

[hyper-activity]

# Runaway Childhood

The new tyranny of choice now begins at age two.

By Marian Kester Coombs

IN THE WORLD of Jane Austen, nothing much ever happens. Country houses sit in the stately midst of nowhere. Life has precious little variety. *Emma*, for example, devotes half its length to plans for a grand ball that in the end amounts to no more than the same set of characters dipping and twirling to the strains of amateur musicians in a dank candlelit hall.

Miss Austen's characters invite each other to dinner, read aloud, chatter over card games, and when beginning to fidget—they go for long walks. Their chief if not only topic of conversation is other people: relatives, friends, neighbors; family history, character, marital and financial prospects; gossip, scandal, morality tales. They may dabble at watercolors or pianoforte, but their major art forms are visiting, conversing, and letter-writing. Occasionally they may remove to an exotic spot like Bath, but their routine once there scarcely alters.

Two hundred years later, we have many more options. The groaning board of all the world is spread before us as never before, freeing us at last of our dependency upon others for amusement, entertainment, and even companionship. Paradoxically, in a world that boasts more human beings more mutually accessible than ever, where space

and time have collapsed and you can Be There Then as well as Be Here Now, it is easier than ever to opt out of the company of others altogether.

Dizzying choices have trickled down to younger and younger ages. Preschool for three-year-olds is no longer uncommon. Each year a higher percentage of American five-year-olds enters kindergarten, which used to be an optional, once-a-week sort of thing, with finger-paint and baby dolls and edible paste. Now the first-grade curriculum has merged with kindergarten, training children to read, to add, and even to type on a keyboard. For years already, parents' magazines have been running articles on how to slow down and let your child be a child. As one young mother writes in *Welcome Home*, "It seemed like I was always rushing him—either out the door in the morning, or out of childcare at the end of the day, or upstairs for his bath, or through his favorite book before bed. Our time together seemed to be a stop along the way to something else." David Elkind submitted his critique of *The Hurried Child* way back in 1981, but if anything the pace has grown more hectic in the past two decades.

Once the child is in grade school, choice proliferates further. Public or private? Montessori, Waldorf, Christian,

International Baccalaureate? Should the child be tutored or attend an after-school enrichment program? In this multicultural world, should he be immersed in a foreign language before it's "too late"? Does his school go back to basics or teach unimaginatively by "drill and kill"? Does it demand that students "own" their education or treat them like guinea pigs in some warped social experiment? Should the child spend summer at a math or science camp instead of hanging out at the pool?

Things could be worse. In China's mass society, children aged 3 to 12 spend their weekends studying math, physics, karate, and such Western attainments as English, piano, and ballet, in order to become little cutthroat "dragons" and "phoenixes," a live enactment of Dr. Seuss's comic nightmare "The 5000 Fingers of Dr. T." On Monday morning they go back to their regular classrooms.

Turning to extracurriculars, organized sports have taken over child's play in America. The vacant-lot pick-up game of ball has gone the way of three-network, black-and-white TV. The June 7, 2004, issue of *U.S. News & World Report* relates, in "Fixing Kids' Sports," that this organizing surge was initially "driven by soccer," where "leagues grew like kudzu." Football and baseball had become too

difficult for many to participate in, both financially and due to sheer numbers; soccer, official sport of the New World Order, requires only a ball and a field to be in business.

AFTER YEARS OF SELECTING APPLICANTS FOR JUST SUCH **INHUMAN RÉSUMÉS**, FOR **"HAVING IT ALL" ON PAPER**—AFTER YEARS, IN OTHER WORDS, OF BEING A HUGE PART OF THE PROBLEM—MIT HAS THE **NERVE TO SAY** THAT IT IS LOOKING FOR **"STUDENTS WHO DAYDREAM."**

"Drive around your neighborhood," suggests David Brooks in "The Organization Kid," from the April 2001 issue of *The Atlantic*. "Remember all those parks that used to have open fields? They have been carved up into neatly trimmed soccer and baseball fields crowded with parents in folding chairs who are watching their kids perform. In 1981 the association U.S. Youth Soccer had 811,000 registered players. By 1998 it had nearly three million. ... From 1981 to 1997 the amount of time that children aged three to twelve spent ... doing organized sports increased 27 percent."

"Physicians say stress injuries among kids are way up," the *U.S. News* article continues, and those go well beyond the physical. A recent National PTA survey found 44 percent of parents said their kids were made so unhappy by team sports that they quit. The article also mentions that the dropout rate is "up to 70 percent," but since all kids drop out of kids' sports when they stop being kids, maybe that's not a meaningful number.

More significant is another recent survey of 3,300 parents in which 84 percent said they had witnessed "violent parental behavior" and 80 percent said they had been subjected to it themselves. Parenting has become "the most competitive sport in America," asserts Alvin Rosenfeld, a New York City psychiatrist. One girls' soccer team's parents became

so incensed over what they considered biased officiating that the teenage referee was cursed and threatened as she was followed out to the parking lot, where her car was then vandalized.

Horrified by the blowback from the pressure they have put on coaches to win at all costs, parents are signing good sportsmanship pledges to curb their worst enthusiasms. Yet adult-run teams continue to dominate across the sports spectrum, from lacrosse to Little League. The latest mutation is "club ball," also known as travel, select, or year-round leagues. Parents persist in wanting their kids to get a leg up, a jump on the competition. In a nation of 300 million, where the same achievement is worth half what it was when the population was 150 million only 50 years ago, nothing but first place matters any more. Who remembers who came in second? There are already too many number ones even to register on consciousness.

David Brooks interviewed top students at Princeton University for his article: "I asked several students to describe their daily schedules, and their replies sounded like a session of Future Workaholics of America: crew practice at dawn, classes in the morning, resident-adviser duty, lunch, study groups, classes in the afternoon, tutoring disadvantaged kids in Trenton, a cappella practice, dinner, study, science lab, prayer session, hit the StairMaster, study a few hours more." Sure, that regimen sounds inhuman, but it works, and in an infinitely competitive environment, how else can you stay on top?

After years of selecting applicants for just such inhuman résumés, for "having it all" on paper—after years, in other words, of being a huge part of the problem—MIT has the nerve to say that it is looking for "students who daydream." *Business Week* interviewed Dean of Admissions Marilee Jones, who coldly observed:

Parents are so incredibly busy. This generation has the highest percentage of kids who have been in daycare since they were tiny. When they outgrew daycare, they had to go some place, so you had a proliferation of enrichment activities, all designed to keep students engaged and learning when their parents weren't home ....

Baby boomers have such high expectations for themselves and for their kids. The parents think kids have to have music lessons. They're expected to play two or three sports. They're expected to belong to certain clubs. They're expected to do community service. Each one of those activities is headed up by an adult, who expects a lot from those kids ....

Sounds as though Ms. Jones isn't buying the "I did it for the kids" defense. But most likely both theories are true: Baby Boomers have grandiose expectations, and they are worried sick about their children being able to make it in the new America.

What is the American Dream? An ad for a new Latino-oriented TV show says the American Dream is something you "grab." Fannie Mae markets its mortgages as enabling all Americans to "buy into" the Dream—the little house surrounded by a white picket fence. Forty acres and a mule. A chicken in every pot. A pie in every sky. Get a piece of it: it is the prize all eyes are on. But will there be enough Dream left to go around?

Daydreaming, the new Nirvana, is even more antithetical to the old Nirvana of multitasking than was single-minded task-orientation. Daydreams are sideways, ego-less, untimely, unfocused—like falling under a spell. Who can afford that luxury?

America's booming, globalizing population means more stimuli, more input, more distractions, more challenges, more competitors, more negations of oneself. Each person is born with a greater or lesser will to power (the kind term would be "thirst for recognition"). How pitiable this burden of human nature becomes when we are no longer protected from anomie—the realization of our own insignificance—by time, space, national borders, autonomous economies, or intact cultural traditions. When it's You versus the Six Billion, no wonder people wear obnoxious t-shirts and jack up their car stereos to ear-popping volume. And even then no one notices.

T.S. Eliot was beautifully lamenting fragmented consciousness as early as 1935, when we hadn't seen anything yet. In "Burnt Norton," he even seemed to foresee television:

Only a flicker  
Over the strained time-ridden  
faces  
Distracted from distraction by  
distraction  
Filled with fancies and empty of  
meaning  
Tumid apathy with no  
concentration ...

TV is now the least of our wastelands. The choices for entertainment, amusement, and consumption of information have gone exponential. Video and computer games, all the way from deluxe PlayStation 2, Nintendo GameCube and Xbox systems to hand-held units, Blackberrys, cell phones, and graphing

calculators. Hundreds of cable TV channels, ESPN 1 and 2 and up, VCRs, DVD players, CD Walkmans, home entertainment systems, and Netflix, which imports any movie you choose to be played on your PC. Net-surfing, Instant Messaging, web chatrooms, e-mail (which now seems archaic), Internet dating, fansites, text messaging, downloading MP3 files, sending digitized photos and movies, online journaling. Talk radio, 24-hour news channels, Drudge, and several dozen other news hubs, blogging, targeted electronic newsletters. You need a titanium belt in

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Tae Kwan Do to fend off the info being pelted from all sides. There are so many "distractions from distractions" that one needs to be almost autistic to focus on anything.

The riot of pressurized choice goes far beyond education, entertainment, and socializing, of course. Which diet should you adopt? Which miracle substance(s) should you believe in and take religiously? Which environmental toxins should you purge from your life? Which exercise program should you follow? Which cool philosophy or type of meditation should you check out? Which bands and brands are hot this month, and which are not? Have you tried a surgical makeover, mood- and performance-enhancing drugs, gene therapy? On the radio there is an this ad for a pill that "fights fatigue and provides energy all day"—the very edge you need to compete in what our parents' generation called "the rat race."

Yet who would condemn choice *per se* or act to restrict it? This is what we wished for, this is what freedom and prosperity mean, isn't it: a whole lot of choices and the wherewithal to choose them. If we find at times that we are doing more and enjoying it less, the reason may not be too much choice but simply unwise choices, choices that replace meaningful experiences with the empty calories of ones that fail to fulfill.

But a whirl of choice also isolates as the imperative of activity forestalls organic socialization. Difficult personal skills like learning to work things out,

apologize, and compromise are not being acquired. This phenomenon is a large contributor to the bullying that's such a plague in our schools and among young people generally: there's a savage, feral quality to it, as of a Hobbesian throwback world.

Paradoxically, at the same time as our children's social skills are sinking to *Lord of the Flies* levels, they suffer from a terrible hunger for friendship, comradeship, loyalty, and trust. All the mass-culture sensations among the young make a fetish of friendship. In the world of Harry Potter, for instance, no act is worse than to betray a friend. Friendship is the new romance; that is, where once one strove to find that one true love, now one strives—though fearfully ill-equipped—to find just one faithful friend.

The "organization kid" is a symptom, not the problem itself. "Workaholism" is a superficial description, not a diagnosis.

It is a coping mechanism: overachieve or be engulfed and swept away by the new global proletariat. Where once the state earned its questionable keep by protecting a people from being dispossessed by others, now it welcomes the usurpers with open arms and open borders. As the “have” nations like America continue to import poverty, export good jobs, debase the currency, and tax everything that moves, why should we expect a moderate, well-balanced, co-operatively social response from the stressed target population?

The struggle for a place in the sun (even for 15 minutes) has gone global. Further, it has gone individual: every man for himself, and the state against all. People are not fools, particularly when it comes to the fate of their own children. Perceiving no hope in political action, owing to the treachery of the Republican Party, American parents are desperately seeking a berth for their children on the last ship sailing. A rising tide lifts all boats, but a rising tide of vulgarized humanity sends people into survival mode. They anaesthetize themselves with Prozac, Paxil, and Zoloft and reprogram their children with Ritalin.

But artificial substitutes for self-esteem can never reproduce the joy of working with, serving, and loving others. Forced globalization is wrecking the societies that real peoples have lovingly labored for millennia to create, and wrecking along with them the pleasures great and small of relations with other members of one’s culture. Jean-Paul Sartre’s morose little drama *No Exit* famously concluded, “Hell is other people.” But they are Heaven, too. Only we can give our stolen significance back to ourselves—and to our children. Miss Austen was clearly onto something. ■

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# Walled Off

Sharon’s fence turns villages into prisons.

By Charles Glass

AZ-ZAWIEH, WEST BANK—The soldier, automatic rifle slung over his shoulder like a kid’s backpack, approached the car and announced, “This is a closed military area.” Whenever the Israeli army wants to exclude prying eyes from some corner of its occupied territories, an officer declares a “closed military area.” The incantation permits the army to conceal some of the activities that might, to the untrained eye, conflict with the country’s self-image as a liberal democracy: the seizure of land from its owners, demolition of family houses, mass arrests, and confinement of whole populations to their towns and villages. I was in a car on which the letters “TV” were painted to protect us, if the armor didn’t, from the Israeli crossfire that has killed more than a dozen journalists in the last four years. My producer demanded to see the soldier’s written orders. The young soldier, who spoke politely and in fluent English, said there were no written orders. My producer called the Israeli Defense Forces spokeswoman, who confirmed that Az-Zawieh was, as of that morning, closed. No one was allowed in or out.

Like everyone else stopped on the road, we turned around. Later, some women from the International Women’s Peace Service (IWPS), do-gooders from Europe and America who often put themselves between Israeli soldiers and Palestinian civilians, showed us another way in. We parked outside another village, carried our camera equipment over an earth

barricade, and hired a taxi on the other side. It was a 20-minute drive into Az-Zawieh, where a few hundred people—Palestinians, Israelis, and foreigners—were gathering in the village’s tiny square. They held banners and balloons. As the morning grew hotter, children passed out popsicles. A few people admitted they were afraid. The day before, when villagers made a similar procession to their olive groves, Israeli troops fired rubber bullets, concussion grenades, and tear gas. “Use an onion wrapped in a handkerchief,” one Israeli woman with experience of tear gas advised.

The purpose of the demonstration was to protest the construction of Israel’s West Bank security wall through their fields. The farmers were losing land to the Wall itself and more to the free-fire zone on either side. Most would end up on the wrong side of the Wall and, undoubtedly, their land would become the property of Israeli settlements. But that was not the worst of it. Once the Wall was complete, it would form a circle around Az-Zawieh and its neighbor villages, Deir Ballout and Rafat. Only one entrance, guarded by Israeli troops, would provide access to the residents of the three villages. The giant wall would sever them from the rest of the West Bank. Even the original ghetto, in Venice, had four gates. But what the Israelis are building is not really a ghetto. It is a prison whose inmates will be free to escape, provided they do not return.