

FORMING AN ALLIANCE FOR CHILDHOOD

Colleen Cordes

*The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God who is our home:*

*William Wordsworth
From "Ode, Intimations of Immortality
from Recollections of Early Childhood"*

As the millennium approaches, is the very notion of childhood obsolete?

Who, after all, really has the time in our fast-paced culture to let children be children?

The idea that children are green young shoots, to be lovingly tended, shielded from social storms and financial droughts, and encouraged to take their own sweet time to bud and bloom . . . isn't that an outdated model for the Information Age?

Why can't we treat them, instead, as small, programmable machines? Don't they come equipped, as a top federal science official has suggested, with "necktop computers?" Couldn't the speed and economic efficiency of their learning and growth be much improved by any number of technical improvements -- plugging them into new electronic technologies, for example, or prescribing the right drugs to relieve the asthma, depression, hyperactivity, violence, and other signs of stress from which they are increasingly suffering? Children must adjust to adults' schedules and priorities, right, not vice versa?

Those were the questions ringing in the air in February at Sunbridge College, as nearly 30 teachers, doctors, university professors, child advocates, and parents agreed to join together and boldly take up those very issues. They will work together as partners, they decided, in forging a broad new international coalition to challenge the rush to end childhood.

The new partnership, called the Alliance for Childhood, will be open to all who value childhood, in its fullest sense, as the human potential to grow in wisdom and love. This potential is every child's sacred birthright, suggested Michaela Glöckler, a pediatrician and author of *A Child's Guide to Health*. But it's also a capacity shared by human beings of all ages, she added.

And ultimately, keeping this ideal of childhood alive is essential to a healthy human future, the group agreed.

“What we share is a common reverence for the life of the child,” said Kate Moody, executive director of the Open Gates Dyslexia Program at the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston.

Christopher Clouder, chair of the International Council of Steiner/Waldorf Schools, echoed that idea, adding that adults’ respect for childhood ultimately reflects a respect for themselves.

“There are qualities of childhood,” Clouder explained, “such as imagination, creativity, and a sense of play and wonder, that human beings should never outgrow or suppress. But it’s these very qualities that are currently endangered at very young ages.”

Clouder and others in the group discussed the toxic mix of cultural, economic, and environmental transformations that are harming children around the world. One such threat to healthy childhood, many suggested at the meeting, is the overexposure of children to television, computers, and other electronic media. These tend to overwhelm their developing nervous systems, and to force them to deal with violence, sexuality, and other themes that even many adults find challenging. They also blunt the very powers of creativity and imagination -- the ability, for example, to create brand new images in one’s own mind -- upon which future progress in science and technology itself depends.

The current focus on educational technologies is distracting schools, teachers, and parents from meeting students’ real needs, added Lowell Monke, who teaches advanced computer technology for the Des Moines Public Schools. Adults, he said, now concentrate on buying children ever more powerful tools. Instead, they should be encouraging children to develop their own powers - - especially the inner resources and human capacities they need to relate to, and care about, a troubled world.

“Our external tools are being substituted in all kinds of ways for the inner development of our youth, and not just our youth, of all of us,” Monke added.

The group also pointed to documented increases in children’s health problems, such as depression, violence against and by children, obesity, attention deficit disorder, and other learning disabilities. John D. Young, a physician and former head of the Laboratory of Molecular Immunology and Cell Biology at Rockefeller University, noted an unprecedented rate of chronic diseases among children in Asia, such as allergies and cancer. Young questioned whether this might be related to the sedentary lifestyles of an increasing number of children, which can block the expression of children’s natural energies. Other environmental factors, such as pollution and stress, should also be considered, he added.

“It’s clear to me that many chronic diseases should not happen in childhood, but we see them more and more,” Young added.

Others expressed concern that many children suffer from too little time and attention from caring adults, too early an emphasis on intense academics, and from adults’ obsession with quantitative tests of the intellectual abilities and achievements of young children. The latter two are counterproductive, mechanistic responses to the real school issue, suggested some members of the group. Educational problems are predictable, they said, when a culture treats its children as harshly as does ours.

John Taylor Gatto, former teacher of the year in New York, added that the current mechanistic approach to education is shortsighted. Creative responses to human mistakes, he argued,

historically have been a major source of unexpected insights and experiential learning. Far from pressuring young children not to fail, he suggested, we should be encouraging them to value trial and error as a font of human wisdom.

“We’re not machines,” Gatto added. “So inadequacies and mistakes are to be desired. This is our birthright.”

And Bettye Caldwell, former president of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, put it this way: “What’s really missing in American education is a certain gentleness.”

Caldwell, now professor of pediatrics at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, called for the alliance to act as a “community of conscience,” working together to make the unmet needs of children a major social and political issue.

Children in many nations today also face even more extreme stresses: civil and international wars that destroy homes and divide families, stubbornly high rates of poverty, and the loss of parents from AIDS. Even in affluent America, about one in five children still grows up poor and an even higher number, rich and poor, suffer emotionally from the absence of a father or mother at home.

The damaging impacts of so many stresses on the young are being documented by researchers and noted by parents and teachers. The clear conclusion: However inconvenient for adults in a hurry, children are still in need of the time and space to grow at their own pace. In support of that goal, the new group agreed that each partner will continue his or her own ongoing efforts in support of children, but may now work in the name of the alliance as well. Each partner will be able to individually initiate new efforts, in consultation with project coordinators, or to join together with other partners in the alliance to serve on joint projects.

The coalition will also seek out other like-minded individuals and groups to invite to become partners in the new alliance. Those attending the Sunbridge meeting described the new group as a “soul alliance,” which will be as decentralized as possible. Its shared commitment to the preservation of childhood will act as a kind of inner “head” quarters and “heart” quarters. The partners agreed to create as little organizational bureaucracy as possible. Each partner will be free to contribute in his or her own way to the shared goal of practical action on the problems that threaten childhood.

The founding partners of the new alliance, most seasoned professionals in their 40s or 50s, ended the two-day meeting with an unusually childlike exercise of their own. Standing at a blackboard with chalk at the ready, Joan Almon, co-chair of the Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America, issued a challenge to the rest of the group: “What exactly is it that we want to protect for childhood?”

There was a brief silence. Then, Barry Sanders, grey-bearded professor of English and the History of Ideas at Pitzer College, mediaevalist, and author of the provocative book, *A is for Ox: Violence, Electronic Media, and the Silencing of the Written Word*, bravely plunged into the lull with a simple but powerful trio of ideals.

“Joy, and love, and freedom!” Sanders sang out.

Marilyn Benoit, psychiatrist, secretary of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and Washington lobbyist for children's causes, was right behind him, putting her own idealism on the line.

"A sense of wonder," Benoit volunteered.

From there, the group was inspired. Everyone, it seemed, wanted to share their own high aspirations for the best that childhood can offer. What followed was a wonderful, unexpected envisioning of the kind of paradise that the child in each of us longs for -- and deserves. The rights of children to grow at their own pace, to live intimately with the rest of the natural world, to make mistakes, and to have their special physical, cognitive, and emotional needs met -- for their own sakes, as individuals, and for the sake of a healthy human future -- all ended up on the long list of ideals that will guide the partners in their work together for the alliance

A short break followed. When the group came back together, Almon, inspired herself, shared with everyone an impromptu poetic version of the list, which she named "Childhood." And everyone present pledged to contribute in some way to the new group's work in support of childhood.

At the end of the two-day meeting of the full alliance, a smaller group met to consider one of the partners' first joint projects: how to respond to a growing emphasis on computers in preschool and elementary education.

As a task force, they decided to put together a package of supporting materials that will demonstrate why the emphasis on computers in educating young children is inappropriate. The package will include quotes and articles that have already been published, as well as a clear, well-researched statement about healthy child development, the hazards that computers pose to such development, and alternative technologies that parents and schools can choose to nurture children in more age-appropriate ways. The latter include, for example, play, artistic activities, gardening, nature exploration, storytelling, and the low-tech power of a library card.

Once the package is ready, the task force hopes to publicize it broadly, among U.S. policymakers, health-care professionals, parents, teachers, and school administrators. Writers in the group also agreed to try to alert the public to the issue by submitting articles and editorials to a variety of publications.

The February meeting was sponsored by the Center for the Spiritual Foundations of Education at Teachers College of Columbia University, under a grant from the Fetzer Institute, and by Sunbridge College. Joan Almon also helped to organize and moderated the meeting, which marked the birth of the alliance.

"Alone, there isn't much we can do," she told the group. "But if we stand together, there's an immense amount that we can do."

Joan Almon, co-chair of the Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America, has offered to coordinate communications between partners in the alliance and fundraising for joint projects. Her home address is 7303 Dartmouth Avenue; College Park, MD. 20740; U.S.A. Anyone interested in learning more about the alliance, working for children as an alliance partner, making a donation, or offering advice about fundraising can reach Joan by phone at 301-699-9058, by fax at 301-779-3272, or by e-mail at jalmon@erols.com.

Colleen Cordes is a journalist who has covered policy issues related to education, science, and technology in Washington, DC, for 17 years. She is a founding partner in the Alliance for Childhood and is coordinator for its Task Force on Computers and Childhood.

CHILDHOOD

Childhood Is a time for learning about the essentials -
about the heavenly world and the earthly,
about goodness, beauty and truth.

Childhood Is a time to be loved and to love -
to express fear and to learn trust -
to be allowed to be serious and calm
and to celebrate with laughter and joy.

Children have a right to dream,
and they need time to grow at their own pace.
They have the right to make mistakes
and the right to be forgiven.

Children need help to develop self-mastery,
to transform themselves and bring forth their highest capacities.
Children have a right to be spared violence and hunger
to have a home and protection
They need help to grow up healthy,
with good habits and sound nutrition.

Children need people to respect,
adults whose example and loving authority they follow.
They need a range of experience - tenderness and kindness,
boldness and courage, and even mischief and misbehavior.

Children need time for receiving and giving,
for belonging and participating.
They need to be part of a community, and they need to be individuals.
They need privacy and sociability.
They need time to rest and time to play,
time to do nothing and time to work.

They need moments for devotion and room for curiosity.
They need protective boundaries and freedom for creativity.
They need to be Introduced to a life of principles,
and given the freedom to discover their own.
They need a relationship to the earth -
to animals and to nature,
and they need to unfold as human beings within the community.

The spirit of childhood is to be protected and nurtured.
It is an essential part of every human being
and needs to be kept alive.

The Alliance for Childhood, partners working together to create a healthy childhood