

ESSAY

The mystery of the disappearing childhood

Is childhood dangerous for children? Is that why parents are doing everything they can to ensure that childhoods disappear in the frenetic preparation for adulthood?

By Kalpish Ratna

Childhood is an adult myth. It is memory with a creative flourish. When we recall childhood, we crowd into it all the fears, pleasures and joys denied us as adults. Remembered deprivations reek of sacrifice and martyrdom. Remembered joys, of disinfected. Childhood is that safe aseptic haven all of us crave. Did we ever belong there? What innocents we were, we think, with the wisdom of 30 or 40. Even adolescence, with all its tribal rites, we recall with indulgence. How young we were, and how naive! So different from today's children! Today's children know everything. We wring our hands and wish on our children the amnesia that infects us today.

There is no doubt that most adults think childhood is dangerous to children. Luckily, it is a passing phase. The parents' only hope lies in dragging a child through it as quickly as possible, hoping he doesn't notice too much. Very soon the child will be an adult. The best way to safeguard a child is to keep him busy at preparing for adulthood. This can be done through clever time management. A successfully managed child will have no time for childhood at all. Adults take this responsibility seriously, and are remarkably proficient at running a child's life.

Adult motivation begins early. The child is just an infant when the uneasy conviction sets in that the simple feelings of love may be insufficient fuel for parenting.

Today's child, birthed in a nuclear family, is raised in an extended one. She has, besides her biological parents and grandparents, the paediatrician, teachers, children and parents in the playgroup, television and movie parents, parents in advertisements, school and tuition teachers, paediatricians, counsellors, sports instructors, therapists,

and every website that is remotely connected with childrearing. With so many parents to compete with, it is no wonder that most adults feel that parental love is an inadequate response to their child's needs. It is too easy, and too self-indulgent. Moreover, it is pleasant, and pleasures are always suspect. Duty must not be so enjoyable. Desperately trying to do her best for the child, the adult makes up rules. The thicket of you-may-do-this-but-not-that is so prickly and impenetrable by the time she is five that it is a brave child who risks breaking through.

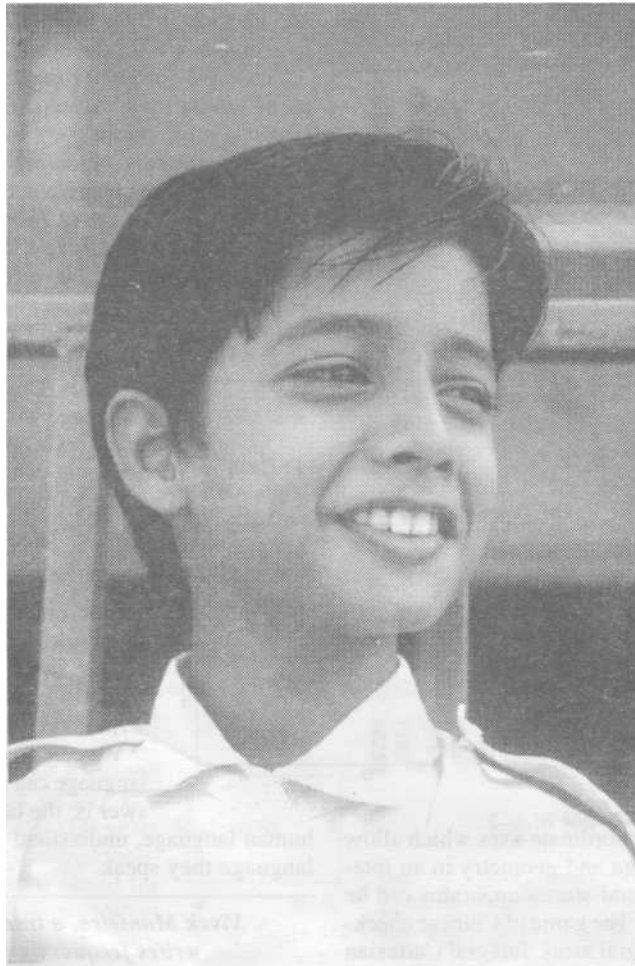
The wise child, who feels it is safer to please his parents, stays within the thicket, peering at the world through the chinks between right and wrong. But he is a child, after all. He tries, sometimes, to venture out, and falls back angry and

bleeding. At such times, the loving adult is always around to comfort him, for comfort and reassurance are important duties. *Don't hurt, the adult tells him. I'm here to hold you.*

Sure you are, retorts the cynical child, *but why make me bleed at all?*

Children perceive. Adults see and observe. They spend quite a lot of time and effort to make certain their children, too, see and observe.

Enlightened parents bemoan the time taken up by school work. Their own sort of management of child-time is so much more efficient. They first identify their child's natural talent or aptitude — most children have at least one — and then they get down to work. They encourage, cultivate, motivate, exploit and indulge this aptitude with careful training, coaching, and challenging. If this aptitude has to do with sports, the situation is even more serious. Time must be even more sternly organized so that studying does not suffer. There are special classes and



special special classes. There are camps for special training. And then there are competitions.

It's a great life for a computer chip.

But the majority of adults have *children*.

This is how the average 8-year-old in urban Mumbai lives:

7 a.m: Wake up, sleepwalk through bath, bowel movement, breakfast before 7.30. Ten minutes to locate socks, homework, forgotten project. 7.45 race with 5 kg bag of school books, 1/4 kg water bottle and 100 gm lunch to the school bus. 8.30 to 10.30, class. Fifteen minute break to visit bathroom, eat snack and play. May be kept back in class to finish copying notes from blackboard. 10.45-1.30, class. Half an hour or 40-minute break to have lunch, visit bathroom and play. May be kept in if homework unsatisfactory. 2 pm to 4 pm, class. Home at 4.30. Eats anything in sight and collapses in front of TV. Standard question: *What happened in school today?* Standard answer: *Nothing*. Remains in suspended animation till 5.30 despite being constantly urged to show homework. At 5.30 he sets out for tuitions, carrying 2.5 kg books. Returns at 7 pm, flings bag down and rushes out to play — which he will till 8 pm, when he can no longer be deaf to: *Come inside this instant, its dark already!* From 8 pm to 9, he does homework. If he's lucky, he gets to see the last 10 minutes of Cartoon Network. 9 pm-10 pm: Dinner, quality time with both parents, who are intent on conversing with a child who wants to watch TV. Remnants of homework are discovered, or a test confessed, and *"I'll wake you up at 6.30"* are the last words that register before he escapes into sleep.

The schedule of a gifted child is infinitely worse. Special classes begin at 6 am or even earlier. Evening playtime is taken up by practice. The anxiety to fit in homework and tests somehow drives both parents neurotic. TV is still soul food, but parental guidance might result in *Discovery* or *National Geographic* instead of *Cartoon Network*.

To make up for all this, today's child is given plenty of treats. The parent, exhausted by a week of leading his child's life, must, every weekend, dredge up enough energy (and money) to share his fun. The child, undaunted by excess, leads his elders through an orgy of pizza and ice cream and amusement parks and movies. Over the weekend, every shopping arcade is transformed into a paediatric Xanadu. Left to their own resources, children can scarcely buy and buy and buy. But they're on their parents' resources, aren't they? So they go right ahead and buy and buy and buy.

But life cannot go on like this. Something's got to give, and all too soon, it does. Sometime in this frenetic schedule,

parent and child are brought face to face. With a pang of anguish, the parent sees the human being within the chip she's worked so hard to programme. What does the child see? I don't think an adult would like to know.

Our bionic wonder isn't performing too well any more. He falls behind in class. Homework is never finished. He's rude and tearful. He doesn't wake up in time for the bus. When he has breakfast at all, he throws up in the bus. His lunch is brought back uneaten. He stuffs himself all evening and demands his favourite foods. He falls asleep over tuitions or plays truant. He wets his bed at night.

The parent is disappointed, reproachful, anguished. The school shrugs off responsibility.

What's going wrong? The parents have done everything that parents possibly can. They've slaved and saved and deprived themselves to give him every possible luxury. They filled his vacation with drawing classes and computer classes and cricket coaching and swimming and elocution and basket weaving and every other skill needed to face life.

And so he never can face life: he's too busy being equipped for it. The average classroom in any urban school will contain at least two children who are obese, 10 with eating and digestive problems, two or three with sleep problems, and a good number with headaches.

Illnesses like these are quickly supplanting fevers and diarrhoeas as the bulk of paediatric practice.

Our children are no longer deprived of nutrition and immunity — they're better off than children 20 years ago used to be. But they are deprived of childhood.

They're deprived of the main ingredient of growth: idleness. Today's child simply doesn't have the time

to be idle. He's being watched or set to do activities all the time. There is no opportunity for the non-dominant cerebral hemisphere to get on with its important activity of perception and insight. Today's child can't think any more. The only way he can be idle is to surf channels on TV, or cruise the Net.

Adults are too afraid of childhood to wish it on their children. *"Don't be childish"* is a frequently heard reprimand. That reproach capsules all that adults fear for their children. *Don't be childish* — why, what else can a child possibly be?

Childishness must be restored to children. That is not so difficult. Just wait for a child to say "Oh I don't know what to do next!" and very soon you will witness her joys of discovery.

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