THE NATURE OF CHILDHOOD – THE HISTORICAL, CULTURAL AND BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

Ramona-Simona KIRU

Adventus University Cernica
amona.kiru@uadventus.ro

Abstract:

The child is seen as a smaller and less powerful version of an adult - more dependent, less knowledgeable, less competent, less socially adapted and less capable of emotional control. The weak point of this description is that it is based only on negative terms, drawing attention to children's weaknesses, without mentioning the vast potential it has for its future development. With all these characteristics, adults have the task of providing support for the child's difficulties and helping him to acquire everything he lacks and turn them into personal characteristics.

It is quite difficult to define childhood without being subjective because one who tries to draw a characterization cannot define it without inevitably expressing something of himself. On a personal level, childhood is built: it is seen in the light of personal experiences and is interpreted so as to fit the vision that has been developed about the world.

The constructed nature of childhood becomes even more evident when comparing conceptions of childhood that were prevalent in different historical periods or in different cultures. The way children are perceived varies depending on the many social, economic, political and religious influences that exist at that time and place. When trying to define a child, it cannot be given only in terms of inherent characteristics that necessarily constitute the ingredients from which children are built; it also depends on the nature of society, the beliefs and customs on which that child is raised.

Keywords: *child, childhood, values.*

Historical Perspective

Philippe Aries in his book Centuries of Childhood (1962) presents the most detailed examination of children's history: "In medieval society the

idea of childhood did not exist; this does not mean that all children were neglected, abandoned or despised. The idea of childhood should not be confused with affection for children; it corresponds to the awareness of the particular nature of childhood, that which distinguishes adults, even from the young adult. In medieval society this awareness was lacking[1]."

In the paintings of the Middle Ages, children were represented as miniature adults, their clothes were reduced children of those worn by men and women. Not only were they seen as adults, but children were also expected to take part in the same work and play activities. What mattered most in times of economic crisis were the power and skills that differentiated children from each other and that made them able to contribute to the survival of the family and the well-being of society. During this period, reaching the first birthday was an achievement for a child: one or two out of three children died in the first year of life[2] . This changed very little until the eighteenth century. The death of a child was therefore a common and frequent phenomenon, which would normally wreak havoc on mothers today and which would also change her attitude towards living children. According to some historians, the self-protective mechanism that was generally adopted under these conditions was maternal indifference: mothers could not afford to become too attached to their children until survival in the first years of life was assured. „This seems hard to believe for people living today who believe that motherly love is an absolutely essential ingredient for a child's development. In the past centuries, at least among the rich, it was widespread and perfectly acceptable to send children home, to nurses in the first year of life and to tutors and craftsmen in middle childhood. It seems that emotional and physical closeness was not considered as necessary for the parent-child relationship as it is today[3]".

Aries shows that it was not until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that a change in the conception of childhood first appeared. Children began to be represented as children in terms of appearance and clothing, although this was initially limited to boys only - as Aries says: "boys were the first specialized children". In general, the change has been slow,

1   Philippe Aries, *Centuries of Chidhood*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1962.

2   Mary Martin McLaughlin, „Survivors and surrogates: Children and parents from the ninth to the thirteenth century", in Lloyd DeMause (ed.), *The History of Childhood*, New York, Psychohistory Press, 1974.

3   Rudolf Schaffer, *Psihologia copilului*, Cluj-Napoca, Editura ASCR, 2005, p. 22

as can be seen in the reluctance to accept the idea that children's need for education must take precedence over adults' need to see them at work. The industrial revolution of the late eighteenth century created an enormous demand for cheap labor; parents were often dependent on their children's wages, and unscrupulous employers did not hesitate to send 6-year-olds to work in factories, mines and chimneys in terrible conditions for long hours. Factory regulations adopted by the British Parliament at various times in the nineteenth century very slowly created a childhood as we see today: for example, the 1833 Act provided that children between the ages of 9 and 13 worked only 48 hours a week, and those between 13 and 18 years only 68 hours a week - an improvement over the previous conditions, which still left little time for children to play or learn. Even these changes met with opposition from employers: as one mine owner put it, for miners' children, practical education in the mine was superior to education with books[4]. Employment of children remains a problem in many countries even today; when difficult economic conditions predominate, a conception of childhood is less likely to appear as a period of delight, happiness, and relaxation.

„The story of childhood is a nightmare from which we have just begun to wake up. The further we go in history, the lower the level of childcare and the more likely we are to see children killed, abandoned, beaten, terrorized and sexually abused[5]." With this statement, Lloyd DeMause begins his book The History of Childhood (1974). It seems that in ancient and medieval times the spread of the phenomenon of child abuse was much greater than today.

The idea of children's rights is very recent. For example, in ancient Rome, children were the legal property of the father; he decided how to raise them, how to discipline them, and whether or not to let them live.

From time to time, especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, brutal treatment of children was justified by religious morality. According to the Puritan doctrine of original sin, we are all conceived and born in the spirit of the devil, and it is the task of parents and educators to rule that devil in the souls of children. So children, far from being innocent, come into the world like little savages; without taming, their natural

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4   William Kessen, *The Child*, New York, Wiley, 1965
5   Lloyd DeMause, *The History of Childhood*, New York, Psychohistory Press, 1974

depravity would be a threat to society, and the primary purpose of raising children is, therefore, to eradicate the negative side that every child is endowed with. "Violation of children's will" thus became a central theme of literature with advice for parents at the time. As Mrs. Wesley, the mother of the founder of Methodism, wrote in the eighteenth century: "I insist on defeating the will of the child sometimes, because this is the only foundation for a religious education... Heaven or hell depends only on this. So, the parent who tries to calm his child's own will will work with God to save the soul: the parent who accepts it works for the devil... No matter how much it hurts, defeat his stubbornness; break his will if you don't want to curse the child[6]".

In earlier times children were seen as an addition to the adult world rather than as individuals with their own rights; children were seen in the light of society and their families. Behavior towards them was justified through economic, moral and religious forces based on the requirements of adults and there were few attempts to define the needs and characteristics of children. The idea that children also have an independent status and that adults should adapt to this status is of recent origin.

As an example of current attitudes, we can consider the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted in 1989. The Convention is important because, first and foremost, it argues that every child has rights; secondly, because it seeks to enumerate these rights; thirdly, because it supports the obligation of governments to impose them; and lastly, because it is based on the specific image of a childhood that we probably find in the minds of those who were responsible for carrying out the Convention. This image is expressed in the following quote from the statement adopted by the World Summit for Children after the United Nations accepted the Convention: „The children of this world are innocent, vulnerable and dependent. They are also curious, active and hopeful. Their life should be one of joy and peace, of play, learning and growth. Their future should be shaped in harmony and cooperation. They should be formed by broadening their horizons and gaining experience."

The Convention consists of 54 articles addressing the basic needs of children everywhere such as: the right to life, the right to develop to their

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6   John Newson & Elizabeth Newson, „Cultural aspects of childrearing in the English-speaking world", in M. P. M. Richards (ed.), *The integration of a child into a social world*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1974

full potential, the right to protection from harmful influences, the right to be protected from abuse and exploitation, and and the right to participate fully in family, cultural and social life. The four basic principles of the convention are non-discrimination, devotion to the best interests of the child, the right to life, survival and development and respect for the views of the child.

Cultural Perspective

We can find different images of children not only going back in time, but also traveling the world and comparing different cultures as they appear today. The world has become smaller and smaller. The improvement of means of transport and the spread of media influence have led to a gradual westernization even in the most remote corners of the world. The way some people think they are right about raising children is by no means shared by all societies.

Let's look at a Western mother who has her baby on her lap. The two are totally absorbed in each other. The mother tries her best to lead this interaction, often very intense from an emotional point of view, by hugging, smiling, rocking, singing and talking to the child, making sure she is in the center of his attention. In contrast, Kaluli mothers live in the rainforests of Papua New Guinea. In this small society, babies are not treated as partners in a one-on-one exchange: the mother and the child do not spend much time looking into each other's eyes, but, on the contrary, mothers hold the children so that they are turned away. to the outside and to be seen by others who are part of their social group. Moreover, mothers rarely talk directly to babies; the other people talk to the baby, and the mother speaks in a high-intensity voice for the baby. In this community, mother-child unity and family are less important. From an early age, children are prepared to be aware of the social community as a whole[7].

In Kenya's Gusa society, any interaction of the mother with her baby aims to avoid or reduce any agitation that he would normally feel in a one-on-one interaction. And here there is little face-to-face interaction: when she is present, she is slow and emotionless. The mother's most common

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7   Bambi B. Schieffelin & Elinor Ochs, „A cultural perspective on the transition from prelinguistic to linguistic communication", in R. M. Golinkoff (ed.), *The Transition from Prelinguistic to Linguistic Communication*, Hillsdale, NJ, Erlbaum, 1983.

response to the baby's gaze or snoring is to look away. However, the emphasis is on physical contact, even during sleep. When the baby cries, he gets attention by offering the breast, either by rocking and hugging - again to avoid agitation. And in this case, the mother follows a cultural agenda through these habits: she must return to the field work as soon as possible, at which point the baby will be left in the care of the older children, who must be calm and easy enough. taken care of so that they can handle it. The way in which manele is treated with babies is therefore the correct way to fulfill the culturally determined goal.

In Western society, considerable importance is given to play, and mothers often play with their children to ensure the formation of cognitive and educational skills. Not so in the case of Mexican mothers from poor families, who see the game as having minimal importance and no role in future development. When asked to join their children in the game, these mothers find this experience strange and embarrassing, and their contributions often take the form of explicit education and not actions designed to make the experience fun. Given the economic circumstances, these mothers seem to function on the basis of a work model: life is serious, play is a luxury, and the sooner children learn this lesson the better[8].

Biblical Perspective

The Bible tells us that there are differences between children and adults: "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I felt like a child, I thought like a child; when I became a man, I rejected what was childish" (1 Corinthians 13:11). The Bible confirms that there is an age at which children do not know how to distinguish good from evil. Cultivating faith in children requires knowing how they speak, think, feel and reason, as well as the resources of their physical possibilities.

Each child has their own growth rate, different from the others. Sometimes there are differences or imbalances between physical, mental and social development. Until adulthood, children go through different stages of development in the same order, but not at the same speed.

When physical development is rapid, mental development is slower. The reverse is also true. During this period of physical development, chil-

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8   Jo Ann M. Farver & Carollee Howes,„Cultural Differences in American and Mexican mother-child pretend play", *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 39/1993, pp.344-358.

dren tend to be restless and very active, often not knowing what to do with their body. During this period of mental development, they are very open to learning and assimilate new ideas without any effort.

Child development is not a uniform and smooth process. It has many ups and downs. A big jump forward, then a fall that prepares the next jump

At all levels of development, boys are more at risk than girls. Boys learn bad habits more easily, become addicted to drugs and have emotional disorders. Despite the fact that they are brave when they are in difficult situations, such as their parents' divorce, boys are much more affected than girls. Boys are more prone to suicide or juvenile delinquency.

Society and culture have changed dramatically in the last ten years. Children live in a world that is constantly changing. Puberty begins earlier than in the past. The influence of friends is stronger, because children spend more time with friends than with parents or adults. I also spend more time under the influence of the media, which has a great power of influence.

Children are the best consumers, from the perspective of producers of goods. As more and more children have money to spend, they have become the target of advertising campaigns. Unfortunately, their mental development does not allow them to recognize the forms of influence through which advertising tries to manipulate them.

Children grow up in a multicultural environment. They need to learn how to relate to children and adults who belong to other cultures and races. Many children face hatred, separation and discrimination, or other stereotypical behaviors that are based on certain racial or religious ideas. They need to develop skills that will help them navigate these challenges and succeed in becoming respectable and competent adults in the 21st century.

In the world of the global village, many children are nomads, moving with their families from one country to another. They follow their parents, who, because they work in a multinational corporation, in the army, in the diplomatic corps or go to another country for a higher earnings, move from one place to another. They become the children of the third culture. They do not have the culture of their parents, nor the culture of the country or countries in which they lived. They have a kind of combination between the cultures they have experienced. They feel connected to all these cultures, but they do not belong to any of them.

„Many children live in a constant state of fear and anxiety. They live in a violent world where they need security. Some children experience domestic violence and go through moments of physical, sexual or emotional violence or abuse by those who should protect them[9]".

Many children are afraid to go to school or high school because gangs are a threat. They live in areas where crime is high and television always reminds them of the dangers of war, natural disasters or child abduction. Others experience these things directly, they don't just see them on TV. War is the colleague of many of them. Constantly, fear and anxiety negatively affect children's emotional development.

Technology is an integral part of raising children in the 21st century. Most children in developed countries cannot imagine their lives without a television, telephone or computer. In less developed countries, it is not uncommon to see children huddled around a phone or tablet idolizing the latest movie, music or sports star.

Less abstract thinking and less mental effort will lead to stifled information processing. A chaotic way of processing information is developing. Employers are already noticing that young employees are not able to solve work problems. They lack the insistence and independent thinking. They just want to press the buttons and move on. A person who has difficulty thinking systematically and critically will be deprived of the ability to discern the authority of information sources.

Cognitive, emotional and physical development are closely linked. None can be produced without the support of the others. It is known that physical activities and sensory experiences are necessary for mental development. Without them, thinking remains undeveloped. Children who sit in front of the screen for more than half a day will not have the physical experiences necessary for brain development.

Emotions play an important role in learning. Strong emotional experiences reinforce learning.

The ability to analyze and understand their own feelings is closely related to the stage of cognitive development that the child has reached. Piaget's four stages of cognitive development describe the difference that occurs in the child's way of thinking, from birth to adolescence. Understanding feelings is related to these stages.

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9   Donna J. Habenicht & Larry Burton, *Credința pe înțelesul copiilor*, București, Editura Viață și Sănătate, 2008, p. 250.

Babies and infants (the sensory-motor stage) experience through the senses. At first, they can't express their feelings, but after a while they learn to relate certain actions to certain emotions.

In early childhood (preoperative stage), children have a poor understanding of feelings. Sad, angry or happy are the most commonly used words. They can identify only one feeling at a time, which they relate to a certain situation.

During the stage of concrete operations (6-7 years to 11 years), children begin to become aware of the mixture of feelings. They can distinguish between different feelings and engage in activities that involve expressing them. I recognize the feelings I am experiencing and can also call the opposite feeling, also noticing the subtle changes that take place on different occasions or situations.

When children have passed the stage of precise operations (11-12 years), their emotional life is very complex. They can experience nuances of feelings and express the quality and intensity of their feelings. Preteens can recognize their own feelings and at the same time recognize the feelings of others. They are beginning to discover new feelings and patterns.

Helping children grow in today's society is a challenge, but God faces any challenge. God loves children and does everything possible to draw them to Him. Parents and teachers are God's partners in this endeavor. Character is the only treasure that does not lose its value over the years. „A good character is a much more valuable capital than gold or silver. He is not affected by panic or failure, and on the day when all earthly properties will be shattered, this character will bring a rich reward. Integrity, firmness, and perseverance are qualities that everyone must cultivate diligently, because they endow the one who holds them with irresistible power — a power that makes him strong to do good, to resist evil, and to endure trouble[10]".

Conclusions

The answer to the question „What is a child?" it turns out not to be a simple one. The way we think about childhood depends on a whole set of historical, cultural, and biblical influences. Every society produces children with personality traits that match its values. „By internalizing values in their

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10   Ellen White, *Îndrumarea copilului*, București, Editura Viață și Sănătate, 2007, p. 113.

own lives, children can be prepared to meet the demands of society and make a positive contribution to it[11]".

Most adults have a belief system about the nature of childhood and their role in a child's development. „Both parents and educators and, in general, all the people involved in the development of the child should attach major importance to the development of the child's language in the preschool stage[12]".

Some will emphasize the influence of the child's own potential, and others the effects of parenting practices and education techniques used by adults.„Each human being is unique and deserves to be sustained, encouraged, assisted in his own development and evolution in order to reach his full potential.[13]"

Beliefs affect the way adults treat children, and these behaviors determine the course of the child's development.

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12   Laura Maftei,„Language development in early education", *Journal in Education Studies*, 1(2)/ 2019, pp.74-103.
13   Eliza M. Spătărelu,„Uphold child dignity in primary education", *Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință*, 7(1)/2019, pp. 608-616.

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