Child Rights, wellbeing, and the balance between freedom and protection in post-war Britain

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Based on a presentation at the Department for Education, 27 October 2011

Executive summary

- The increasing 'cocooning' of children is a long-term feature of the modern history of childhood, its romance about childhood innocence, and its resulting urge for protection. However, this also went alongside ideas about the need for freedom that could be in tension with this urge to protect.
- In certain respects the experience of the Second World War heightened concern about protection, resulting in British children becoming increasingly cocooned within the safety of home and family.
- This period also saw the development of special spaces for the fostering of child development which attempted to reconcile the need for both protection and freedom.
- Growing levels of traffic added to concern about the safety of children, but before the 1970s, concern about sexual danger remained relatively under-developed.
- Despite these developments evidence reveals a much greater degree of independent mobility for British children at the start of the 1970s than by the end of the century.
- The 1970s saw a series of radical responses to a perceived decline in childhood freedom and the incorporation of arguments about children's rights. These debates exposed some of the difficulties of child-rights arguments and, taken to an extreme, provoked a backlash.
- There is gulf between the child-rights thinking that came to the fore in the 1990s and that of the 1970s. Whereas the central agenda of the 1970s was one of liberation, that of the 1990s was more directed towards protection and well being. Nevertheless, there was a powerful current of feeling in the early twenty-first century that Britain was failing when it came to child wellbeing.

Introduction

In 2007, UNICEF produced a report that strikingly placed the United Kingdom at, or very near, the bottom of a league of twenty-one rich countries in its assessment of child wellbeing. The main exception was that UK rated highly when it came to safety, judged in terms of accidents and injuries. Even this sat uncomfortably alongside an apparent propensity for risky behaviour and problems in relation to alcohol, drugs and pregnancy. The data has attracted criticism, but it clearly touched a public nerve and led to comments about a 'toxic' environment for children in the UK. In particular, it fuelled a debate about whether British children suffer from being over-protected and restricted from being able to play freely outside their homes (ironically, this went alongside alarm about 'feral' children who were not under parental control).

The 'cocooning' of British children has long-term origins but in some respects accelerated in the aftermath of the Second World War. This was facilitated by the creation of special spaces which could provide both protection *and* freedom, and it was encouraged by a

concern about safety in response to traffic, though less-so sexual danger. Nevertheless, it also highlights the degree to which British children in the decades between the war and the 1970s still had a considerably greater degree of independent mobility that they would by end of the 20th century. By the 1970s this situation was provoking concern and arguments about child rights were being deployed in radical circles to outline a series of alternative spaces and freedoms that could enhance child wellbeing. These visions were often pushed to an extreme, exposing some of the difficulties of applying rights-based arguments to children, and as a result they largely collapsed and often provoked a backlash against such thinking. There is gulf between this 1970s debate about child rights and that which came to the fore in relation to child well-being in the 1990s. A reappraisal of this earlier child rights era, like the origins of the process of cocooning, may help us to situate the concerns over child well-being, rights, and freedom in our own time.

'Cocooning' of the Welfare State Child

At the heart of the history of modern childhood there is tension between urges to protect but also to free the child. They both reflect a powerful, romantic notion about the inherent innocence of the child. In Britain, the experience of the Second World War heightened concerns about child safety and helped unleash an urge for protection which now gained the opportunity for realisation through the advance of the post-war welfare state. Yet progressive thinking about childhood had also by this time been deeply affected by the romance of innocence and freedom. These ideas about liberation lay at the heart of progressive thinking in education, they were advanced by the increasingly influential discipline of psychology, and they were becoming embedded in the emotional culture of everyday family life where there was an ever-growing emphasis on freedom, play, and a child-centred approach.

In the study of modern childhood, the Second World War has been seen as leading to the 'cocooning' of British childhood. Here, the influence of Bowlbyism, and its emphasis on the importance of attachment and avoiding the separation of the young child from the family, is an important factor. But alongside this, there was also an effort to design environments specially suited to the needs of the child: sites which reconciled the need for protection but also freedom. One example was the emergence of a specially-designed virtual landscape for the child in the form of BBC children's television. Another was the post-war adventure playground movement. At the heart of these special landscapes was the idea of children being different to adults and their need for play, exploration, and freedom within boundaries set by the child expert. In reality, such landscapes proved difficult to sustain. For instance, children were attracted to the commercial fare of the new ITV, to the violence of the western and the cop show and, most importantly, to adult programming. While adventure playgrounds upset residents concerned about their apparent anarchism, but still proved a very limited solution to satisfying children's spirit of adventure both in terms of level of provision and by offering only limited freedoms. In fact, evidence from Elizabeth and John Newsons' late 1960s research on the lives of young children indicates a still considerable degree of independent mobility in urban areas and raises some doubt about the pervasiveness of post-war cocooning.

Two factors in limiting children's freedom were the danger and fear of traffic and the danger and fear of strangers. Only, however, in the first instance is there clear evidence of a major increase in actual danger over the course of the century, from the huge increase in the number of vehicles on the road. In fact, the number of accidents did not rise in relation to the number of vehicles, but this is most likely to be accounted for by the gradual separation of vehicles and child pedestrians. Again, the view that children were fundamentally different to adults acted to reinforce the tendency for separation, with efforts to educate children in child safety overtaken by a belief that the child mind was fundamentally incapable of coping with

the complexity of the urban landscape, and that parents had be to made responsible for keeping their children away from dangerous traffic.

When it came to the danger of strangers, evidence on real danger is far harder to measure, but if anything the decline in independent mobility is likely to have diminished the danger of assault from strangers. Certainly, it seems that concern about flashers has quietly receded from public consciousness in the last decades of the century. But there is also a significant shift in professional views regarding this sort of danger. Before the 1970s, there was a tendency to regard paedophilia as an unusual psycho-sexual condition, and either to view the children involved in such abuse as not wholly innocent, or to regard a criminal prosecution of the abuser as likely to cause more harm to the child than good. In the public sphere, moreover, a language of paedophilia was almost wholly absent before the 1970s. A a protective cocoon for the post-war child was encouraged by a combination of: anxieties emerging from the War, the ascendancy of child psychology emphasising the child's special needs, a perceived increase in dangers outside the home and the radical extension of welfare provision after the War (both the welfare state itself and the extension of its ethos via for instance the BBC or the voluntarism of the adventure playground movement). Overall, however, children still had greater freedom in 1970 that they do today. Important changes followed this period.

The 1970s and radical alternatives

There was an inherent tension in the cocooning of the post-war decades: greater protectiveness went alongside recognition that play and freedom were at the heart of the developmental needs of the child. The creation of special real and virtual landscapes, such as the adventure playground and children's television were only partial solutions to this challenge. And this became even more obvious in the 1970s as confidence that home and family could provide all that was needed for the wellbeing of the child fell away, for reasons discussed in my talk about Bowlby. Within this context, but also a broader impetus towards liberation associated with the counter culture, 1970s Britain saw an explosion of radical thinking and practice in child liberation and child rights. This was seen in debate about education, for instance in the free school movement, in discussion about children's rights, and in the development of what was called environmental education. This reacted to a closing down of urban space, and looked to a reinvention of education across the curriculum and into secondary education, encouraging interaction with the urban landscape. Children were to get out of school, undertake project work on their localities, and thus not only to overcome a new environmental deprivation but also gain a political voice in redesigning their world. Local children's centres would act as catalysts for transforming the local landscape, turning the environment into the subject for child study but also turning play into a subject for local politics. Within schools, children were to be given a real voice, with radical implications for discipline as well as pedagogy. And beyond school, radical criminologists added their voice as they challenged notions of deviancy applied to the phenomenon of vandalism, suggesting that in many cases this was an understandable reaction to an unsustainable situation and that society needed to see it as more akin to the middle-class student revolts of the period. At the heart of this new philosophy was an acceptance that post-war protection effectively entailed a closing down of rights and opportunities for freedom.

Such debates and activities were not without significance. However, this was far from a universal movement, concentrated in certain pockets of the country such as London. Just as important as the influence of this new thinking was the opposing reaction. Indeed, the extremes to which arguments about child liberation were sometimes pushed made it an easy target. The magazine *Child Rights* descended into chaos as some began to encourage children to assert their rights in school by strategies of physical resistance. The child rights movement

also found itself awkwardly embroiled in an emerging controversy over child sexuality, as paedophiles looked to appropriate the strategies of the homosexual liberation and feminist movements in efforts to create a paedophile movement, taking on the banner of child rights to argue for a radical review of the age of sexual consent. Defenders of traditional values had a relatively easy job in publicising their cause by highlighting the extremes to which child-rights pedagogy could lead.

Conclusion

The result of this backlash was that rather than a reorientation away from protection towards a new emphasis on freedom, the period from the late 1970s saw a movement in the opposite direction. Perhaps most dramatically, the figure of the paedophile, and the subject of child pornography became objects of everyday concern, mobilised initially by the political right, but also providing a new focus for professional protection in the sphere of child welfare and social work. The political reorientation of the 1980s, and rhetoric of blaming permissiveness for social ills, also provided scope for a shift away from progressive towards a more traditional pedagogy in schools. At a local level, the money dried up for schemes of urban renewal that looked to establish children centres. And the inexorable increase in road traffic and the prioritisation of economic growth meant that there was little chance of asserting the rights of the child to free access to the environment, against the rights of the driver and the market.

Yet it was also this period that would see the emergence of a new emphasis on child rights. As was the case during the Second World War, international influence was an important factor. Domestically, although there are some links back to the radical developments of the early 1970s, there is also something of an historical gulf of consciousness between the two. A new field of child studies, modelling itself around its subject of enquiry in similar way to women's studies, would see itself as fundamentally breaking with the past: bringing about a 'paradigm shift' in understanding, in which children were to be listened to, in which research would try to understand things from the perspective of the child, and which would move beyond the social and developmental perspective of the psychologically-dominated post-war approach to children. However, for all its significance and radicalism, this second wave of children's rights thinking came up against the problem that the central challenges for child wellbeing were in fact often structural and social. Children's rights were always difficult to define in practice, particularly when this meant challenging the rights of other groups, and were in some ways contradictory to the assumptions at the core of ideas about childhood.

By the end of the century, evidence indicated for instance that a right to independent mobility (and all this entailed in terms of wellbeing), which the radicals of the early 1970s had begun to explore, had been radically stripped away since the time of the Newsons' research. There was instead considerable anxiety about children who lacked custodial care, emblemised by the coining of the term 'feral child', particularly from 2002 onwards in the context of the introduction of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders and then in the post-riots discourse after the English riots of August 2011. Child rights in late twentieth century Britain went alongside a vigorous policing of children that was in many ways at odds with the trajectory leading up to the early 1970s. An era of child rights, if we are to accept the UNICEF findings, also went alongside an era in which Britain – a leader in thinking about child welfare in the aftermath of the Second World War, and a far more affluent society half a century later – emerged near the very bottom of international tables measuring child wellbeing.

Further Reading

David Buckingham et al, *Children's Television in Britain: History, Discourse and Policy* (1999).
Harry Ferguson, *Protecting Children in Time* (2004).
Mayer Hillman, John Adams, & John Whitelegg, *One False Move: A Study of Children's Independent Mobility* (1990).
Patricia Holland, *Picturing Childhood: The Myth of the Child in Popular Imagery* (London, 2004).
Alison James and Alan Prout (eds.), *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood* (1990).
John and Elizabeth Newson, *Seven Years Old in the Home Environment* (1976).
Sue Palmer, *Toxic Childhood: How Modern Life is Damaging our Children and What We Can Do About It* (2006).
UNICEF, *Child Poverty in Perspective: An Overview of Child Well-Being in Rich Countries* (2007).
Colin Ward, *The Child in the City* (1978)

About the Author

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This paper was first presented at a History & Policy seminar on Early Years Childcare held at the Department for Education on 27 October 2011. It reflects work that will contribute to a book under preparation on 'The Landscape of the Child in Post-War Britain'.