

The **child care worker**



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GROWING UP: THE DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGE OF LEAVING HOME	3
ASSOCIATION DIARY FOR AUGUST 1989	6
THE TIMES WE WILL REMEMBER	7
BRIEWE: ARTIKEL 40, FAMILY HEALTH WORKERS	8
ASHLEY THERON: KINDERSORGDIENTSTE OORSEE	9
BOOKS: A CULTURE OF THE STREETS	12
BRIEF REPORT: SELF-AWARENESS COURSE	13
ELLEN DRAKE WRITES ON STREET CHILDREN IN OTHER COUNTRIES	14
GUARDING FAMILIES: HAZARDOUS OCCUPATION	15

**Journal of the
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Child Care Workers**

International Network Affiliate

CWLA

Child Welfare League of America

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Editorial Board Members: Merle Allsopp BA, HDE, NHCRC; Annette Cockburn LTCL, Dip.Ad.Ed.(UCT); Peter Powis MA (Clinical Psychology); Rose September BA (SW), BA (Hons), Dip.Ad.Ed.; René van der Merwe BA (SW) (Stellenbosch). United Kingdom: Peter Harper MSc (Clinical Psychology); USA: Dina Hatchuel BSocSc (SW) (Hons) PSW, MSocSc.

Editor: Brian Gannon

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The National Association of Child Care Workers is an independent, non-racial organisation which provides the professional training and infrastructure to improve standards of care and treatment for children in residential settings. Die Nasionale Vereniging van Kinderversorgers is 'n onafhanklike, nie-rassige organisasie wat professionele opleiding en infrastruktuur verskaf om versorging en behandeling standarde vir kinders in residensiële omgewings te verbeter.

National Executive Committee/Nasionale Uitvoerende Raad

Nasionale Voorsitter/National Chairman: Ashley Theron BA (SW), BA (Hons), NHCRC, MICC, 39 Michael Hendricks Street, Charlesville 7490. Tel: 021-418-1730 or 021-934-8789.

National Treasurer/Nasionale Tesourier: John Saxey AIAC, FICB(SA), P.O. Box/Posbus 3212, Cape Town/Kaapstad 8000. Tel: 761-7591.

Members/Lede: Roger Pitt (Border), Ernie Nightingale (Natal), Leon Rodrigues (Wes-Kaap), Barrie Lodge (Transvaal).

Directorate/Direktoraat

National Director/Nasionale Direkteur: Brian Gannon BA (Hons), MA, AICC, P.O. Box/Posbus 23199, Claremont 7735. Tel: 021-790-3401.

Regional Director (Transvaal): Di Levine BA (SW) (Hons), MA, MICC, P.O. Box 95129, Grant Park 2051. Tel: 011-728-3728.

Streekdirekteur (Oostelike Provinsie en Natal): Lesley du Toit BA (Soc.Sc), Hons BA (SW), Hons BA, MICC, Posbus 28323, Malvern 4055. Tel: 031-44-1106 or 031-44-6555.

Streeksekretaresse/Regional Secretaries Transvaal: Joan Rubenstein, P.O. Box/Posbus 27791, Yeoville 2143. Tel: 011-648-1120

Natal: Kathy Mitchell, P.O. Box/Posbus 28119, Malvern 4055. Tel: 031-44-6555

Border/Grens: Sarah Burger, Posbus/P.O. Box 482, King Williams Town 5600. Tel: 0433-21932

Wes-Kaap/Western Cape: Nicola van Rensburg, St Michaels, Hoofweg 63 Main Road, Plumstead 7800. Tel: 021-797-4186

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Two-way Traffic – I

This week we confirmed the flight plans for Dr Norman Powell to visit South Africa where he is to be the guest-speaker at our National Conference. At 18h30 on Thursday 21 September he boards Pan American flight PA 098 at Miami in Florida and spends a day in London before arriving in Cape Town on Saturday with a day or so to catch his breath before Conference starts on Monday morning.

Norman Powell is the latest of a number of distinguished overseas child care specialists to contribute to our national Conferences since the first in 1977. On that occasion we had guest-speakers from the child care associations in the UK and in Holland. Since then international speakers have been invited from the USA, Israel, Britain and Canada. With nearly all of these, contact has been maintained to the benefit of child care in this country.

Dr Powell will be giving the Keynote Address on "Competent Care, Competent Kids" on the first morning of conference, and on the following morning he will speak at the Biennial General Meeting of the NACCW to which all conference delegates are invited. As immediate past president of the National Organisation of Child Care Worker Associations (NOCCWA) in the USA, he has an understanding of the role of professional associations such as ours. He will also address a plenary session at the National Focus Day on Child Abuse on Wednesday 27 September. Beyond those three fixed engagements, Dr Powell will participate in a number of the sessions, and delegates will have the opportunity to meet him.

Also present at Conference will be Prof Mike Baizerman, a colleague of Jerry Beker (guest-speaker in 1981) at the University of Minnesota, and himself a recent visitor to South Africa at the time of our National Workshop on Street Children last July. Mike has proved to be more than a passing guest, and has continued month by month to help the NACCW with contacts and information regarding child care – and street children in particular. Mike will be presenting one session at Conference, but

will be in South Africa for most of September with the offer to consult wherever he may be useful.

It is hardly necessary to stress how valuable our overseas colleagues have been in the progress of child care in South Africa. To be able to draw on the experience of others has not only encouraged and inspired us, but it has in several cases saved us the trouble of re-inventing the wheel. Many South African workers have had the privilege of paying return visits, and it has been good to set up such two-way traffic. We all look forward to welcoming Norman Powell and Mike Baizerman to Cape Town in September.

Two-way Traffic – II

Quite the nicest thing to happen in the offices of *The Child Care Worker* this past month has been the arrival in the post of a page full of Letters to the Editor. Look at page 8. Just as your Editor must do as he 'psychs' himself up to write this column month by month, so might our readers remember the words of Thackeray: "There are a thousand thoughts lying within a man that he does not know till he takes up the pen to write".

Certainly for us who are brokers of words and ideas on the subject, one of the joys of child care is that it does have its own dialectic.

Yet in South Africa such exchange and discussion seems strangely mute. Where *do* people in this country argue about child care? Where *are* theories tried in the fires of dispute?

Or is it too much part of our South African ethic that we don't question, that we never challenge? How sad that would be for our profession. How much that might explain! So, a sincere word of thanks to our correspondents: you suggested something new, you challenged our politics, you responded to an idea, you protested your innocence – and so enriched the debate. Most of all, you reassured us about something we were beginning to doubt: that someone really is out there!

It would be good to know that a page-full of readers' views could more regularly be part of this journal.



GROWING UP

The Development Challenge of Leaving Home

Saul Levine

Saul Levine graduated in Medicine from McGill University in 1963. He is active clinically, and is widely published in the field of Adolescent Psychiatry, and his research interests centre largely on the development of Belief Systems in young adults, and adolescent behaviour in general.

In current popular views of adolescents and youths, myths abound. Somehow professionals and the public alike have "bought" messages regarding contemporary youth which are often invalid, colour their thinking, and worst of all, impose powerful expectations on our youth, which in turn can shape behaviour. We then have a clear instance of the "tail wagging the dog". If it isn't so, we'll change our perceptions, and then our reality, in order to make it so.

What are these myths?

First of all, it is just not true that the majority of adolescents go through inevitable *sturm und drang* (storminess and turbulence), during those formative years. To be sure some, upwards of 20 percent, *do* have tension and turmoil associated with hormonal and other changes, personality problems, family conflicts or related stress. But the majority go through that phase of life quite smoothly, and many do so with exuberance, energy, enthusiasm, and optimism.

Second and related to the first, it is not the worst decade (or so) of an individual's life. Would not many of our readers prefer to relive those years of relative freedom from the shackles of responsibilities, when we had only to look "forward to" (instead of behind us)? Is it not at least as difficult to be elderly, or middle-aged?

Third, it is not the worst era of all time to be an adolescent. Certainly multiple options, rapidity of technological changes, unemployment, and the spectre of nuclear disaster are niceties of the

eighties, but not too many generations ago, youth were deemed lucky to have lived as long as adulthood, and the threat of dying a violent or painful death was much greater. The possibilities for the future are frightening, to be sure, but they are also full of potential and promise.

Fourth, adolescents are not paragons of virtue, nor are they the scourge of civilisation. Trite, you say? There are still many individuals who harbour dogmatic, unwavering, close-minded views of our youth, and try to fit any behaviour or activity of young people into their rigid preconceived notions. Young people are *not* grossly dissimilar from their parents. Many have the same hopes and ideals, the same value systems and attitudes, as their mothers and fathers.

Fifth, identity, the theme which Erik Erikson postulated as *the* central task of adolescence, providing answers to such questions as "Who am I? Where am I going? How? Why?" is *not* the sole domain of that age group. We *all* ask ourselves these same questions to a greater or lesser extent almost on a daily basis — for life.

It is perhaps no wonder that we are confused about the process of growing up, and out. Adolescence is a complex multifaceted concept, which defies exact and unanimous definition. The inherent confusions abound: chronologically, depending upon the jurisdiction, the ages of sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen can represent the age of informed consent(16), driving(17), voting(18), or drinking(19), with all kinds of added variations thrown in for good measure.

The onset of puberty supposedly characterises the physical onset of adolescence, but we know this to have the widest possible variation in timing. Even this is not always heralded by the appearance of secondary sexual characteristics. By the same token, the closing of the epiphyses of the long bones of the body is as ludicrous a definition of the end of that

phase of life.

We know that adolescence is characterised by an upsurge in various hormones produced by different endocrine glands: the gonadotrophins (estrogen, androgen, testosterone) and growth hormones are produced at much higher levels, and there are increases in adrenal hormones (steroids) and thyroid hormones. Accompanying these physiological changes are new and powerful urges, especially in the areas of strength, power and body awareness on the one hand, and sexuality on the other.

There are also psychological changes occurring during that period which enable the young person to move from the relatively concrete thinking of childhood to hypothetical deductive reasoning of adulthood, enabling him/her to reason much more along theoretical, abstract, philosophical, and ideological lines. They are also burdened much more by thoughts of the Self, which may appear narcissistic but usually have to do with insecurity and bolstering their self-esteem. Finally, this is a period of the relative ascendancy of the peer group, with a commensurate diminution in the time spent with the nuclear family. But we should never forget that the family is still vital to the adolescent.

What all this means, of course, is that the *sine qua non* of this all too brief period of life is *change*. Not only are they in a changing world: customs, values, attitudes, as well as actual life styles, but their bodies and minds are changing at the most rapid pace of the life span, except for infancy and old age. There are hormonal changes and anatomical changes, especially in secondary sexual characteristics, height and bulk. There are cognitive changes, moving from concrete to more abstract reasoning patterns. There are new bodily urges which must be controlled and contained, especially sexual and aggressive, and new bodily capabilities which accompany

them. There are new behaviour patterns, more time spent with friends, more questioning of parental authority, and more demands on everybody, including themselves.

If adolescence is the age of "I" and Identity, let us look at a number of subtasks subsumed under that rubric, *all* beginning with that letter:

- **Impulse control:** The adolescent, partly because of hormonal changes, feels stimulated by sexual urges; he is also much more powerful than even a few months earlier; he must learn to channel his new urges in a socially acceptable and constructive direction; if he cannot do so, he comes up against the vested authorities of society.

- **Industry:** The adolescent is developing academic and/or vocational skills; he is pursuing schooling and career choices; largely due to personal initiative and external pressures, he is working at preparing the foundation for his lifelong work and hobbies, including recreational and athletic skills, when he "finds" something to turn him on, it is exciting to see the blossoming in all spheres of his or her life.

- **Independence:** The adolescent is learning about the boundaries of his powers and control, just how far he can go before coming up against rules, laws or adult limits; he is spending more time away from home; he is developing a sense of personal autonomy; he is working on separation-individuation, in preparation for the ultimate task of Leaving Home.

- **Ideology:** The adolescent develops his own value system although often not too dissimilar from his parents'; he "tests" attitudes and ideas against others; he can become committed to movements and causes; or often takes impassioned stands.

- **Identity:** The adolescent learns about himself, develops a self-image, discovers just who he is and what he is really like, what are his strengths and weaknesses, what do people like, or dislike about him; a sense of self-worth, or self-esteem should be evolving at this time.

Adolescents form a paradoxical shrinking proportion of the population. That is, for all our public preoccupation with that age group, their relative numbers are falling because of the decline in the birth rate, and increase in life expectancy. Furthermore, for all the "noise" and rhetoric, there is a dearth of mental services for adolescents.

Why are psychiatrists and other mental health professionals particularly interested in the group? Because they represent an increasing utilisation of our services; because they are the beginning of the maximal age of onset of some major psychiatric disorders (e.g. schizophrenia); because the suicide rate

in adolescents has risen dramatically in the past two decades; because disturbed adolescents become disturbed adults; and because we recall our own years of adolescence vividly and emotionally. But in this article we are not concentrating on patients or clients. We are focusing on the "continuum of the normal", sons and daughters who go through the labour of leaving home in widely different ways.

With all this background, the young person prepares himself for the inevitable, for leaving the family hearth and home

With all this background, the young person prepares himself for the inevitable, for his leaving the family hearth and home. To accomplish this smoothly, the various subtasks, all the "I's" have to be well on their way to being accomplished. If for some reason this has not been achieved, separation-individuation will suffer, and leaving home will occur, if at all, in a conflict-ridden manner.

There are four general ways in which "normal" young people finally make the physical transition from home, the protective womb, to the outside world. We must bear in mind, however, that emotional separation is much more difficult. The major maturational trick is to get to the point where the young person can say "I am an autonomous, mature human being", and *still* retain close emotional ties with this family "THAT is true separation-individuation.

- **First:** The most common manner of leaving the nuclear family is characterised by a smooth transition, and is called *continuous* (50 percent). The young person might leave just prior to college, or not until marriage, and at any point in between. But in this process, there is adequate preparation, working through anticipatory grieving, contingency planning, and role rehearsal. This usually occurs in individuals who have generally been good "copers and adaptors", who have a network of support, and a history both of being motivated, guided and supported while at the same time given the space and autonomy to make mistakes and practise control of their own lives even at an early age.

- **Second:** *Discontinuous* transitions (30 percent) are obviously not as smooth as the above. They are marked by "blips on the screen". That is, there is more hesitancy and impulsive behaviour, more starts and stops, more ambivalence. Each of the halting, tentative moves is met by equally unreliable and unpredictable responses on the part of parents and others. But the general background superstructure is one of positive support and caring. There is planning and rehearsal but their extent and depth are not as comprehensive as in continuous transitions. There is more stress involved before, during, and after, for all concerned. Not all contingencies are accounted for, and consequently anything unexpected can cause an increase in intrasystem tension. The fact is that in this form, as with most of the others, there is a pattern already established. One is often able to predict an individual adaptation to change on the basis of past experiences. However, the present context and conditions obviously have to be considered, lest expectations are allowed to shape behaviour, as in a self-fulfilling prophecy.

- **Third:** Further along the continuum are the difficult transitions which I term *disruptive* (15 percent), for obvious reasons. These are marked by dissension and emotional upheaval. The young men and women who go "through this turmoil" are usually the ones who had most difficulty with inherent changes associated with adolescence (above). Milestones and crises are usually marked, in their lives, by rocky relationships and personal displays of angry outbursts or depressive withdrawals. Performance in school, social relationships, drugs, have marked to some degree the past years. They are usually time limited, but they inevitably wreak havoc with family and friends. It is as if the very process of leaving "has to be" worked through via confrontation and conflict. Paradoxically, in order to effect a satisfactory resolution. There is hell to pay along the road, but the end result may in fact be successful, if the conflict has not been allowed to cause irrevocable damage.

- **Fourth:** Last, and least satisfactory, certainly to the parents, are the leavings which I term "*radical departures*" (5 percent). These are sudden unexpected and dramatic detours from seemingly conservative and inexorable paths of family education and life style, into living arrangements, activities, and groups which defy parental imagination. The groups, often referred to as cults, can in reality be religious, political, therapeutic or of any other totalistic persuasions, but they captivate the ideology and commitment of the young people who join. Parents go

through unimaginable pain, for they see their dreams disappearing, and spectres of disaster looming. These young people, contrary to the above, do *not* offer many clues from prior behaviour patterns and adaptation to change and challenge. Many of them have done very well in a variety of spheres.

It is in the period of transition to adulthood, the crystallisation of separation-individuation that they run into their difficulties. Even then, there is a serendipitous nature to the process. The young person has to be in a relative state of alienation and demoralisation, with recurrent questions about his/her self-esteem and future — a kind of existential agonising which is not at all uncommon among older adolescents, *and* — a group has to make itself available at that “fortuitous” moment, that Critical Period, and the “chemistry” has to work. Only if all these ingredients are present, *and* the group offers an absolutist and uplifting belief system (Believing), and a respective and cohesive communal milieu, will the Radical Departure take hold. But take heart, more than 95 percent of young people who go this route return to the fold in under two years, chagrined, chastened, matured.

What can parents do to ensure the smoothest transitions for their sons and daughters — *and* themselves? In reality they can obviously ensure nothing, but they can help create conditions in which young people grow and move in positive directions, or at least mitigate the negative characteristics of circumstances or personalities of their youth. Parents of adolescents thus have their own tasks to accomplish in order to facilitate the transitions.

They have to balance an approach which emphasises opportunities and optimism, encouraging and supporting independence and individual initiative, while at the same time presenting dissenting ideas, teaching about contingencies, crises and consequences, and even limit setting, if necessary. Parental responsibilities are to inculcate a system of standards and values, without preaching that there is only one way (“my way”). The ability to listen without harshly judging, to discuss openly, to be flexible to difference and change is something that is transmitted at an early age. Rather, all of these characteristics of “ideal” parental behaviour are not “applied” strategically prior to the young person’s leave taking. We are discussing a process which hopefully has gone on for years, which has created an atmosphere which enabled the best characteristics of their youth to flourish, and diminished the deleterious effects of the less salutary aspects of their peculiarities.

I am an inveterate optimist about our youth and their future. Alarmists, and there are many of them, would have you believe that our society is on a collision course with disaster, and that young people will face an inevitably sordid end. We are presented with a litany of woe in the various media: bold headlines over articles, documentaries on television, special programmes on radio, all document the demise of our culture and values, and

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by extension, our youth. In a spate of recent books — *Children Without Childhood* (Marie Wynn), *Our Endangered Children — Growing Up in a Changing World* (Vance Packard, Little Brown), *The Hurried Child* (David Elkind, Addison Wesley) — we are told that parents no longer care about their children, that neglect, exploitation, abuse, and deprivation abound, and that these are entirely new phenomena. We learn that boys and girls are confronted with excessive television, early sex, dangerous drugs, and absent parents, and that there are inevitably dire destructive consequences in store for them. Our children, we are warned, face the spectre of the disintegration of the nuclear family and of traditional social supports, of the failure of schooling, of high and permanent unemployment, and of the spreading of dangerous cults in the context of potential nuclear annihilation. And youth, we are led to believe, are responding to these disintegrating conditions, by earlier displays of aberrant and antisocial behaviour. Three well-known public commentators have recently issued strong condemnatory statements about our children, illustrating the inherent difficulties of growing up in the 1980s, in a society gone awry. Allow me to quote from their works:

● “I see no hope for the future of our people if they are dependent on the frivolous youth of today, for certainly all youth are reckless beyond words ... When I was a boy, we were taught to be discreet and respectful of elders, but the present youth are exceedingly wise and impatient

of restraint”.

● “Our adolescents now seem to love luxury. They have bad manners and contempt for authority. They show disrespect for adults and spend their time hanging around places gossiping with one another ... they are ready to contradict their parents, monopolise the conversation in company, eat gluttonously, and tyrannise their teachers”.

● “I would there were no age between ten and three and twenty, or that youth would sleep out the rest; for there is nothing in the between but getting wenches with child, wronging the ancients, stealing (and) fighting”.

These contemporary sentiments were voiced by Socrates in the third century B.C., Hesiod in the eighth century B.C., and by William Shakespeare, in *A Winter's Tale*, in the sixteenth century. Obviously, *plus ca change, plus c'est la même chose* (the more things change, the more they stay the same).

Aside from the fact that alarmist statements sell, there seems to be a vested interest on the part of some seers, to predict the worst. If one is critical of western societies, or our economic system, the doom saying serves a personally useful purpose. If one feels that the answers to our youth problems lie in pumping more money into the system, then rallying anti-status quo sentiments via vehement rhetoric, fuels the fires of discontent, and puts the governments on the defensive. If one is an unhappy youth-worker, involved with the small proportion of our youth in genuine social and psychological trouble, then extrapolation to the whole of society is almost understandable, even if not valid.

What we tend to do when we concentrate on the pathological aspects of society rather than the healthy, is to lose sight of what constitutes the latter. Take it from me; psychiatrists did that for years. They would develop theories of normal behaviour based solely on their work with disturbed individuals. The same type of disservice that was done to some patients, is now being perpetrated on large numbers of our young people. Through the eyes of the pessimistic prognosticators, all of our youth now get painted with the same depressing brush. It is not that we haven't got our problems. Anyone who has studied and worked with young people around the world would recognise that there are too many inequities and iniquities, no matter what the social or economic system. We have a responsibility to address gross disparities between haves and have-nots, we have to make school and job opportunities open to all young people, independent of background, race or creed, and we must ensure that corrective inter-