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Miseducation: Preschoolers at Risk

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All Grown Up and No Place to Go: Teenagers in Crisis

by David Elkind. New York: Addison Publishing Company, 1984.

With the 'hurried children' of his earlier book now grown into highly stressed teenage adults, David Elkind continues to warn parents and educators of the escalating human costs of hurrying young people to grow up too fast. In both his books Elkind, a child psychologist, argues for increasing the energy and protection allocated to the period of childhood. Elkind asks parents to hold fast to the time, expectations, and regulations they set to help children and teenagers master the growth rituals and trappings of their age and maturity levels.

Elkind says that we have thrust teenagers too early into challenges of adult life. This condition of premature adulthood steals from them their opportunity and time to construct a personal identity. It impairs the formation of self-definition and leaves teenagers psychologically crippled and unable to meet the challenges of adult life. Both personal suffering and many of the social problems of the nineties are attributable to the pressures of youth attempting to meet adult challenges too early. Suicide, substance abuse, running away, and dropping out of school are the results.

Teenagers are not miniature adults. They are not capable of carrying adult responsibilities. Nor are they children whose subservience can be taken for granted. "We expect them to be grown up in all those domains where we cannot or do not want to maintain control. But in other domains, such as attending school, we expect our teenagers to behave like obedient children." Parents too caught up in their own lives give too little time and attention to their youth at the time when they need it most. According to Elkind, few adults are committed anymore to helping teenagers experience the measured, controlled introductions to healthy adulthood. Young people are denied the recognition and protections that society previously accorded the adolescent age group. The special stage belonging to teenagers has been excised from the life cycle, and teenagers have been given a *pro forma* adulthood—an adulthood with all the responsibilities but few of the prerogatives. "Young people today are quite literally all grown up with no place to go."

Using examples from his years of clinical practice and excerpts from popular teenage literature, Elkind presents *All Grown Up With No Place to Go* as a three part argument: Part 1, Needed, A Time to Grow; Part 2, Given, A Premature Adulthood; and Part 3, Result, Stress, and its Aftermath. Also included is an appendix which lists available services for troubled teenagers. Throughout, Elkind pleads for the return of traditional values and growth traditions. He emphasizes the importance of maturity markers—external signs

of the 'stages of life's way' (Kierkegaard). Elkind says these markers confirm socially as well as individually the passage from one life stage to another.

Without markers, he says children and teenagers experience great psychological stress and social displacement. He says much of the gratification of reaching new markers is increased social acceptance and public recognition which accrues from progress and growth. Elkind cautions us to protect our society's time-recognized transition points: graduations, bar mitzvahs, first cars, first dates, proms, etc. Elkind says markers protect teenagers against stress. Markers lessen the kinds of stress teenagers have to encounter. Markers help teenagers attain a clear self-definition because they know where they are and what is expected. Markers reduce stress by supplying rules, limits, taboos, and prohibitions that teenagers need to help them avoid inappropriate decisions and choices.

Elkind's argument is convincing. It is also jargon-free and straightforward. He wants adults to allow children to remain children. He says their lives depend on it as does the preservation of our society as we know it. For Elkind, time spent giving one-to-one attention and positive modeling by caring adults such as parents and educators are the critical elements needed for teenagers to develop. At a time when the problems of teenagers and at risk youth are pervading the literature, this book is especially important because it does offer answers and hope. Kids are still kids. As adults, we need to protect their rights and give them time to make mistakes—time to grow up.

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Miseducation: Preschoolers at Risk

by David Elkind. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988.

For the past several decades, Elkind has been a consistent advocate for the developmental needs of young children. In this publication he draws our attention to the 'miseducation' of young children and the risk factors associated with these approaches. Just what does Elkind mean by the terms miseducation and 'preschoolers at risk'? In the first chapter he presents his argument for the book's title:

When we instruct children in academic subjects, or in swimming, gymnastics, or ballet at too early an age, we miseducate them; we put them at risk for short-term stress and long-term personality damage for no useful purpose. There is no evidence that such early instruction has lasting benefits, and considerable evidence that it can do lasting harm (pp. 3-4).

The reasons for contemporary miseducation of young children are traced to the changing values, size and structure of American families and to increased competitive pressures experienced by parents and educators in the 1980s. This

cultural influence supports miseducation among those parents who are confident that they can make a difference in their children's lives by giving them early formal instruction to make them brighter and more competent than their peers. Extreme examples of this dynamic are reading programs for infants, flashcards for toddlers, and drill and memorization activities for preschoolers. The influence of changes within American families is especially evident among today's middle class families with low birth rates. In these families, one or two children are the norm and are, in Elkind's estimation, particularly vulnerable to the competitive pressures that current prevail within this cohort group. The reader is also presented with a more than convincing description of the potential harm of developmentally inappropriate learning experiences for children under the age of eight. Short-term harmful consequences include increased stress from being pushed too hard too soon. Long-term consequences include increased levels of obsessions, compulsions, psychosomatic symptoms and decreased interest in learning and education. Elkind's greatest concern for this treatment of miseducation centers on public education. He points out that "public education is increasingly guilty of putting children at risk for no purpose by exposing them to formal instruction before they are ready" (p. 9).

What, then, does Elkind advise for the appropriate education of children younger than eight? We are asked to re-

consider the world of the child; to remind ourselves of just how inexperienced young children are and how much they have to learn. We are also reminded that healthy education for children is based on the support and encouragement of spontaneous learning. In the writer's view, "early instruction miseducates, not because it attempts to treat the wrong things at the wrong time" but because "... when we ignore what the child has to learn and impose what we want to teach, we put infants and young children at risk for no purpose" (p. 25).

Elkind's value as a researcher is greatly enhanced by the eloquence and clarity of his writing. As in his other publications (e.g., *The Hurried Child*), he continues to raise issues of great concern in the area of children's wellbeing. Fortunately for both parents and educators, Elkind not only raises concerns about miseducation of young children, but he also clearly describes how to provide appropriate education. His stress in the importance of developmentally appropriate experiences and learning environments for young children is a welcomed addition to the advocacy efforts of professional groups such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).

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