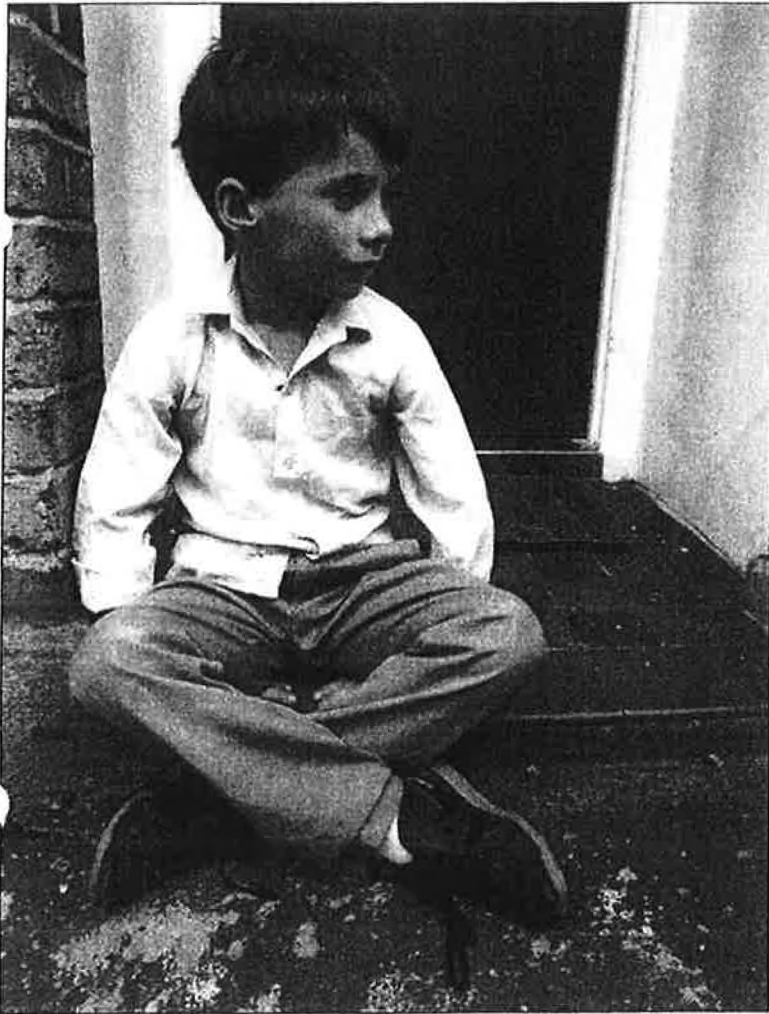


## CHILDHOOD &amp; GROWING UP

## CHILD CARE

## Whatever happened to childhood?



(NSPCC Photographic Library. All photographs posed by models)

According to the United Nations a child should grow up in a family environment — in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding — to develop a well-balanced character

**T**HE subjects of children and childhood have been in the headlines recently. But not all the news has been positive.

In the United States, a new report by the AMA (American Medical Association) revealed that children as young as two years old are being given

anti-depressant drugs.

In Hamburg, Germany, the city council has set up a 'hole in the wall' where unwanted babies can be delivered.

In Britain, it is reported that a growing number of children live in poverty. And of course, there was the shocking news — once again from the US — where a 6-year old child shot and killed a classmate. With tragic stories like these we could well ask the question: *whatever happened to childhood?*

It is often said that in childhood we experience the happiest days of our lives. And for most children that is still the case. But a growing number of children are suffering in our 'modern' western societies.

To answer the question: 'whatever happened to childhood?' perhaps we

should first ask another question: *whatever happened to parents?*

There was a time, not so long ago, when parents actually looked after their own children. There were no nurseries or other institutions where parents could place their children. The arrival of a baby usually meant that mother and child stayed together at home.

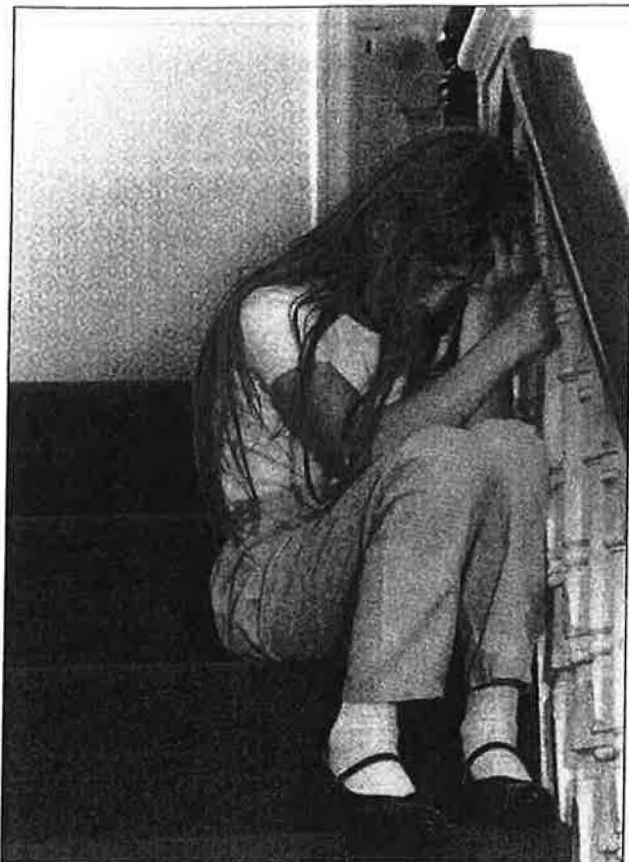
Parents also relied on help from uncles, aunts and grandparents. These other family members took some of the stress and strain of coping with a new-born baby. And they also became an important part of the child's inner circle of trusted and loving friends.

Times have changed. Western societies treat their youngest members very differently these days. This is due, in part, to the fact that both parents work outside the home. Our modern lifestyle often demands more money than one parent can earn alone. But the rush for material riches is leaving our children a lot poorer.

This was the subject of a recent newspaper column by the American reporter, Philip Delves. His article 'Children of two put on Prozac', describes how some US parents use drugs as a 'quick fix' for overactive children. The only thing 'wrong' with these restless

*continued on page 13*

## CHILDHOOD &amp; GROWING UP



(NSPCC Photographic Library. All photographs posed by models)

*'In the little world in which children have their existence .... there is nothing so finely perceived [understood] and so finely felt, as injustice.'*

Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (1861)

children is that they miss the love and affection of their parents.

To make matters worse they are labelled 'problem kids' by the institutions where they are left by busy parents. These institutions often expect behaviour from a child that he or she is not yet old enough to give. So, parents 'reach for the pill bottle' as a solution to their hyperactive, restless children.

Delves describes how these children — some as

young as two years old — are given drugs such as Prozac and Ritalin. This is in spite of the fact that little is known about the long-term effects of the drugs on young bodies and minds. And also in spite of the fact that a change of diet and therapy could provide *real* solutions for 'problem children'.

It would seem that the irresponsibility of these parents is matched only by the greed of the drug companies who supply these drugs — with few restrictions.

Kofi Annan, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, recently spoke these wise words on the subject of child care:

'To look into some aspects of the future, we do not need projections by supercomputers. Much of the next millennium can be seen in how we care for our children today. Tomorrow's world may be influenced by science and technology, but more than anything, it is already taking shape in the bodies and minds of our children.'

Every time you see a young child or a baby you are looking at the future. As Mr Annan points out, our future will only be as good as the treatment we give our children today. There can be no higher task for society today than to make sure that its youngest — and most helpless — members get the start in life they deserve. This doesn't come from a bottle of pills but from the love and care of parents. □

#### WORDS

**anti-depressant drugs** — drugs used to prevent or treat depression

**aspects** — in the text, parts or elements

**behaviour** — the way a person acts or 'behaves'

**greed** — extreme desire to have more than one needs or deserves

**institution** — in the text, a place where children are looked after (outside the home)

**irresponsibility** — having no responsibility; stupidity

**labelled** — called; described as

**material riches** — wealth; expensive things (cars, houses, expensive clothes, and so on)

**nursery** — day-care centre for young children

**poverty** — state of being extremely poor

**projections** — predictions;

thoughts about the future

**Prozac** — anti-depressant drug

**quick fix** — quick solution (not

always the best solution)

**restrictions** — safety controls

**Ritalin** — drug used to treat

hyperactivity and children who

have difficulty concentrating

(however, many professionals

fear that the drug is being used

on healthy, active children as

a 'quick fix')

**solution** — answer, remedy

**stress and strain** — difficulty

**taking shape** — forming

**treatment** — therapy;

medical care

For links to more information on this subject check the 'latest' page on our web site:

[www.schooltimes.com/latest.htm](http://www.schooltimes.com/latest.htm)

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#### Discuss with the class

1 'Sperm banks' offer single women the chance to become pregnant. But the resulting child will never know his or her biological father. Do children, even unborn children, have rights? And do we have the right to deny these children a real father?

2 Some adults become parents before they themselves have 'grown up'. They are sometimes so badly prepared for the experience of being a parent that their children suffer as a result. If we demand that people have a licence to drive a car, should adults be made to have a licence before having children? And if there were such a licence, what kind of things should people know and learn about before passing their 'test' — and getting their 'parent licence'?

3 We know that experiences in early childhood years affect the rest of our lives. What practical steps can society take to make sure that children get the best start in life?

4 Can adults who have experienced a 'loveless childhood' love their own children?