his life.<sup>1</sup>

This event, from the early decades of the nineteenth century, is far removed from the experience of most children of today. A deep-seated attitude of reverence, nurtured and developed in the early years, is for nearly all the world's children a thing of the past. The tensions and turbulence of our times leave little space for such attitudes to be fostered. Hence the growing debates about spiritual values in education and the raising of children have become important aspects of current concern. Louis MacNeice's poem, "Prayer Before Birth," is more in tune with the tenor of our times:

I am not yet born; O hear me.  
Let not the bloodsucking bat or the rat or the  
stoat or the club-footed ghoul come near  
me.

I am not yet born, console me.  
I fear that the human race may with tall walls  
wall me, with strong drugs dope me, with  
wise lies lure me, on black racks rack me,  
in blood-baths roll me.

I am not yet born; provide me  
With water to dandle me, grass to grow for  
me, trees to talk to me, sky to sing to me,  
birds and a white light in the back of my  
mind to guide me.

I am not yet born; forgive me  
For the sins that in me the world shall  
commit, my words when they speak me,  
my thoughts when they think me,  
my treason engendered by traitors  
beyond me, my life when they murder by  
means of my hands, my death when they  
live me.

I am not yet born; rehearse me  
In the parts I must play and the cues I must  
take when old men lecture me,  
bureaucrats hector me, mountains  
frown at me, lovers laugh at me, the  
white waves call me to folly and the  
desert calls me to doom and the beggar  
refuses my gift and my children curse me.

I am not yet born; O hear me,  
Let not the man who is beast or who thinks  
he is God come near me.

I am not yet born; O fill me  
With strength against those who would freeze  
my humanity, would dragoon me into a  
lethal automaton, would make me a cog  
in a machine, a thing with one face, a  
thing, and against all those  
who would dissipate my entirety, would  
blow me like thistledown hither and  
thither or hither and thither  
like water held in the  
hands would spill me.

Let them not make me a stone and let them  
not spill me.  
Otherwise kill me.<sup>2</sup>

To speak of the child's right to an inviolable childhood is to speak a truism. No right thinking adult is against it, yet many children do face a

1. Kjetsaa, G. *Fyodor Dostoyevsky*, New York: Macmillan, 1987.

2. MacNeice, Louis. "Prayer Before Birth." *Selected Poems*, Faber, 1964.

world that contains threats to their healthful and happy development, as portrayed in this poem. MacNeice's conclusion is a stark one:

Let them not make me a stone and let them  
not spill me.  
Otherwise kill me.

This is the antithesis of the hope and joy that each child brings into life at birth. Rembrandt's paintings of Christ's birth in a stable at Bethlehem, in which the light streaming from the child shines into the surrounding darkness and embraces even the most humble of creatures in the dismal areas of the structure, depict a universal truth. A newborn baby brings light and love with it that can illuminate all the recesses of the human heart. As adults we participate in an intuitive wonder that draws us toward it:

It is of extraordinary significance that we, in our descent into earthly life, draw together forces from the universal ether, and thus take with us, in our ether body, a kind of image of the cosmos. If one could extract the human ether body at the moment when the human being is uniting himself with the physical body, we should have a sphere which is far more beautiful than any formed by mechanical means—a sphere containing stars, zodiac, sun and moon.<sup>3</sup>

A child is born into a social context. "And she brought forth her first born son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger." The binding of an infant to prevent movement, as though still enwrapped and protected by the womb, is still practiced in some cultures. In others it is seen as detrimental to children's need to exercise their limbs and move freely, thereby stimulating the senses. Our social and cultural differences manifest themselves from the first breath on and are part of children's learning process in becoming social beings. Rudolf Steiner suggests that in earlier cultures children were born with innate social capacities, but in our times these abilities have to be learned. This

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3. Steiner, Rudolf. *The Human Soul in Relation to World Evolution*, New York: Anthroposophic Press.

underlines our need to understand—and to work with greater insight with—the evolution of consciousness and other cultures if we are to serve the needs of young children in a healthy and desirable manner.

First, a child should be welcome. How that welcome is expressed may vary according to the times and the social fabric around the child. A report from the Swedish Family Aid Commission touches elements that confront us as citizens of the world's affluent minority.

Basic to a good society is that children are welcome, are given a good environment during childhood and are the concern of the whole society. Children have a right to secure living conditions that enhance their development. Pre-school has an important function in children's lives. It offers a comprehensive program and is the source of stimulation in the children's development. It gives them a chance to meet other children and adults and to be part of an experience of fellowship and friendship. It is a complement to the upbringing a child gets at home.<sup>4</sup>

Ellen Key, the Swedish educational reformer and feminist, published her influential book, *The Century of the Child*, in 1900:

The next century will be the century of the child just as much as the last century has been the woman's century. When the child gets his rights, morality will be perfect. The role of a woman was to devote herself to the care of children, hygiene and sick nursing. Kindergartens and crèches were only second best, and schools should strive to make themselves redundant. Success in child rearing lay in becoming "as a child oneself." The simplicity of the child's character will be kept as adults. So the old social order will renew itself.<sup>5</sup>

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4. Family Aid Commission, Sweden, 1981, op.cit. *Transforming Nursery Education*, Moss and Penn, Chapman, 1996.

5. Op. cit. H. Cunningham. *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500*, Longman, 1995.

For many children, Ellen Key's concept of the "Century of Childhood" brought countless benefits, though it is salutary to remember that most of the world's children have not shared these welcome changes. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the infant mortality rate for most European countries was within the range of 100 to 250 deaths per thousand live births. By the 1950s this had fallen to between 25 and 50 deaths per thousand. By 1995 only three European countries had rates above 20 and only one, Albania, above 30. In Western European countries this statistic is now well below 10.<sup>6</sup> We have moved from a time when the death of a baby was a tragic—but expected—family event, one which parents were rarely able to avoid, to a time when we can assume that our children will reach adulthood. This is completely new in the history of childhood and is of great significance for our attitude to parenting.

The history of the last hundred years has taught us to view such fervent certainty about a better world with skepticism, and Key's basic expectations of gender roles and the unimportance of educational institutions are no longer applicable. She was, however, pleading the cause of the child in a new way at a time when the prevalent view was that the child was an important asset to the state. Childhood was assumed to be naturally akin to "a garden of delight" and, by being sheltered from the world in general, a child should be able to develop "the habit of happiness" as a matter of course. The reality that most children did not have this opportunity was considered inconsequential. This was the world of implicit belief in the findings of science, and much advice was given on the avoidance of spontaneity, emotion, and individualism in the rearing of children. A distance was prescribed between parents and their offspring.

The dictum common in the early twentieth century that parents should not play with their babies may seem harsh (United States Children's Bureau, 1914). So was the view that there was one sensible way of treating children—namely to treat them as though they were young adults, never hug and kiss them, never let them climb onto your lap (John Watson, *The Psychological Care*

*of Infant and Child*, 1928). The child was to be inculcated with the virtues of self-control, obedience, and respect for authority. A science-centered morality superseded a deity-centered morality of the nineteenth century. For example, infant "formula" was promulgated as being preferable to breast-feeding because of its scientific reliability.

How is it, then, that by the end of the twentieth century our concern was, to use Neil Postman's term, "The Disappearance of Childhood"? And why has an authoritative and confident tone, however lamentable the advice might seem to us now, given way to anxiety and doubts about our roles as parents, caregivers, and educators?

One cause is a greater awareness of the importance of childhood that has steadily manifested more and more strongly since the Romantic era of the nineteenth century. Since the Second World War, the joy of parenting has been accompanied by a deep desire to get it right. For this, parents felt they needed experts to advise them, even if this expert advice fluctuated and contradicted itself over time. In 1914, there were 175 pediatricians in the US; by 1955 there were 6,547, and this number doubled by 1966. Because we now set great value in our children's wellbeing, we needed expertise to help us with this ever more complex and demanding task.

Shari L. Thurer's wonderfully readable and knowledgeable book, *The Myths of Motherhood: How Culture Reinvents the Good Mother*, describes this change in outlook. Thurer states that our hyper-empathetic ideal of parenting is partly a reaction to the loss of value accorded to human life in the twentieth century as a result of genocidal events such as the Holocaust and a greater awareness of child poverty and deprivation. In bringing up children, one idea supersedes another with bewildering speed, so that we always seem to be failing in the awesome responsibility of raising the next generation.

Few women could read about their formidable power to harm their children without a pang of conscience. What mother hasn't momentarily failed to stimulate or pay attention or delight in all baby's accomplishments? Who hasn't been provoked by her children . . . screaming or even, dare I suggest,

6. *World Education Report*, UNESCO 1998, Table 1.

slapped them . . . only to undergo a black period of agonizing guilt and self-recrimination? According to child experts, even unconscious hostility could plant the seeds of neurosis in her offspring. . . . A deficient mother (you!) could be exposed by the very symptoms of your child's pathology. Crankiness in a baby, withdrawal, uncontrollable crying, school phobia, surliness—all betrayed mother's ineptness.<sup>7</sup>

It is calculated that in the UK it costs £100,000 to bring up a child. Yet even in a society in which such affluence exists, many children are undernourished, abused, and deprived. On one side there is excessive consumerism. As the title of an article in *The New York Times* once memorably put it: "It's a boy! It's a girl! It's time to shop!" In the US, one in eight children goes hungry, and recorded abuse has increased by 40% since 1980. In the UK, child poverty has increased threefold since 1979, an estimated 350,000 children under 12 are left daily in unsupervised homes, and 20% of children suffer from psychological problems, of which more than half are anxiety disorders.<sup>8</sup> These two countries are not the exception in the Western world, as the problems are becoming more widespread. There are resistance factors that enable children to become what Norwegian researchers call "dandelion children," children who can cope with such disadvantages. These factors have been found to be good communication skills, a sense of religious faith, an ability to reflect, and a strong attachment to parents in the first years. Yet many of our contemporary cultural trends tend to deny children the possibility of developing these very abilities.

In all cultures there have been acceptable means by which children could be transferred from biological parents to non-biological parents. For the ancient Celtic tribes of Britain, this transfer often took place when children were seven years old, so that they would not become too circumscribed by one family setting and would develop skills of mobility and flexibility. Early in the last century, a family with too many mouths

to feed could transfer a child to a family that needed an extra child as an extra pair of working hands. Now it has become axiomatic that adults have the right to have a child for their own emotional completeness.

At the beginning of the last century, the essential vision of childhood was one of powerlessness and dependence, and good parenting prolonged this state. A hundred years later, the authority of parents has significantly declined as children demand and are granted early access to the adult world. This is stressful for all concerned, and this tension works right down into the early years, as it affects the way we perceive our children. This signal is one to which they are acutely sensitive. A child is a person with rights—including the right to be a child—and autonomy. These principles, rights and autonomy, can contradict one another, giving rise to problems for us all. This right to be a child is often expressed by its absence:

Boredom!!! Shooting!!! Shelling!!!  
People being killed!!! Despair!!! Hunger!!!  
Misery!!! Fear!!! That's my life! The life of  
an innocent eleven year-old schoolgirl!!! A  
schoolgirl without a school, without the  
fun and excitement of school. A child with-  
out games, without friends, without sun,  
without birds, without nature, without  
fruit, without chocolate or sweets, with  
just a little powdered milk. In short, a  
child without childhood.<sup>9</sup>

Often what is absent becomes the definition of what an inviolable childhood should be.

In her seminal book *Children Without Childhood* Marie Winn looks at the radical changes taking place in the way adults are treating children and how this affects their behavior. Her concern is that parents are finding their traditional role as protectors of childhood more and more difficult to fulfill.

. . . as today's children impress adults with their sophisticated ways, adults begin to change their ideal about children and their needs; that is, they form new ideas about childhood . . . as adults

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7. Thurer, Shari. L. *Myths of Motherhood*, Penguin, New York, 1994.

8. *Bright Futures. Promoting Children and Young People's Mental Health*, The Mental Health Foundation, 1999.

9. Filipovic, Z. *Zlata's Diary: A Child's Life in Sarajevo*, London, 1994.

act less protectively . . . and as they expose children to the underside of their lives—adult sexuality, suffering, fear of death—these former innocents grow tougher perforce, less playful and trusting, more skeptical—in short, more like adults.<sup>10</sup>

Winn sees this tendency as a regression to the Middle Ages, when there was no concept of protecting children from the exigencies of adult life. Following this came several centuries when childhood was seen as an estate clearly differentiated from adulthood, and in Winn's view, it is vital, in an increasingly complex and turbulent society, that "real childhood" be restored, that the period of nurture and protection is not shortened, and that adults need to be encouraged to retake an authoritative—but not authoritarian—role in family life.

It is not surprising, however, that some parents, faced with a plethora of demands they feel ill-equipped to handle, and looking for simplicity in a confusing and contradictory task, find a more authoritarian approach attractive. A symptom of this is the organization Growing Families International, which has rapidly become a multi-million dollar business. Its publications recommend that babies as young as eight months should be drilled in high-chair manners to sit up straight with their arms by their sides and remain pinned in this position until they obey. At 18 months, babies should be smacked with a plastic spatula to "inflict pain, but not break bones or damage skin tissue." In a return to turn-of-the-century views, "Teach the child to obey according to the character of true obedience, immediately, completely, without challenge and without complaint."<sup>11</sup> While this flies in the face of the contemporary appreciation of each child as an individual and verges on child abuse, yet many parents are resorting to such ideas out of despair and not knowing where else to turn.

Paradoxically, this advice appears at the same time as another view suggesting that parents have little influence on a child and that the most potent agents of child socialization are peer groups. Judith Rich Harris's paper,<sup>12</sup> which first

appeared in *Psychological Review* in 1995, and her subsequent book, *The Nurture Assumption*, have aroused much interest, and her propositions have reverberated ever since. Like much else in this field, ideas generated in the US wing their way across the Atlantic and become areas of debate and practice in Europe as well. Harris's convincing and well-written paper claims that, in the many hundreds of studies undertaken into parental influence on children, almost no evidence has come to light that proves this influence exists at all. Even evidence as to how children react to extreme experiences such as divorce, abuse, and adoption is elusive because children react so differently. She points out that more highly evolved primates can be raised successfully by their peers when they have lost their mother and asks whether this could not also be the case with humans.

We swing, on one hand, from omnipotent demanding parents to, on the other, the powerless parents who invokes genetic traits, social pressures, consumerism, peer pressure, and birth order as far more determinative of their child's development than they can be. Howard Gardner's effective critique of Harris's view, although he shows respect for her sincerity and scholarship, shows that the peers a child has are basically a question of the society and of circumstances the parents themselves create.

In the absence of parents and other adults, most children would not be able to deal effectively with life. . . . Whether on the scene or behind the scenes, parents have jointly created the institutions that train and inspire children: apprenticeships, schools, works of art and literature, religious classes, playing fields, and even forms of resistance and rebellion. These institutions, and the adults who run them, sustain civilization and provide the disciplines—however fragile they may seem—that keep societies from reverting to barbarism.<sup>13</sup>

10. Winn, Marie. *Children Without Childhood*, Penguin, 1984.

11. "Smack the Child and Praise the Lord," *The Independent*, September 24, 1999.

12. *Where is the Child's Environment? A Group Socialization Theory of Development*, July, 1995.

13. Gardner, Howard. "Do Parents Count?" *The New York Review of Books*, November 5, 1998.

In other words, children are born into a culture and this culture, with all its assumptions, history, and aspirations, will have a profound effect on how they experience their childhood and indeed their adult lives as well. Human cultures vary enormously in their approaches to the rearing of children and one culture cannot claim to be the template of good practice for all.

Yet there is the factor of our common humanity and something that can be recognized as universal childhood. In our work on behalf of young children around the world we should strive to understand this, and we should also deepen our perceptions and knowledge of our own culture and of others. In the roller-coaster-like plethora of advice, research, and increasing polarization of views, we must look for genuine aspects of childhood so that as parents, caregivers, and educators we do not become restricted to a particular one-sided approach.

How quality in early childhood education is defined and evaluated will be a concern not only for politicians, experts, administrators and professionals, but will also be a matter for a broader citizenry . . . It becomes important to create forums or arenas for discussion and reflection where people can engage with devotion and vision . . . Within these arenas a lively dialogue can take place in which early childhood education and care are placed within larger societal contexts and where questions concerning children's position are made vivid.<sup>14</sup>

If we wish to help our children develop "devotion and vision," we have to strive for them ourselves, as in our world they are no longer just a given fact of life. We can work for an international forum and in alliance with others for the benefit of children worldwide.

Universal childhood consists of basic elements that are the definition of being human and which appear in all our earliest years: the capacities for

walking, talking, and thinking. It is claimed that 90% of our learning takes place in the first three years of life, so how we acquire these capacities is of fundamental importance.

Walking, for which we are biologically equipped, is nevertheless a cultural activity. It is claimed that the Wolf Children of Sri Lanka and the Gazelle Boy of the Sahara did not learn this skill because they were adopted and brought up by animals.

Underlying learning to walk there is an inner adjustment—an orientation of the young child. The equilibrium of the organism, with all its possibilities for movement, becomes related to the equilibrium and all the possibilities for the movement of the whole universe, because the child stands within it. While learning to walk, children are seeking to relate their equilibrium to that of the entire cosmos. . . to meet the forces of statics and dynamics both in body and soul and to relate these experiences to the whole cosmos—this is what walking is all about.<sup>15</sup>

That these first steps are an enlightenment is vividly depicted on the child's countenance when it takes them. The child has found its place and beams up at us its joy at joining our community. In the ancient culture of Egypt, where these mysteries were experienced more directly and less cognitively, uprightness was considered divine. The backbone was venerated as the manifestation of the father god of the afterlife, Osiris. Mummy cases were made to stand upright for the passage through death and uprightness was petrified and made immortal in the obelisk. One of the greatest yearly festivals was when a Djed column, the symbol of the backbone, was hoisted from a recumbent position to a vertical one. This was celebrated as a deed of resurrection. Children, too, experience standing and walking for the first occasion as a unique and special event, toward which they have struggled for some time.

Speech is likewise the accomplishment of a whole human being. For the last hundred years it

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14. Dahlberg and Åsen, *Evaluation and Regulation: A Question of Empowerment. Valuing Quality in Early Childhood Service*, Eds. Muss and Pence, Chapman, 1994.

15. Steiner, Rudolf. *The Child's Changing Consciousness*, New York: Anthroposophical Press, 1988.

was thought that the ability to produce speech was a function of particular areas of the brain. However, recent research has shown that there is a widely spread, multi-centered language system that extends through the whole brain, including areas that were previously thought to have no involvement. It is likely, therefore, that speech is not just a skill that has been added in the course of evolution but something that permeates all our acts of thinking, feeling, and remembering. Language flows out on the current of breath and provides a basis for our thoughts.

An inviolate childhood is one in which these capacities of walking and speaking are allowed to develop in such a way that they can be transformed and renewed throughout a life time, not just as bodily functions but also as soul ones. Children must be allowed to breathe, in all the metaphoric and natural connotations of the word.

Martin Luther King said: "We are challenged to rise above the narrow confines of our individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity. . . . Through our scientific genius we have made a neighborhood of our world; now through our moral and spiritual genius we must make of it a brotherhood." These are latent powers of childhood, and in respecting the early forms of these gifts in our caring and upbringing, we can help our children realize their potentialities. What we learn, we learn so that we can transform it. We do not learn so that we can be held in learning's thrall. Our first breath is an expression of our potentiality, just as our first cry is an expression of our rights on earth. For the Egyptians, breath was the manifestation of the goddess Isis. Unlike her consort, she remained on earth to accompany humankind in its destiny. Her wings were laid across the chests and lungs of the dead as they returned to the realm from which they had originally come. She lived in the air which we all share and united humanity by entering us all without exception or preference. She was wise beyond all measure because she alone knew the secret name of the sun god. In Egyptian art she is often portrayed holding the new child, the offspring of her marriage to Osiris, on her lap and giving him her breast. Steiner spoke of the need to find the new Isis, because we have lost her and because she is that which expresses our common humanity. In our new realm of work

with the earliest years of childhood, we can find that the wisdom of childhood informs and inspires us. We can work with Isis and Osiris.

To this end it must be so among us that one helps the other in love, so that a real community of souls arises in which envy and all such things disappear, and in which we do not look each at our own particular goal, but face together, united in love, the great goal we all have in common.<sup>16</sup> This is the gift that children bring to us all, and in coming to a better understanding of this gift, by giving it the time and space to unfold, we endeavor also to transform ourselves.

16. Steiner, Rudolf. *The Search for the New Isis, the Divine Sophia*, Spring Valley: Mercury Press, 1983.

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## Fostering Ethical and Moral Values through Language

Language not only offers the child the opportunity to express her own thoughts and feelings, but also in growing measure the child can begin to perceive the world, the thoughts and feelings of other people and unfamiliar cultures. She can enter these new horizons, build human relationships, and learn to understand others in their different, unique states of being.

Language forms a sense of morality and love of the truth in a child because she learns that every word has a certain meaning, a certain sense. The child instinctively expects a specific action or reaction to take place with certain word usage; words and deeds match. Our attitude (ethos) and truthfulness are extremely important when we speak with children. Children do not understand irony or sarcasm. This developing capacity of speech must mature for the child to be able to see through an intentional lapse between what is said and what is meant and understand it as a joke or witticism.

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