

Why Do We Have Children?

A century or so ago that was a fairly easy question to answer. Children were primarily commodities. The majority of families were farmers and shopkeepers and children were essential for cheap labor. Of course, having children back then was not exactly family planning either! Contraception was a non-entity. So families were large and children had important roles in the survival of the family. Formal education was for the elite. The education of most children was by apprenticeship, ideal by the way for children with ADHD or the hands-on type but not for the intellectual or artistic child. My how times have turned things around.

It's worth noting that the mothers of that era were working in the fields and shops as well as at home. The "second-shift" is no modern phenomenon. The key difference, however, was that a lot of homemaking and childcare was done by the older daughters.

So children were needed. They had an important role within each family and within society in general. In the 20th Century (remember back then), our country became more industrialized and began to pass laws limiting the use of children as laborers. In addition, education of all children became the norm, but it took a long time before a high school degree came to be a desired and important goal. Most children would drop out around 6th to 8th grade to learn a trade. Only the really good students of the newly developing upper middle class were protected and urged to get a diploma. A smattering even began to go to college.

Of course we were a "melting pot" during the first 25-30 years of the last century, so the waves of immigrants were usually a step behind, consumed with finding a way to survive in the New World, and their children were less likely to finish public school and were still primarily commodities.

In the forties and fifties, a much more dramatic shift took place. After WWII, men went to work farther from home, farming and shop-keeping became secondary occupations, women were now "housewives", and there was an increased focus on educating children for their future life as adults. This represented a dramatic shift in the reasons for having children. It became a mixture of societal continuity, carrying on the family name (which meant the paternal name), and, a new phenomenon, the joy of parenting! Of course that meant that parenting now became a more defined responsibility for mothers with an increased expectation of being skilled at this task even though it was not truly given social value. Two critical outcomes of this shift were the evolution of parenting experts attempting to establish that there were right and wrong ways to raise children and that if children had problems, mothers were to blame.

As our society went through some dramatic changes in the sixties and seventies, parenting, too, was significantly changing. Women were less satisfied with being restricted to the role of housewives, divorce rates skyrocketed (don't know if there's a causal relationship between those last two points), and college degrees became the educational goal instead of a high school diploma. Simultaneously, apprenticeship learning disappeared and children who did not fit the rigid, complex, and highly focused classroom day became problem children.

As divorce became more commonplace, a new reason for having children appeared: To save a struggling marriage. Meanwhile, with children no longer needed as workers and modern means of conception available, family size shrunk dramatically, except among the poor, who ironically could least afford to have large families.

But children's lives were still fairly reasonable. They typically had their own bedrooms now, TV was a wonderful diversion, and neighborhoods evolved with children running free with their friends after hours of being cooped up in a classroom. Over the previous decades a new concept for children and their parents had evolved, namely the goal that children's achievements would exceed those of their parents. But the idea of going to college was still so special that there was limited pressure about what college one went to. Middle America was still predominant. The Upper Middle Class was just beginning to emerge. Thus, the perception was that it was still a very achievable goal for children to be more successful than their parents.

Over the past few decades all this has changed very dramatically. Our society has reshaped its class lines, with an Upper Middle Class that predominates and has created an image of the successful American that has become rigidified and made to seem essential for "the good life." The Baby Boomer generation, the highest educated and most exceptionally successful of any previous generation in our country's history, suddenly set the bar so high that the increasing fixation with achievement and material success created unrealistic expectations for their children. Some have said their children will be the first generation whose standard of living will not exceed that of their parents. Well, that was like throwing down the gauntlet to Baby Boomers, who never saw an achievement they couldn't master.

The result is that having children became about the potential achievements of their children. Parents developed an obsession with finding ways to promote the intellectual, social, artistic, and athletic accomplishments of their children. They turned more than ever to the "experts", soaking up every new story about what would generate stronger minds and bodies for their children. There's no playtime in childhood anymore – there's only developing social skills that are believed to be essential to achievement in adult life. Free time!! You must be joking. There is just no time to waste. Parents only

have eighteen years to forge the minds and bodies of their offspring into lean, mean fighting machines prepared to go out into the world and conquer all adversity. Any college!! You must be joking. Only those who go to the best colleges will have a chance out there.

So too bad if you're not a strong student by nature – we'll get you tutors. Or else, we'll have you spend many hours in sports, music, art, dance or whatever hint of talent you show in order to find some area of excellence that will give each child an edge out there. Thank goodness we have the option of all kinds of specialized summer camps that can sharpen any of these skills so children no longer have to waste time at camps where they just swim and play. My child will be a successful child so he/she can be sure to be a successful adult.

Of course, the majority of this is being done in homes with two employed parents or a single working parent who have little time for anything, no less running around to get their children taken care of by all these special programs and services. The extra services and programs and increased choice of private schools cost a lot of money, creating a vicious cycle of needing the extra income, having to earn more income, therefore not having much time to enjoy being a parent. Nor do children have much time to enjoy being children.

So why do we have children? Increasingly it appears children have once again become commodities for parents. But this time it is not to aid in the survival of the family. Instead it is to serve the intensified worshipping of actualization – the concept that the purpose of life is all about achieving the maximum one is capable of achieving. We seem to have lost our way with the increased choices that came about in the second half of the last century. We've lost community life. We've lost our spiritual life. We've lost our sense of the value of enjoying life and that meaningful relationships are at least the equal, if not superior, key to the good life. Can the children of the Baby Boomers, who are now becoming the next generation of parents, be remembered for righting the ship and establishing a more complex, gentler set of reasons for having children? Parenting can be fun you know! We just need to stop taking it so seriously.

About the Author

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