

Educating Children in a Socially Toxic Environment

James Garbarino

[This article is reprinted with permission of the author, James Garbarino. It was also published in [Educational Leadership](#), Vol. 54, No. 7, April 1997. © 1997 by James Garbarino.]

Abstract

This article discusses the problems of children growing up in a socially toxic environment. Social toxins include violence, poverty, and other economic pressures on parents and their children. They include disruption of family relationships and other trauma, despair, depression, paranoia, nastiness, and alienation--all contaminants that demoralize families and communities. These are the forces in the land that contaminate the environment of children and youth. These are the elements of social toxicity.

What does it mean to be a child today? Are we doing enough to protect our children -- to grant them the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?

When I was in high school, I wrote an opinion column for the school newspaper. One month I criticized the fraternities at my school, an act that led many of my peers to become angry at me. As a result, late one night a car pulled up and dumped garbage on the lawn of our house: I was the victim of a drive-by littering.

I often think about that incident when I visit schools and communities. How would that incident play itself out if I were an adolescent today? What might well happen is that I would become the victim of a drive-by shooting. Things have changed.

Some of this difference between then and now simply reflects today's greater awareness of problems. When I was in high school, kids certainly were using drugs and alcohol. Girls did get pregnant. Child abuse did exist. But for the most part, we didn't know about it. With the benefit of hindsight, I realize that, as kids, we were shielded from knowing some of these things by

adults who thought we would be better off not knowing. Some of the change is therefore a change in awareness all around.

But the change we are observing is more complex than a combination of greater awareness and better reporting. For instance, Fordham University's Institute for Social Policy produces an *Index of Social Health for the United States*, based on 16 measures, including infant mortality, teenage suicide, dropout rates, drug abuse, homicide, food stamp use, unemployment, traffic deaths, and poverty among the elderly. The Index ranges between 0 and 100 (with 100 being the best). From 1970 to 1992, the Index showed a decline from 74 to 41 (Miringoff 1994). This means that the overall well-being of our society decreased significantly.

Kids today *are* in trouble, more trouble than kids were when I was growing up. Evidence of this is found in research on emotional and behavioral problems among American children. The most compelling study of this change (Achenbach and Howell 1993) used a tool called *The Child Behavior Checklist*. This assessment instrument is widely used in research in many countries. Parents (or other adults who know the child well) indicate the presence (or absence) and intensity of each of 118 specific behaviors or feelings in words such as "can't sit still, restless, or hyperactive," "lying or cheating," "feels worthless or inferior," "cruelty, bullying, or meanness to others," and "nervous, high-strung, or tense."

In 1976, 10 percent of all children studied were judged to be doing so poorly that they could be *candidates* for therapy (even though only a third of these kids actually received such therapy). By 1989, 18 percent of the children were doing badly enough in their behavior and development to warrant needing therapy (and about half were getting it).

Achenbach and Howell's data certainly conform to the observations of teachers and other professionals who work with children. In the past few years, I have had occasion to ask those who have worked with children professionally for 30 years or more what they have observed. They overwhelmingly agree that more and more children are in greater and greater trouble.

Why do greater numbers of our children display signs of serious problems? I believe that children are most vulnerable to the negative influence of an increasingly socially toxic environment. Unless we do something about it now, the situation for children will only continue to deteriorate.

What Is a Socially Toxic Environment?

What I mean by the term *socially toxic environment* is that the social world of children, the social context in which they grow up, has become poisonous to their development -- just as toxic substances in the environment threaten human well-being and survival. The nature of physical

toxicity is a matter for public policy and private concern. For example, we now know that the increasing rates of cancer throughout the 20th century result at least in part from the buildup of toxic substances in the air, the water, and the soil. We know that air quality is a major problem in many places, so much so that in some cities, just breathing "normally" is a threat to your health.

What are the social equivalents to lead and smoke in the air, PCBs in the water, and pesticides in the food chain? I think some social equivalents include violence, poverty, and other economic pressures on parents and their children. They include disruption of family relationships and other trauma, despair, depression, paranoia, nastiness, and alienation -- all contaminants that demoralize families and communities. These are the forces in the land that contaminate the environment of children and youth. These are the elements of social toxicity.

A (Recent) Historical Perspective

Social life is more risky now than it was just 40 years ago; the level of social and cultural poison is higher. How is the environment for kids more socially toxic now than it was when I was a child? For one thing, no kid ever died from a drive-by fist fight, but the proliferation of guns among growing numbers of adolescent peer groups means that conflict and confrontation that once were settled with fists now can lead to shooting. The littering I experienced in 1963 was radically different from the threat faced today by a teen who angers his or her peers.

Kids today are bombarded with messages about the potentially lethal consequences of sex. There is no comparison between the threat of AIDS today and the threat of venereal disease during my youth, and it is striking to hear teenagers routinely asking potential partners to take an AIDS test before initiating sexual intimacy. More generally, children and youth today must contend with a constant stream of messages that undermine their sense of security. If it isn't the threat of kidnaping, it's the high probability of parental divorce. If it isn't weapons at school, it's contemplating a future with dim employment opportunities.

Children's Vulnerability

Beyond the immediate threats to children, many other issues are subtle, yet equally serious. High on the list is the departure of adults from the lives of kids -- and some studies report a 50 percent decrease over the past 30 years in the amount of time parents are spending with kids in constructive activities. The lack of adult supervision and time spent doing constructive, cooperative activities compounds the effects of other negative influences in the social environment for kids. Kids "home alone" are more vulnerable to every cultural poison they encounter than are children backed up by adults.

Although everyone is vulnerable to toxicity in the social environment, children (like the elderly) are the most vulnerable -- just as when airborne pollution gets really bad, it is the children (and our elders) with asthma or other respiratory conditions who show the effects first and with greatest intensity. And who are the children who will show the effects of social toxicity most dramatically? They are the children who already have accumulated the most developmental risk factors.

I can acknowledge and celebrate progress in some aspects of American life (for example, the decline of the most blatant forms of racism and sexism) and yet still maintain that the concept of social toxicity explains a great deal of what troubles us about children and youth growing up in the 1990s. At stake is the essence of childhood as a protected time and place in the human life cycle.

Imagine living in a city plagued by cholera. In this city, the challenge to parents to keep kids healthy would be overwhelming. Yes, the most competent parents and those with the most resources would have more success delivering drinkable water to their children than would other parents. But even these "successful" parents would sometimes fail. Would we blame them, or point the finger at the community's failed water purification system? In a socially toxic environment, the same principle holds.

To fully understand what is happening to our children, we need a view of what childhood *ought to be*. What does it mean to be a child? What are the rights of children?

Children's Rights

A *global* consensus about the meaning of childhood is emerging, as seen in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Cohen and Naimark 1991). This document represents an international effort to define what it should mean to be a child, based on what middle-class societies have learned about children and child development.

The Convention proposes that to be a child is to be shielded from the direct demands of adult economic, political, and sexual forces. It proclaims that childhood is a protected niche in the social environment, a special time and place in the human life cycle, having a special claim on the community. Regardless of their economic value, children have a right to receive support from their families and communities. They have a right to be shielded from war and violence, to lead a life free from adult sexuality, and to have a positive identity.

The U.N. Convention tells us that children need not pay their own way and earn their keep. They have a human right to be cared for. Typically, families want to provide this support and, as a rule, will do so if possible. But when families cannot provide for their children, the U.N.

Convention says that society should pick up the tab. This deeply held principle gives moral force to ongoing efforts to eliminate exploitive labor and poverty from the lives of children. And specific articles in the document testify to this impetus to offer every child what middle-class families offer to their children. We should bear this in mind in the United States, where we see a high and growing rate of poverty among children.

Children and economics. At present, about one in five of all U.S. children, and two in five among children age 6 and under, live below the officially defined poverty line. By historical and global standards, this may seem a relatively small number--in many countries of the world, the figure is more like 65 percent. But when contrasted with the affluence of our society and the success of other modern societies in protecting children from poverty, the U.S. data represent a telling statistical accusation, particularly if we factor in the finding that among modern societies, the United States has the biggest gap between rich and poor. Whereas in Sweden the top 10 percent of families make two times what the bottom 10 percent earn, for the United States the difference is a factor of six times (and for Canada, four times) (Rainwater and Smeeding 1995).

But the economic foundations of childhood go beyond protection from poverty. The idea of childhood as a protected niche implies that children are not direct participants in the cash economy. Any work they do should be guided by their parents and should serve educational and developmental purposes. We can celebrate the strides that have been made in many countries in protecting children from work-force participation. Dramatically reducing child labor was an important accomplishment in creating childhood in the United States; around the world, it remains a hot issue. But the economic rights of children go beyond being protected from adult work.

The child also has a right to be protected from the excesses of the consumer economy. In this view, the child's consumer purchases are to be kept separate and sheltered from commercial advertising that exploits the cognitive, emotional, and social limitations of children. The fact that children are often *not* so shielded is a violation of their rights. Turn on a television set during the children's hours before and after school, on weekends, and in the early evening, and you can see for yourself where our society stands on this matter. Children are commercial targets. Walk around any shopping mall, and you can see today's parents trying to cope with the fruits of this commercial exploitation of childhood. You may well be one of these parents.

Children and government. In addition to advocating for the economic protections of children, the U.N. Convention discusses political rights of children. The most important of these is to stand in a privileged position with respect to government. Children cannot vote, are not legally accountable (except in special circumstances when they can be tried in adult courts for especially violent offenses), and are not expected to be used by competing political forces in society. And yet government has obligations toward children. They are to receive special protection in case of

war and community violence. Children are off limits during times of war and entitled to special rehabilitation if they are affected adversely.

Children are to be protected from violence in general. The U.N. Convention prohibits the execution of minors. It urges that parents and teachers adopt a nonviolent approach to discipline. More and more middle-class adults around the world have come to acknowledge that "children are not for hitting." As a result of this growing awareness, many schools ban corporal punishment, and parents seek alternatives to spanking and beating children. Child development research and human rights go hand in hand here.

Imagine telling children they must earn their dinner or their parents' interest on the basis of their accomplishments --*what* they do. No. Children are to eat and have the regard of their parents because of the fact of their relationship, *who* they are. Governments must protect these rights.

Children and sex. Besides being economically privileged and politically protected, children are supposed to be off limits to adult sexuality. They are not sex objects. Their interests, their attitudes, and their bodies are off limits.

In modern Western societies, this principle used to be reinforced by the distinctly different clothing worn by children. Only about 50 years ago, boys wore short pants until adolescence as a symbol of their childhood status. Girls waited until adolescence for makeup and stockings. Today, even young children wear clothing undifferentiated from that worn by teenagers and grownups. Visiting the children's section of a department store recently reminded me of this change. The only difference between the styles for boys and girls, on the one hand, and adults, on the other, is size. Children were certainly subjected to sexual abuse before the change in clothing took place. But the change shows how we are failing to recognize childhood as a special time that is very different from adulthood. Dressing children like adults sends a message.

To be sure, children are physical, even sensual creatures. But they are not sexual unless corrupted by adults (or adolescents). Although some kids are more physical than others, children generally respond well to physical affection. It's more than that, really. Children *need* physical affection to thrive emotionally, so much so that kids who are deprived of this affection are put in jeopardy. Ironically, these children may even be at greater risk of being sexually abused by predatory adults who exploit this unmet need seductively. As David Finkelhor (1979) makes clear in his analysis of sexual abuse, children are not in a position, developmentally or socially, to give informed consent for sexual involvements.

They lack the cognitive and emotional equipment to figure out the consequences. Also, they lack the independent status necessary to decide freely. In any interaction between a child and an adult, there is the presumption of adult authority. When children are involved, there can be no liaison

between consenting persons. Children cannot say "no" with sufficient authority and awareness. Therefore, they are prohibited from saying "yes" (just as adults are prohibited from asking).

Human Rights of Children

The key to detoxifying the social environment and to strengthening children to resist it lies in a human rights perspective on child development. We need to focus positively on what children need to thrive; we must channel our efforts into realizing that vision. This is the fundamental purpose for government as laid out in the Declaration of Independence. Recall that after listing the fundamental, unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, the Declaration states "that to secure these rights governments are instituted." That's the foundation for educating children in a socially toxic environment.

References

Achenbach, T., and C. Howell. (1993). "Are American Children's Problems Getting Worse? A Thirteen-Year Comparison." *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 32, 6: 1145-1154.

Cohen, C., and H. Naimark. (1991). "United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: Individual Rights Concepts and Their Significance for Social Scientists." *American Psychologist* 46: 60-65.

Finkelhor, D. (1979). *Sexually Victimized Children*. New York: Free Press.

Miringoff, M. (1994). *Monitoring the Social Well-Being of the Nation: The Index of Social Health*. Tarrytown, N.Y.: Fordham Institute for Social Policy.

Rainwater, L., and T. Smeeding. (Fall/Winter 1995). "U.S. Doing Poorly." *News and Issues of the National Center for Children in Poverty* 5, 3: 4-5.

Author

James Garbarino is Director of the Family Life Development Center and Professor of Human Development and Family Studies at Cornell University, College of Human Ecology, G-20 MVR, Ithaca, NY 14853-4401 (e-mail: jg38@cornell.edu).

This article is adapted from his book *Raising Children in a Socially Toxic Environment* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995).

Cite this article:

Garbarino, James. "Educating Children in a Socially Toxic Environment." *The Forum for Family and Consumer Issues* 4.3 (1999): 31 pars. 31 December 1999.