

Different Children – Changed Childhood

by Armin Krenz

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“In earlier times everything was different!” This sentence, uttered by the author at home, was countered by his wife with a smile: “Yes, yes—in the olden days everything was made of wood, and we still had an Emperor.” Certainly a great deal has changed in the living conditions of children. Armin Krenz, of the Institute for Applied Psychology and Pedagogy in Keil, takes a look at the changes.

The Facts

Changes in society:

Children and young people in Germany are growing up in an increasingly aging society. Most often they have one sibling and live, more often than earlier, in a variety of family forms, in “alternative families.” They are often confronted with the separation or divorce of their parents. Approximately two thirds of children between ten and fifteen have already, at an early age, been drawn into decisions significant for their biographies.

Financial situation:

More and more often and in growing numbers, mothers are gainfully employed, and almost 25 percent of the actively employed mothers in the newly formed German states have a child less than three years of age. Almost 40 percent of the women with children under fourteen work in the evenings and on Saturdays, more than one quarter work on Sunday, and 16 percent work nights.

Single parents have a significantly higher risk of living in poverty than couples with children. Poverty for children and youth has been growing steadily since the 1990s. Parents today might spend up to half of the net family household income for the children.

Changed living situation:

To a large degree daily life is institutionally structured—through caretakers, the lengthening of school-time, and a plethora of activities for free time available in the educational and cultural realms. The specialization of life activities isolates children and young people more and more away from the society of adults, at the same time that the “worlds” of adolescents are more differentiated in the course of the day and in the course of the biography.

Children and youth who grow up in or near an urban residential area with a lot of traffic have to put up with sharply diminished opportunities for experiences and development in their neighborhoods.

Shifting of educational processes:

Educational experiences have shifted increasingly into out-of-school activities. Through the very different economic situations of the parents, very significant inequalities can develop in the educational possibilities of children and young people.

Communicating with classmates, participating in cliques, watching TV or playing video games, and simple chatting with friends are the favorite free-time activities. The media are an everyday experience for many. Compared with children in other European countries, the children of Germany are the most equipped with media technology.

Different conditions of socialization lead to different childhoods.

In earlier times children could grow up within a larger, extended family, with a number of siblings, and perhaps living with the grandparents or being cared for by relatives. Today there are an increasing number of “latch-key children” who grow up in an environment shaped by technology and the media, and oriented towards consumerism. In their movements and activities they are rather limited, with extraordinarily fewer acoustical and optical impressions.

Due to career mobility the parents are either absent for the greater part of the day or existing relationships are disrupted. The increasing poverty of many families and the anxiety of searching for a job bring further insecurity into the family.

Public discussions about education have led to earlier planning for the futures of children and youth, with more and more restrictions on their available free time. On the other hand, there are parents who are not engaged in their children’s education, who give little or no stimulus to their children’s education. Thus peers gain more influence over the behavior and experiences of children and young people.

Material needs are being met, but not the soul needs.

All of the foregoing makes it clear that it is no longer possible to speak of a stress-free (unencumbered) childhood in Germany. Childhood as a separate, free-standing, age-appropriate life-phase is scarcely to be found anymore.

To be sure, it is easier and more possible for many children to take advantage of cognitive developmental offerings, but at the same time it becomes more difficult for them to develop physically and with emotional stability. Stable relationships give way to educational benchmarks, which entail higher behavioral expectations of children and young people. The opportunities for development, which are not as equally available when compared to previous generations, always bring along new burdens, which can be too heavy for many children and young people. This can help explain many behavioral disturbances.

Many parents fulfill the material wishes of their children more frequently than in earlier times, but in greater numbers they neglect their children's basic soul needs, which might include, for example, spending time together, giving them the gift of unstructured time, calmly accepting the child's development, letting the child feel their acceptance, granting the child space for his/her own discoveries, and giving the example of worthy guidance.

Adults involved in education can hinder the child's self-competence.

Children and young people are frequently bound up in the expectations of the nursery school, the kindergarten, the school, their parents, their neighborhood, and the cliques of friends. They lack the free space to find themselves and to learn how to experience their own competence. In earlier times one saw children as unfinished, not-yet-developed beings, but today adults who are involved in their children's education regard them as personalities with "capacities demanding cultivation." They are called serious participants, but find themselves at the same time to be in a dependent position with expectations to live up to. In this way adults contribute daily to overloading childhood with contradictions. Along these lines, they bring forth their own "picture of the child," often very inconsistently, which also leads to further disturbances for the child.

In his article, "Being a Child Is not Child's Play," Klaus Peter Brinkhoff has hit the point on the theme of "childhood today." He brings forward certain concepts about childhood:

"Airbag childhood"

Most children today are well furnished with material goods, if not extraordinarily so, and they are caught and cushioned by a predominantly functioning pedagogical (social) "airbag system."

Consumer childhood

In past generations the main concern was procuring enough food for the whole family, but now a “merciless consumption of mass-produced toys” stands in the foreground.

Media childhood

The material media furnishings of children’s rooms and the extent of media usage are higher than that in any preceding generation. Children are courted and treated as consumers.

“First-row” childhood

Children witness and experience at an increasingly younger age events from which they were previously sheltered. Scenes of war and natural catastrophes are brought into the family home through television, sexuality is openly portrayed, and the “wide world” is experienced by ever-younger children through foreign travel.

Career childhood

In popular and also institutional pedagogy, many adults see “education from the very beginning” as a first principle. The greatest possible number of children should, from the earliest possible moment, find a “comfortable place on the educational carousel.”

Isolated childhood

The living situation of families takes place predominantly in structured social neighborhoods. Arrangements for free time, the workplaces of the parents, shopping malls, central schools, sports fields, gyms, and outside possibilities for relaxation are more strictly separated from each other. Children are frequently transported by their parents to friends and agreed-upon places; thus continuous social contact is more and more limited.

Virtual childhood

On account of the more restricted fields of activity and more limited living spaces, children turn more often to “reality software” and “second-hand experience” as offered by the media. In the place of listening to the rustling of the trees there are nature CDs, and instead of building a tree house in the garden or the woods oneself, children avail themselves of the corresponding building game over the Internet.

Endangered childhood

The price for the continuous further development of commercialization, modernization, mechanization, industrialization, and urbanization is high. Violence and aggression among children and youth, increased psychosomatic complaints, the rise of alcohol, pill, and drug abuse, the high proportion of eating disturbances, the frequency of traffic accidents, the increase in chronic illnesses as well as both attempted and completed suicides, all disclose that children and young people are increasingly caught up in stressful situations.

Multicultural childhood

Through the recent dissolution of countries in Eastern Europe, waves of immigration and opening of the borders, Germany has become a distinctly multicultural country. Important opportunities for development have arisen through this, but cultural variety contains hidden risks as well, such as over-the-border criminal activities, human trafficking, and increased religious radicalism.

Individualized childhood

In that standards have changed quite notably, it has become more a matter of being “isolated in the masses.” Traditional values lose their meaning, so that it becomes increasingly necessary for children, young people and adults to find “a new, firm ground under their feet.”

Uncertain childhood

In spite of many developments in the fields of technology and medicine, children and youth are confronted with many problems. These include questions about later careers or future jobs, as well as concerns for the world climate and social questions such as providing for retirement and pensions, justice among generations, and public health.

What is missing is security in development.

One thing becomes quite clear in this list: More than ever, children need security in their development to be able to build a stable identity. We need directed observations about how children are doing in their social and emotional development, and place-specific perceptions about the actual living situations of children, to be able to find out what children need to further their individual development and which pedagogical qualities or connections help children discover their resources for development. We need to extend these effectively in everyday experiences.

Goals (consequences) for a pedagogy adapted for the present time:

- We must strongly provide for children to be allowed to be children.
- A responsible pedagogy must give attention to the specific stage of the child's development and may not be allowed to sacrifice the present for the sake of the future.
- The idea of a "perfect child" from the earliest possible moment must be given up, as childhood should be built on the idea that mistakes must be allowed to be made, from which learning can take place.
- Children need examples upon whom they model themselves.
- Instead of a strong consumers orientation, children need "nourishment for the soul" that will help them build a stable foundation for the personality.
- They are dependent on adults who will again and again take on the task of understanding them in all their varieties of expression.
- Above all else they need the feeling of security.
- They need firm attachments and reliable relationships, so that even when they fall back, they will be able to recover and meet the challenges of everyday life with confidence and commitment.
- They do not need artificially arranged living spaces, but rather, comprehensive and extensive room for play and activity, where they can have real, tangible experiences.
- They need to have enough time to process and strengthen their perceptions, to be able to understand the contexts and consequences.
- They depend on a stable self-consciousness, as they get older, to be able to take on the tasks of daily life with independence, readiness for hard work, and joy in learning.
- They need adults who will work together with optimism, joy, and devotion, to actively enter into the quest for a world where "childhood" as an independent phase of life is protected or re-established.

Let us look into ourselves, to see how much devotion, joy, courage, positive attitude towards life, and inward participation in the lives of children we can bring towards the work of the re-establishing such a worthwhile world.

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