THE CONSERVATION OF CHILDHOOD

FRITZ KOCH

Lake Geneva New School
Chataigneraie sur Coppet (Vaud), Switzerland

Henry Ward Beecher has said that no man is a man unless he has some of the boy left in him. Fortunate is the man of that type and fortunate too the woman that has some of the girl left in her, for the boy and the girl and the child element in the adult adds greatly to the realization of the universal happiness we are all striving for.

This paper is, however, not so much concerned about youthful adults as about the conservation of that original naïve, playful mental attitude which we find in typical children.

The list of things that man considers as absolute necessities is steadily growing and consequently an unnatural stress is forced on the ability to earn money. This not only prevents adults from living a full, well-balanced life but it reaches clear down into childhood. The relentless money hustler arrives finally at that state of narrow-mindedness where he can no longer appreciate the reasonable right of a child to live the full life of a child with all its fanciful dreams and delightful make-believe.

We, wise adults with our great mass of accumulated knowledge, have found certain ways, which, if strictly followed, may lead one rapidly to much desired results. Our faith is very great in this course, because this or that man "got there" by doing so and so. One sometimes gets the impression that the text is "Seek ye all the other things and the Kingdom of Heaven will be added as you hustle along." The rapidly growing craze of today to make the utmost show of actual or borrowed wealth has created in the brain of some shrewd fanatic the brilliant notion that a training in trades and commerce and make-money-quickly processes should commence even as the child emerges from the cradle. Every minute in life being represented by a coin it is highly

essential that children become grown-ups as rapidly as possible. The sooner the young infant learns to grasp and reproduce the methods and manners of adults, the greater is the applause, for the adult ways and manners are the only ones that bring "tangible" results.

Now wouldn't it be strange if we should wake up some day and discover that an overfed, swell-housed, swell-automobiled nation is after all not such a desirable achievement as we imagine it to be—at least not worth the sacrifice it costs. Perhaps those who have enjoyed a glorious childhood will discover some day that their children, not having had the same advantages, have grown up pitiable specimens of humanity, utterly unable to enjoy either the wealth they accumulated or any of the worthier pleasures that money cannot buy.

If an education given to a child shall enable him to live a full life later on as well as during this school period his education must be such that when he finally enters upon his vocational career he will be deeply interested not only in his vocation but also in many other things including at least one hobby of some kind distinctly different from his chosen vocation.

Whereas it may be an excellent idea to have pupils, from their thirteenth year on, gradually, tend to a specialization along vocational lines, we must not lose sight of the fact that adults work eight hours a day and that most of the worst mischief in the world is done by those who do not know what to do with themselves in the hours when they are free from work.

When twelve years of reading fails to interest children in good literature and in the secrets of nature to which books furnish a key, something is wrong somewhere. When twelve years of practice in writing does not enable one to express in legible characters an account of some common event that flows glibly from the end of the tongue, something is wrong somewhere. A lack of interest for the things written and read about are to my mind one of the reasons for such unsatisfactory results. Who knows but that, notwithstanding the heroic efforts of reformers, the subject-matter still lacks genuine adaptability to a childish nature and that the methods are *still too much akin* to those by

which venerable adults enlarge their store of abstract knowledge. It seems to me that because the more mature and cultured mind keenly enjoys the highest in art, literature, and music, one is often inclined to demand an appreciation on the part of the child which is forced and unnatural. The process of urging children to form and express personal opinions about the most sublime achievements of great men is wrong because children have neither a natural desire nor any business to do so. The method, too, of early forcing a crystallization of opinion by having children read a great deal *about* the highest literature and art is most disastrous to the development of a strong personality because a child has not lived long enough to corroborate or supplement the book-material by results from personal experience. Such opinions are consequently without backbone and we have, as a result, on the one hand those who are puffed up and conceited and on the other hand those who, a few years later, have forgotten both the subject and their opinion. An opinion that is formulated unverified by personal experience, is only borrowed property and very frequently proves to be valueless.

As to hearing and seeing music, literature, and art much of the very best acts beneficially and successfully upon the child even in cases where it is not altogether adapted to his interest and emotional nature. The mistake is made when we *expect reactions* from these influences in forms of expression identical to our *adult* view of looking at things.

But not only through adult school-subjects is the child spirit in the child suppressed when it has scarcely commenced to blossom. There are other agencies that encroach with equally harmful results. Children to thrive best, should be much with children. The child that is always with adults assumes adult ways and cuts out of his career experiences that leave him mentally crippled when he has reached maturity. He can never be a full man. Children that frequent theaters, balls, etc., are forcibly influenced by the conversation and ideals of adult performers and try to be grown-ups in their thought and expression. There is a vast difference between the serious (sometimes unconscious) attempt of the precocious child to be an adult and

the playful make-believe of natural children when for the mere novelty of it they dress up in big people's clothes.

Not least among the detriments to a natural development of children is fashion, a forced culture of vanity and extravagance. Not only do the parents but also the teachers set the example. To follow slavishly all the extravagance of fashion appears to be a far stronger tendency than the desire to be refined and simple. It is so utterly common to be fashionable, nowadays, that I should think teachers, at least, would refuse to imitate the great mass of humanity, unless the fashion happens to be adaptable to the particular personality of the wearer. For the benefit of the children I would recommend that all "self-crippled" exponents of vanity be banished from the schoolroom.

Dressing fashionably, dressing elaborately is often so strongly impressed even upon the youngest children that it prevents them from concerning themselves about things of much greater value to them. This is particularly noticeable not only among the wealthy but among children of the great middle class and among those who believe it necessary to live up to the very limit of their income.

Cleanliness is a virtue not demanded from the factory hand while at work, but children, while at play, are constantly reprimanded because of their dirty hands, spots on their clothes, etc. So frequently are they called away from their real life because of this, and so dressed up are many of them (because the father can afford it and the mother likes it) that natural, intense, wild play is gradually replaced by occupations of lesser value, or by systematic games, like tennis, basket-ball, and baseball. As, however, the systematic games are indulged in by only a small section of the children generally, owing to an insufficient number of places, this does not affect the great majority; and, excellent as they are, *systematic games* should not be the only ones played by children. The free plays of their own making, and such simple games as hide and seek, or hare and hounds give more scope to the exercise of the imagination because they are bounded by very few rules.

Spontaneous action and natural growth take place when

children are least encumbered by critical adult supervision during their free play hours. They are naturally diggers in the dirt, waddlers in puddles, climbers of trees and fences and balustrades. Real boys and girls are rovers in fields and forests, in alleys and dangerous places. They play hide and seek until it is pitch dark and come home all perspiration and mud and radiant happiness. They are awfully hungry and yet a genuine sleepiness overtakes them even while they eat their bread and milk.

Real boys and girls are fascinated by the most gruesome ghost-stories and they listen to the most impossible fairy tales with breathless attention. They keenly enjoy the inner battle between fear and courage. The child that never knew fear has never intensely felt the glory of a victory when courage wins out. The child that has never tried to down hatred, jealousy, or revenge is probably the child that never played intensely to the very limit of his strength. When children play intensely there is noise and lots of it—and that is right. It should be so. Children who play noiselessly never test their capacities to the uttermost and fail to expand as they should. Growth of mind, body, and character takes place not nearly so thoroughly and successfully in the peaceful kindergarten or the well-ordered classroom as in the clash-bang hour of genuine, exhaustive play.

But how are boys and girls going to play like this when they are constantly dressed-up in Sunday clothes? And how is it possible so long as parents have a thousand foolish fears and when they feel terribly disgraced upon beholding their children all mussed up?

Children up to fourteen should wear play-clothes designed on the simplest lines and made of tent canvas if needs be. Children should wear stockings and sandals only when the weather gets to be too cold, but run barefooted otherwise. Rubbers are inventions to please the housewife. To the children they are the cause of more sickness than their not wearing them would bring. Why not let them exchange their sandals for slippers as they enter the house. Talks about rubbers and leggings and this wrap and that and all kinds of temperature have created a greater wave of fear and sickness and worry than all the written and un-

written ghost-stories put together, and furthermore such over-anxious adjustments to weather conditions have prevented the child from freely exercising his real inner forces. I have seen small children on a bright winter day so encumbered by great quantities of beautiful clothes that they could not possibly spoil them for they could scarcely waddle around in them. Of course, real play was out of the question. The natural child that has not already been spoiled by elementary lessons in vanity cares very little for costly clothes. It is the vain parent that early inoculates these tendencies, irrespective of the child's more normal demand for clothes that are first of all practical. Such clothes can be quite artistic. In fact, much more so than the questionable finery that ignorant parents often select as the best.

We are living in an age when the well-patched garment is no longer a sign of thrift and economy but rather a sign of poverty. The man is considered a pauper who does not keep his children constantly dressed in new and fashionable clothes. But I question the wisdom of this attitude, as it is not only the cause of much unhappiness among those who cannot keep pace with the more "fortunate" (?), but a constant supply of new garments creates either a vain passion for clothes or it becomes such a common event that children grow indifferent. They fail to enjoy the keener pleasure that comes to the child who on rare occasions is surprised by the gift of a new suit, which for a long time is childishly treasured and worn at first only on holidays.

City life is, of course, very detrimental to the natural growth of children, but even those families who decide that it is wisest to live in a flat, can do several things by way of solving the playground problem for children. Wherever back yards are to be found there perhaps, by an agreement between all the neighbors, a common playground can be established by putting doors in the dividing fences. Such a larger playground, with its many nooks and corners, is very essential to *intense, free play*. Children should be provided with plenty of old dry-goods boxes, odd board, and bits of worn-out rugs, etc. The fantastic houses made of this material stir up the imagination and furnish manual work most closely related to their ideals. The crude model of a ship

whittled and rigged in the most primitive manner has an educational value which we frequently underestimate. We criticize a child's work because we fail to find in it those elements that happen to constitute our *preconceived* notion of what the thing ought to be, and we are blind to any of the originality expressed because it is foreign to us and obliges the lazy mind to adjust itself to new conditions.

I once saw a class of 32 slum children produce 22 different inventions for strengthening four legs attached to a table-top. The vital imagination in these children had not been prematurely adjusted to our notions of what is right and proper. Without having had some opportunity to experiment children do not fully appreciate the achievements of the race. A most refreshing diversity and many suggestive improvements characterized the whole work of this class, but, above all, these children lived intensely *the life of people eleven years old*. They were not forcibly drawn into work-ideals of people twenty years their senior. The delusive fact that children can early be trained to act very much like adults, and skilfully to accomplish tasks equal in workmanship (if not excelling) those of adults, is not at all a sign that children should be made to do these things. Such evidence is rather significant of the fact that adults are not nearly such wonderful creatures as they imagine themselves to be. Adults are often occupied in their regular business with things that children can learn to do in a few years of apprenticeship under the right kind of a leader. It is commonly known that the art productions of children ten years old are usually in every way superior to the artistic attempts of inexperienced adults.

One of the greatest mistakes we make is to consider children inferior beings. It is just as bad as the habit of making unnatural sacrifices for them. When a family in Germany goes out to a picnic, the men carry canes, the women carry the babies, and the children drag along the heavy lunch-basket. But also in America are children often made to feel that they are "only" children. I take exception to the word "only." Those who look upon children in that light are unreasonable, unjust, and ignorant of a true attitude toward life. Such people possess a remarkable lack

of humility and get a good share of my profoundest sympathy whenever, and as soon as, I am able to down my grudge against them.

Let us recognize children as children, neither granting them all the privileges of adults nor depriving them of their particular rights as *junior members* of our race. Picture to them with fervor all the fun and glorious opportunities that their special plays and occupations bring, and children will enthusiastically live their happy life and ardently love it until they have outgrown it or even beyond that time which, by the way, is no serious fault.