

CHILDREN AIN'T WHAT THEY USED TO BE

BOB ZASLAVSKY

Children ain't what they used to be, and that may not be altogether to the good.

One can see this if one looks back to the New England Primer, one of the most influential home schooling tools of our nation's first two centuries. This book, primarily designed for the religious instruction of children, contained a series of alphabet rhymes to help youngsters master the rudiments of literacy. Here is a representative sample.

B
Thy Life to Mend
This Book attend.

F
The Idle Fool
Is whipt at School.

H
My Book and Heart
Shall never part.

G
As runs the [hour] Glass,
Man's Life doth pass.

T
Time cuts down all,
Both great and small.

X
Xerxes the great did die,
And so must you and I.

Such a set of pedagogical mnemonics would be unthinkable today. The importance of books to life and the need to keep books always close to oneself would be mocked. The draconian notion of school classroom management would be scorned. Moreover, the pervasiveness of the emphasis on the transience of life and the shadow of death that hangs over every moment of it would be derided.

Our forebears had a no-nonsense view of childhood as basic training, so to speak, for the battles of adulthood. In those harsher, pre-Industrial Revolution days, adulthood began somewhere between the ages of ten and thirteen.

At the beginning of *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet is thirteen, going on fourteen. Both her mother and nurse make that seem like the verge of old maidhood, since both of them were married and pregnant by that age.

At the age of thirteen, prince Hal (the future Henry V) had already been frequenting taverns and carousing with Falstaff for at least a year.

At the age of thirteen, little Johnny Keats and his 8th-grade classmates were translating Vergil's *Aeneid* in their Latin class.

At the age of thirteen, Melville and Twain were both finished with their formal educations and were out earning a living.

As the tailor in *Fiddler on the Roof* sings, "At three I started Hebrew school; at ten I learned a trade."

In other words, there was a time when rituals like the bar mitzvah were not lavishly celebrated empty ceremonies, but rather were austere mundane steppings-over the threshold from childhood to adulthood.

In the 20th century, as adulthood was deferred more and more, childhood was extended concomitantly.

This was partly the consequence, as any good Marxist would know, of economic forces. The Industrial Revolution reduced the number of unskilled jobs that allowed at least a subsistence income. The easiest way to ease the competition for the remaining jobs was to lop off the younger end of the labor pool.

Hence—which is not to deny a strain of altruism too—child labor laws were passed to reduce the shallow (younger) end of the labor pool. A place had to be found for these vocationally displaced youngsters. That place was school.

It is no accident that the growth of compulsory education laws in this country coincides with the first phase of the Industrial Revolution (mid-19th-century to the end of World War I). The first state to enact a compulsory education law (in 1852) was Massachusetts. It took until 1918 for all states to enact such a law.

This is when C. Northcote Parkinson's Law begins to operate in our schools: "work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion."

When those who had formal schooling rarely went beyond primary school, the primary school education was rigorous and thorough enough to provide the basis for life-long autodidacticism. A Melville and a Twain—geniuses though they may be—could become the erudite writers that they were after dropping out of school at the age of eleven or twelve. That would be unimaginable today.

The reason is that as the "terminal" degree moved from primary school to secondary school, the same primary education expanded to fill the added time. When it moved to a college degree, the content became even more attenuated, to such an extent that today's college graduates are not typically as well educated in their early twenties as Melville and Twain were at half that age.

As childhood expanded, the language that we use to talk about youngsters changed, especially after World War II, to reflect this dumbing-down of our expectations for them. The pervasive use of the patronizing term "kids" to refer to toddlers and college students alike reflects this.

The term "teen-ager" is equally condescending. There were no teen-agers in this country before the 1950s: the term did not exist before then. I was in the first generation to be so designated, and I have always found the term offensive.

Language matters. It needs to be retrogressed. However, language is only the beginning. We should start to formulate our school curricula with an eye to, and respect for, the intellectual maturity of our children, our students.

If we do not, the classrooms of Star Fleet Academy, with its daunting curriculum, will go empty.