

CHILDHOOD AND CHILDREN OF YESTERDAY AND TODAY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract: *The authors compare the children of yesterday and today from the perspective of eight adults of different age, sex, professional training, and nationality, interviewed about their own childhood and on how they see today’s children, to identify similarities and differences and to find remedial solutions. The method is qualitative, and the technique is that of the interview. For those interviewed, childhood meant freedom, joy, outdoor play, family, and flying; family members and teachers had the greatest impact on childhood. Compared to the children of yesteryear, today’s children are both happy and unhappy. Yesterday’s children were happy, fulfilled, modest, contented, grateful, respectful, and simple; today’s children are creative, beautiful, informed, intelligent, ambitious, critical, brave, and free, but also uncommunicative, bored, absent, disoriented, and without models. Remedial solutions should target the causes that have led to these mutations: broken families, social media, and technology.*

Keywords: *childhood; children; model; impact; characteristic features; remedial solutions.*

Introduction

What happens when childhood is lost too soon? The most beautiful and pure period of life is lost with the phone in hand or in front of the computer or tablet; the physical and mental health of children is lost and they become more and more often obese and aggressive; the good habit of reading is lost and a poor vocabulary is acquired; freedom is lost and the family home is replaced by a re-education institution, etc. To better understand how childhood has “evolved”, it is good to see how the social generations of the 20th and 21st centuries have evolved. Thus:

The Great / Pre-War / Silent / Traditionalist Generation (1920-1945) was the conformist and traditionalist generation that did not express their opinions publicly (Crompton et al., 2013, Iosim et al. 2022);

Boomers (1946-1960) are demanding of improvement, optimistic, individualistic, rebellious, hardworking, stressed, career/work focused, highly competitive, weak to the temptation of immediate reward, hedonistic, powerful, accomplished, driven, self-directed, benevolent, universalist, traditionalist, and conformist; have strong ties to family and friends; are considered a bridge between generations; and are motivated to volunteer (Phillipson, 2007; Leach et al., 2008; Sandeen, 2008; Leach et al., 2013; Hansen & Slagsvold, 2020; Slagsvold & Hansen, 2021);

Generation X (1965-1980) is the “turnkey” generation, with lower educational performance; they are good negotiators, conscious consumers, with adult interaction skills, with less university education, more politically and financially conservative, resilient, family-oriented survivors; they have benefited from computers; they tend to save more, change jobs more often, and prefer feedback (Sandeen, 2008; Fuchs, Fuchs & Lorenz, 2024, Gavrilă-Ardelean, 2019, Puticiu et al., 2024, Butoi et al. 2024);

Generation Y or Millennials (1981-1996) is the generation familiar with the use of the Internet, mobile devices, social networks, and technology, in general;

Generation Z or Zoomers (1997-2012) are nicknamed “digital natives”, have intellectual disabilities, mental health problems, lower teenage pregnancy rates, and psychiatric disorders; they read fewer books (which has a negative impact on attention, future economic contribution, school performance, and vocabulary), drink alcohol less often, practice sexting more often (i.e., send, receive or forward sexually explicit messages, photos or videos, mainly between mobile phones, computers or other digital devices), and suffer from insomnia; they are better at delaying gratification (i.e., can resist the temptation of an immediate reward in favour of a more valuable and long-lasting reward later), more tired of screen time, more preoccupied than older generations in academic performance and employment prospects; and they tend to live at a slower pace than their age predecessors (Singh & Dangmei, 2016; Seemiller & Grace, 2017; Dolot, 2018; Lev, 2021; Mahapatra, Bhullar & Gupta, 2022; Jayatissa, 2023; Fuchs, Fuchs & Lorenz, 2024, Gavrilă-Ardelean & Gavrilă-Ardelean, 2017, Sârbu et al., 2022, Marici et al. 2023);

Generation Alpha (2013-mid-2020s) is the generation whose type of entertainment is increasingly dominated by social networks, streaming services (method of transmitting or receiving data – especially video

and audio materials – through a computer network as a steady, continuous stream, allowing playback to begin while the rest of the data is still being received) and electronic technology, and who are dealing with allergies, obesity, and health problems related to screen time.

In this study, the children of yesterday (Boomers and Generation X) and today (Zoomers) in Romania are compared from the perspective of eight adults of different age, sex, professional training, and nationality, interviewed about their own childhood – how they could define it in one word and who had the biggest impact on it – and how they see children today (Runcan, 2020). The goal is to identify the similarities and differences between childhood and children of yesterday and today in order to find remedial solutions.

Method and materials

The method used in the study is qualitative, and the technique used is that of the interview.

Eight adults of different age, gender, professional training, and nationality were interviewed about their own childhood and how they see children today. The adults were, at the time of the interview, over 60 years old, except for one interviewee who was 50 years old. Of the eight interviewees, five were women and three were men. Regarding professional training, two interviewees were doctors (C.C. and I.R.), two were high school teachers (M.B. and F.I.), two were university professors (D.B. and E.J.), one was a pastor (G.S.), and one was a teacher; one of the doctors was also a psychotherapist (I.R.), one of the university professors was also a priest and psychotherapist (E.J.), and the teacher was also a school master. Seven interviewees were of Romanian nationality and one was of American nationality.

The eight interviewees were asked the following questions related to their own childhood (Q5 and Q6) and to how they see today's children (Q8):

- Q4/5: If you had to sum up your childhood in one word, what would it be? Now, when you look back at that special time in your life, what do you feel would be the most authentic motto for the childhood that you had the opportunity to experience?
- Q5/6: What helped you the most in your childhood and who was the person you most admired and which had a strong impact on your life? Why?
- Q7/8: How do you perceive today's children? Are they happier or unhappier than yesterday's children? What do you consider to be the greatest assets of today's generation? And the most obvious shortcomings or challenges?

Results

Question Q4/5, If you had to sum up your childhood in one word, what would it be? Now, when you look back at that special time in your life, what do you feel would be the most authentic motto for the childhood that you had the opportunity to experience? asked the interviewees to sum up their childhood in a single word and choose an authentic motto for their childhood.

For D.B., childhood meant freedom (the unfettered freedom to choose what and how to play, “an edifying freedom that helps us build ourselves as authentic human beings”) and authenticity (“if a man is not free, he does not grow in freedom, he does not have the exercise of freedom, and he cannot be authentic; he will be altered by too many and too restrictive conditions, by dependencies of all kinds – from economic dependence on other people, to dependence on a vice”). The chosen motto is “After a beautiful day comes another, even more promising.”

For M.B., childhood was joy and “playing together, outside, in the open air”. The respondent did not choose any motto.

For C.C., childhood equalled family, and the chosen motto is “The family and the restricted community are the safe space of the child.”

For F.I., childhood meant flight. The respondent did not choose any motto, but she quoted the Romanian essayist, philosopher, poet, playwright, translator, journalist, university professor, academic, and diplomat Lucian Blaga (1895-1961) with “Childhood is the heart of all ages.”, the French poet, journalist, aristocrat, novelist, and essayist Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1900-1944) with “Where do I come from? I come from my childhood. I come from my childhood like from a country.”, and Chilean poet-diplomat and politician Pablo Neruda (1904-1973) with “All is ceremony in the wild garden of childhood.”

For E.J., childhood was sadness: the respondent had a childhood marked by worries and problems, which led him to develop a “highly hyperthymic personality [hyperthymia being an “exaggerated increase in good mood in manic states” – cf. DEX ‘16]”. The chosen motto is “But as for me, I am poor and needy; come quickly to me, O God. You are my help and my deliverer; LORD, do not delay.” (Psalm 70:5)

I.R. it did not define childhood, but spoke of the complexity and beauty of life.

For G.S., childhood equalled victory, and the chosen motto is “Be real, face your problems and overcome them with God’s help!”

Petru M.Ș., childhood meant a story, and the chosen motto is “The purity and beauty of life.”

Question Q5/6, What helped you the most in your childhood and who was the person you most admired and which had a strong impact on your life? Why? asked the interviewees to say what helped them the most in childhood and who had a strong impact on their lives.

D.B. did not say what helped him the most as a child, but he said there were two people he admired the most and who had a strong impact on his life: his mother (“a dedicated teacher, a deeply moral person, sometimes excessively normativism”, principled, correct, and moral) and his maternal grandfather (“an exemplary educator: demanding, but humane, [...] a genuine intellectual”).

For M.B., “The freedom to play with the other children all day (after finishing the household chores) on vacation and until late at night; during school, after finishing homework.” helped her the most in her childhood, and the people with a strong impact in her life were her grandmother (illiterate, but wise, a good cook, good storyteller, lover of life, serene, and sincere), her mother (“who found time to play with us”), her father, two neighbours (one “who pampered us with thick slices smeared with rosehip paste or pear marmalade” and another one “who gave us rolls when she baked bread”), as well as her teachers, professors, and school mates.

C.C. did not say what helped her the most as a child, but she stated that her mother (the “Know it all” hero), her father (the “Superman” hero), and her grandmother (the “I love you, no matter what” hero) were the people she most admired and which had a strong impact on her life.

As for F.I., “every person or thing helped him to a greater or lesser extent. Every look, word, every page read, every sunrise, tree, leaf, bird...”, and the family members (“parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins”), the teacher (“gentle, smiling”), the teacher of history (“a good storyteller”), and an acquaintance (“small in height, extremely sprinting and hardworking”) were the people most admired and with the strongest impact on his life.

E.J. stated that “early maturation” helped him become more independent, self-taught, and responsible, and that everyone around him had a strong impact on his life

I.R. did not say what helped her the most in life, but she stated that her father (“who she looks like”), her mother (“who does the same things as her”) and an aunt (“who dresses like her”) were the most admired and the ones that had the strongest impact on her life.

G.S.’s grandmother helped him the most in the first years of life; his grandmother (whose values were “faith, family and love”) was also the person he admired the most and which had the strongest impact on his life.

For M.Ş., “optimism, confidence in one’s own strength, and faith” helped her the most, and the person most admired and with the strongest impact on her life was her mother’s uncle (mature, serious, hardworking, respectful, intelligent, self-confident, loving oneself and others, good, ambitious, determined, giving, and devoted).

Question Q7/8, How do you perceive today’s children? Are they happier or unhappier than yesterday’s children? What do you consider to be the greatest assets of today’s generation? And the most obvious shortcomings or challenges? asked respondents to say how they perceived today’s children, i.e., whether they are happier or unhappier than yesterday’s children and what their strengths and weaknesses are.

According to D.B., today’s children are neither happier nor unhappier than yesterday’s children. The main challenge is the fact that they are “strange”.

According to M.B., today’s children are both happy and unhappy. They are brave, informed, nonchalant, but also without models, uncommunicative, distrustful, and bored.

C.C. did not answer the part of the question “Are they happier or unhappier than yesterday’s children?”, but considered today’s children confused and uncommunicative.

According to F.I., yesterday’s children were happy, fulfilled, modest, satisfied, grateful, respectful, and simple, while today’s children are creative, beautiful, intelligent, and wonderful, but also selfish, frustrated, dissatisfied, and powerless.

According to E.J., today’s children are as happy or unhappy as yesterday’s children. If yesterday’s children were under terror and “on guard”, today’s children seem critical, “unfrozen”, informed, and free, but also absent, gullible / naive, disoriented, unconscious, uneducated, bored, and rebellious.

I.R. did not answer the first part of the question, but characterized today’s children as creative, beautiful, intelligent, and precocious, but also unruly, naughty, spoiled, and terrorists.

G.S. neither answered the first part of the question, but he characterized today’s children as marked by broken families, social networks, technology.

M.Ş. also did not answer the first part of the question; for her, today’s kids are agile, casual, ambitious, and on trend with the technological revolution, but stubborn.

Discussion

Foll Question Q4/5

For the eight respondents, childhood meant freedom, joy and “play together, outside, in the open”, family, flight (= freedom), sadness,

victory, and story. It should be noted that one of the respondents did not define childhood; that one respondent gave not one definition but two; that, if we leave aside the equating of childhood with sadness, all other equivalents have a positive denotation; and that three definitions (freedom, outdoor play, and flight) refer, explicitly or implicitly, to freedom.

Regarding the motto (“quotation taken, usually, from a consecrated work or signed by a famous author, placed at the beginning of a work, a chapter, etc. with the aim of revealing the fundamental idea of the respective writing” – DEX ‘16) chosen to define the childhood experienced by the eight respondents, two of them proposed none; one propose three mottos belonging to Blaga (“Childhood is the heart of all ages.”), Saint-Exupéry (“Where do I come from? I come from my childhood. I come from my childhood like from a country.”) and Neruda (“All is ceremony in the wild garden of childhood.”); another one, two verses from Psalm 70:5 (“But as for me, I am poor and needy; come quickly to me, O God. You are my help and my deliverer; LORD, do not delay.”); and four proposed personal mottos with a most positive and inspiring tone: “After a beautiful day follows another, even more promising.”, “The family and the small community are the safe space of the child.”, “Be real, face your problems and overcome them with God’s help!”, and “The purity and beauty of life.”

Question Q5/6

Only four interviewees answered the first part of the question, “What helped you the most as a child?”: “The freedom to play with the other children all day (after finishing the housework) on vacation and until late at night; during school, after finishing homework.” (M.B.), “every person or thing helped me to a greater or lesser extent. Every glance, word, every page read, every sunrise, tree, leaf, bird...” (F.I.), “early maturation” (E.J.), and “optimism, confidence in one’s own strength, faith” (M.Ş.).

As for the second part of the question, “Who was the person you most admired and had a strong impact on your life?”, the “votes” went in the following directions: family members (once): “parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins” (F.I.); mother (four times): “a dedicated teacher, a deeply moral person, sometimes overly normative”, principled, correct, and moral (D.B.), “who found time to play with us” (M.B.), the “She knows everything hero” (C.C.), (I.R.); father (three times): (M.B.), the “Superman hero” (C.C.), (I.R.); grandmother (three times): illiterate, wise, good cook, good storyteller, lover of life, serene and sincere (M.B.), the “I love you, no matter what hero” (C.C), whose values were “faith, family and love” (G.S.); grandfather (once): “an exemplary educator: demanding, but humane,

[...] a genuine intellectual” (D.B.); an aunt (once): (I.R.); and my mother’s uncle (once): mature, serious, hard-working, respectful, intelligent, self-confident, loving himself and others, good, ambitious, determined, giving, and devoted) (M.Ş.). To the family members are added the elementary school teachers (twice): (M.B.) / the “gentle, smiling” teacher (F.I.); the teachers (twice): (M.B.) / the history teacher “a good storyteller” (F.I.); schoolmates (once): (M.B.); an acquaintance (once): “small in height, extremely fast and hardworking” (F.I.); everyone around (once): (E.J.); and the neighbours (once): one “who pampered us with thick slices smeared with rosehip paste or pear marmalade” and another “who gave us rolls when she baked bread” (M.B.). To note that, of the nuclear family members, only the parents are mentioned and that the extended family is well represented. Also, as expected, educators (teachers, professors) are well represented. All of them are characterized as: ambitious, illiterate, gentle, good storyteller, good, good cook, fair, brave, giving, dedicated, devoted, exemplary educator, demanding educator, humane educator, generous, hardworking, determined, genuine intellectual, intelligent, loving life, loving self and others, self-confident, wise, mature, deeply moral / moral, hardworking, skilful, principled, respectful, serene, serious, sincere, and smiling.

Question Q7/8

Only three interviewees answered to the first part of the question, Are today’s children happier or unhappier than yesterday’s children?: “they are neither happier nor unhappier” (D.B.), “both happy and unhappy” (M.B.), “equally happy or unhappy” (E.J.).

The second part of the question raised a series of characterizations of the children of yesterday and today. Thus, the children of yesterday were happy, fulfilled, modest, satisfied, grateful, respectful, and simple, but also in terror and “on guard”. Today’s children have positive qualities – creative (2), beautiful (2), informed (2), intelligent (2), agile, ambitious, critical, brave, “unfrozen”, easy-going, on trend with the technological revolution, free, wonderful, nonchalant, and precocious – but also negative qualities: uncommunicative (2), bored (2), absent, strange, gullible / naïve, confused, disoriented, selfish, patternless, frustrated, unaware, stubborn, uneducated, distrustful of themselves, malcontents, powerless, unruly, naughty, spoiled, rebellious, and terrorists.

Conclusion

For the eight respondents, childhood meant freedom, joy and “play together, outside, in the open”, family, flight (= freedom), sadness,

victory, and story, and the chosen mottos denote optimism and inspiration.

In childhood, the respondents were helped by everyone around them, and their role models in life were, first of all, family members, followed by teachers and others, characterized as ambitious, illiterate, gentle, good storyteller / storyteller, good, good cook, fair, brave, giving, dedicated, devoted, exemplary educator, demanding educator, humane educator, generous, hardworking, determined, genuine intellectual, intelligent, loving life, loving self and others, confident self-reliant, wise, mature, deeply moral / moral, hard-working, skillful, principled, respectful, serene, serious, sincere, and smiling.

Compared to the children of yesteryear, today's children are "neither happier nor unhappier", "both happy and unhappy", or "equally happy or unhappy". Yesterday's children were under terror and "on guard" (in the communist regime), but happy, fulfilled, modest, contented, grateful, respectful, simple. Today's children have positive qualities (creative, beautiful, informed, intelligent, etc.) but also negative qualities: uncommunicative, bored, etc.

G. S. does not answer the first part of Q7/8, but characterizes today's children as marked by broken families, social media, and technology. Or, the remedial solutions should target precisely these causes that have led to the mutations indicated in the analysis above.

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