

Raising the Children of the Nineties

Risa Doherty

Children of the Nineties are growing up in a vastly different world than their parents faced only a generation ago. Today's young have come to expect instant gratification: from cable channels that play back-to-back all night cartoons to the "29 Minute photo" store. As children, we grew tired of hearing how good we had it. Yet, we are constantly amazed at the world unfolding before our own children and the expectations they display because of our secularized, overly materialistic culture.

Only one generation ago, mothers did the laundry, cooking and cleaning, while keeping an eye on their precious progeny who played happily on their backyard swingsets and in their sandboxes. They toted their little ones along to grocery stores, post offices, and dry cleaners. Today, the at-home mothers who have no assistance with their errands and cleaning often postpone these chores until the weekend or evening, when their spouse returns from work, so that they can maintain a quicker pace, and free up their afternoons for child-oriented exploits. The focus has changed, and my son and daughter know who runs the show.

They know that some restaurants are designed specifically for their dining pleasure, providing crayons, toys, costumed characters and giant TV screens with cartoons. They know that "hands-on" children's museums and indoor playgrounds are available to them everywhere, and that movie theaters present myriad children's films, which are relentlessly merchandised. They know to seek out the toy section in every fine boutique. They are aware that warehouse-sized bookstores offer children's sections, which themselves dwarf the long-gone corner bookstore. Toy stores no longer display the once conventional "Please Do Not Touch" sign, and instead lovingly invite kids to sample the latest toys and computer software.

Frankly, having been born a couple of

years too late to appreciate Toys R Us, I am envious of today's children.

I looked at my spouse with horror one Sunday when he suggested that we go to a "real" museum. My son was as confused as I was as to how he was expected to respectably amuse himself at a museum. We went. After chasing my two children under grown-ups' legs and around the exhibit like an obstacle course I had to explain to my son that the security guards and museum patrons would not appreciate adjustments to the venetian blinds and the light switches. Ultimately, we discovered that the museum had a special children's room.

The secret is out on Madison Avenue too. Advertisers know who controls the purse strings. The all-powerful voice on the TV blatantly directs its new target audience to "Ask for Chuck E. Cheese, please," check with their parents before they call that handy 800 number to order a new magazine, and summon their folks to the TV to subject them to the latest super appeal from public television.

Some uninitiated mothers still hold out hope that they can shield their impressionable youngsters from the hypnotic media hype. Indeed, if a mother is bold enough to turn off the TV, in the wake of multiple demands for a desperately sought-after toy or trip to Discovery Zone, her resourceful youth will probably turn his attention to the day's mail to page through the latest toy catalogs, dog-caring them and ripping out the best pages to affix them to his bedroom walls.

Mass marketing has me scouring the area for yet undiscovered Burger Kings and McDonalds'. Not so that my children may partake of a well-balanced nourishing meal, since food pales in comparison to the object of our sacred mission, but in search of the missing figure from the set of Disney characters featured in the latest animated film. I cannot imagine that the excitement that fills our car at the

drive-through window as we finally obtain the missing Lion King figure could ever have been matched by the acquisition of a prized baseball card by a youngster in the Sixties.

Cross-merchandising is an ingenious mechanism geared to subliminally coerce parents into double-parking in front of Pizza Hut and begging the teenager behind the counter to sell them the missing Casper ghoul without an accompanying purchase.

I am sure that my son is not alone in begging for the home video version of a movie even before the credits flash across the screen. Unable to endure such badgering any longer, I was forced to explain the basics of distribution rights to him. Likewise, both my children are faced with a crisis whenever they unexpectedly enjoy a new television program: they do not understand why the show cannot be interrupted for snack time or replayed on demand.

The dissimilarity between the child rearing advice foisted upon me by my Mother, and the various new approaches left me both frustrated and confused. I started by reading about whether or not to stay home: one book said "yes," one book said "no," and one book directed me to stay home for a few years. Then came the child-rearing books. We grew into the paperback books on the revolving rack, that we read together with our little ones to help overcome each major obstacle of life: separation anxiety, potty problems, or prolonged pacifier or bottle dependence. We've been in school so long that we almost have trouble recognizing when we *don't* need professional guidance and can rely merely on common sense simple answers.

Many new mothers believe their self worth revolves around how well they prepare their children for the modern world. Mothers seat their children in front of the computer, teaching them how to maneuver

a mouse, even before they can properly manipulate their forks and spoons. I myself page endlessly through the latest catalogues for the best educational toys and travel to every town within a 35 mile radius to be sure that I have not overlooked that most creative and uniquely marvelous toy which will be the key to my child's future as a Nobel Laureate. We start planning their birthday parties six months in advance and hurriedly mail out each invitation with the urgency of a wedding invitation. More pint-sized guests attend our children's birthday parties than ever attended our own, because we never had play groups, Gymboree classes, or friends whose moms met at Lamaze.

Then there's the problem created by the overabundance of toys in most children's homes. This "overcrowding" problem results in part from the megaparties, and in part from parents and grandparents who no longer restrain themselves by limiting gift-giving to birthdays and holidays. Consequently, our children have more reason to believe that they will not leave a store empty-handed, and hence, the ongoing battle in the toy aisle or children's section of every large store. And, in response to my own mother's frequent inquiry: *No, my home is not a branch of FAO Schwarz.*

Our children are different because we parent differently. We give them the majority of our time and attention. But are we doing too much? Have we bought into a corporate manufactured set of expectations carefully designed to encourage us to spare no expense in assuring our children the best chance of leading successful lives, or else feel that we are somehow neglectful parents, relegating our children to lives as second class citizens?

The benefits of today's child-oriented American culture no doubt outweigh its costs. But parents must not lose site of the importance of spending simple, quality time with their children—time that will ultimately help build the most substantial adults and the most enduring childhood memories. ■

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Beyond Post-Modernism

Wesley Allen Riddle

Aimless people on aimless walks,
Prattle see; and prattle talks
Of fantasy-perceived reality—
In fervent tones for fervor's sake,
But of a content soon forgotten....

O ye dundering herd!

Who thinks for thee today?

To which the supposition mocks the charge
And begs the question yet:

Who art *thou* to judge me, of me or of us?

Say I am *that I Am* in every honest man,

Who holds the pen and sword of Truth and bids you:

Come hither, view your mirrored mortal spot;

Peer through the windows at your soul,

See therein what *lies*—or tries but truly cannot.

Then emboldened ignorance, a dead coalescent pur
Spews its buzz and din of thoughtlessness undone,
While spoiled and spurious, furious airs resist
That which Divine and Rational Mind would teach,
What stays forever hidden to children of *Why-not*.