The New Child

In search of smarter grown-ups

Don and Patricia Edgar

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To Adrian, Luke, Emily, and Ace

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr Don Edgar is an internationally known authority on family change, marriage trends, and the work/family balance. His PhD in sociology from Stanford University led him to teaching at the prestigious University of Chicago in the United States, and at Monash and La Trobe Universities. In 1980, he was appointed foundation director of the Australian Institute of Family Studies, where his pioneering research helped shape government policy toward Australian families over two decades. A prolific writer, his books include *Men, Mateship, Marriage* (1997), *The Patchwork Nation* (2001) and *The War Over Work: The Future of Work and Family* (2005). He is a member of the Victorian Children's Council.

The recipient of numerous awards and the author of eight books, Dr Patricia Edgar is without peer in Australia as a media researcher, producer of children's television, and policy expert on media. She taught the first film courses in an Australian university and was the architect of the Children's Television Standards. As founding director of the Australian Children's Television Foundation she kick-started an industry, producing an outstanding slate of internationally recognised programs, including *Winners, Lift Off, Round the Twist, Yolngu Boy, Noah & Saskia* and *Kahootz*. She founded the World Summit Movement on Media for Children, which she chairs.

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INTRODUCTION

The children in our lives

The inspiration to write this book has come from our grandchildren, aged 13, 10, 9, and 7. We have been active participants in their lives since they were born; watching them develop physically and mentally as they strive to gain control over their world, and negotiate relationships with their family and friends. These kids are great company, loving, and bursting with vitality. They and their friends speak frankly about their lives – what they enjoy and what they expect. They exemplify the innate potential all kids possess, there to bloom if we cultivate wisely. We quote some of the things they say and do to illustrate key trends, but our main sources for this book are the research literature – often misinterpreted by media reports and politicians pursuing their own ends – and our professional experience over more than 50 years.

Our first book on the development of Australian children was published 35 years ago. We have returned to the subject partly because we are fascinated and concerned by rapid changes in the media, and the undoubted impact they are having on today's kids. Observing our grandchildren's confident engagement with the internet, iPods, Nintendo and the rest – even the youngest was online by the age of three – we cannot help but wonder about their experience of childhood.

We also wanted to draw together the threads of our working and personal lives, to reflect on what we have learned about the development of children in this unusual and, in many ways, lucky country of ours. Our professional work has always involved children and families. We both started as schoolteachers, then moved on to universities lecturing in education and sociology, training new teachers, and writing about education policy.

Don became founding director of the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), initiating pioneering research that redefined the nature of family life in Australia, and helped governments understand what real life meant behind the cliché of the white picket fence. Patricia's career focused on children and the media, first as a researcher, then as a regulator of children's television programming. For two decades, she was director of the Australian Children's Television Foundation, which helped redefine the emotional and imaginative landscape of children's television production with programs such as *Round the Twist* and *Lift-Off*. These days, Don is a member of the Victorian Children's Council, while Patricia chairs the World Summit Foundation on Media for Children.

There are few comprehensive studies of Australian children. One is the Australian Temperament Project, a long-term study of the psychosocial development of children born in Victoria at the end of 1982, which is up to its fourteenth wave of data collection. The AIFS conducted the *Children in Australian Families project* in 1985, and is now engaged in a national longitudinal study, *Growing Up in Australia*. Professor Fiona Stanley and her colleagues raised the profile of children's health and wellbeing in their recent book *Children of the Lucky Country*. Yet, as we found when we came to write our own book, there is still little systematic research data on how and why Australian children have changed.

Fortunately, much can be inferred from research on the changing nature of family life, from the new paths forged by women in the workplace, and from the way that market forces and new communication technologies have redefined the nature of childhood. In the last decade or so, the new field of neuroscience has also shown how significant a child's early years are to the development of their intelligence and their ability to cope with an increasingly complex world.

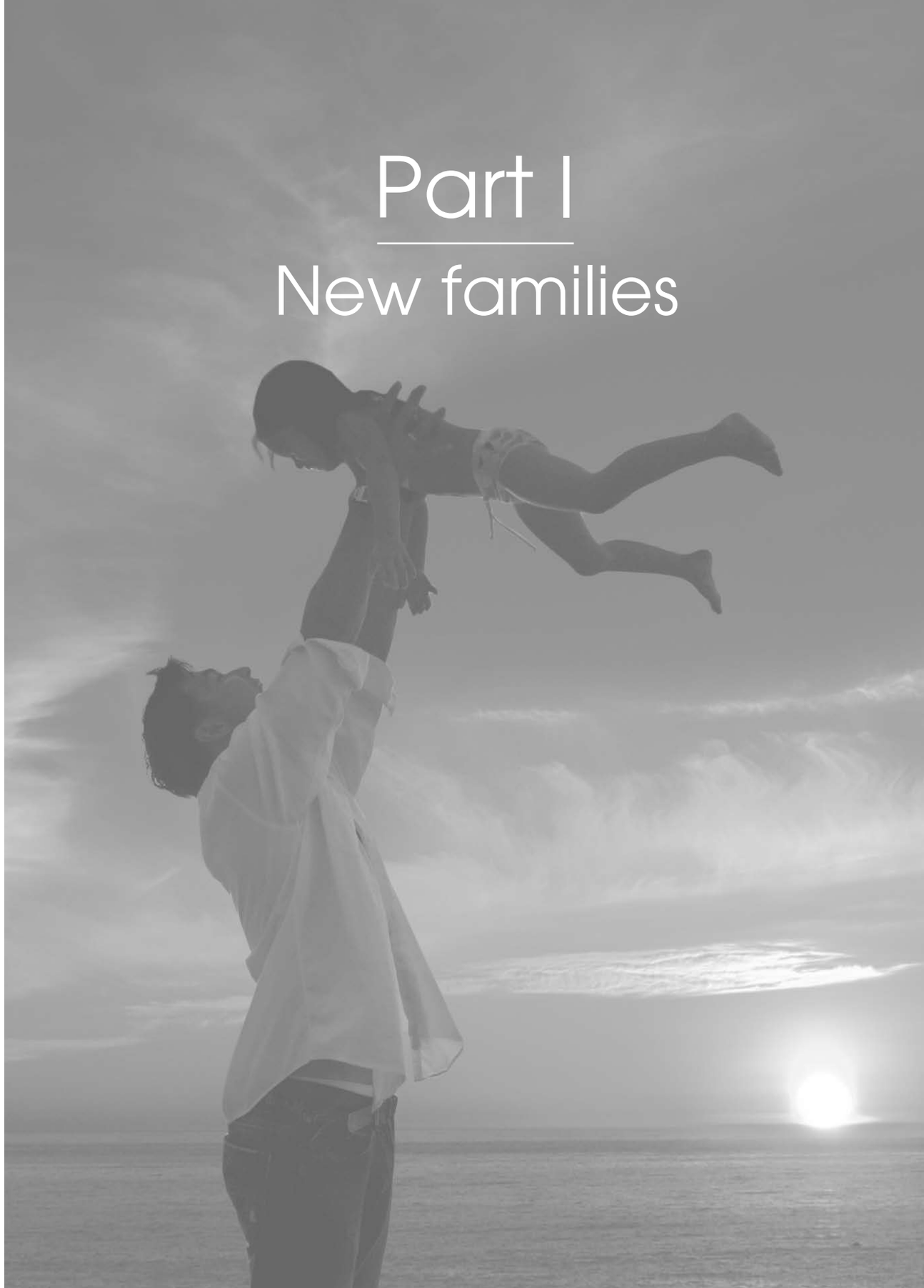
Parents and educators need to understand these trends so that they can put their own difficulties and concerns into context. Every day, the media report on the disasters of the world these kids are living in; a world that, in time, they will shape for themselves. Predictions of doom and gloom have become a commonplace: kids are out of control, too fat, too sexy, disrespectful, too full of themselves for their own good – not only is the world going to the dogs; the kids are too. We only partly agree.

Every child has challenges to come to terms with. This has always been the case, and although today's hazards seem more complex, today's kids seem as well equipped as any generation before them to deal with life. It is our belief that the New Child is alert, thinking creatively, and motivated to learn. They are exuberant, perceptive, and inventive. They know their way around – and know far more about what's going on than we did at their early age. As the raw material of the future, they demonstrate more hope than you could ever find between the pages of a newspaper or on the nightly news.

So what can we do to help them? It's our job to try to provide them with the resilience and resources they will need to give them the best chance in life. What they need is smarter grown-ups around them – parents, teachers, business leaders, and politicians – who recognise that potential, and work together to foster the best in every child.

Part I

New families



CHAPTER 1

Children don't live in 'normal' families anymore

For the first time in Australia's recorded history, children are a minority. This is so shocking that we say it again: our children have become a numerical minority which continues to decline proportionally, now making up less than 20 per cent of the national population. We need to pay close attention to their needs if their futures – and the future of our country – are to be assured.

As a minority group, today's children face a different experience from previous generations. They have older parents, fewer siblings, and more living grandparents. Parents today are more time-poor than ever, and face increasing pressures in their own lives from work structures unresponsive to the needs of mothers and fathers. To compensate, they tend to overindulge their children. Families are becoming smaller, and there are fewer of them, but at the same time their composition is both more diverse and more democratic. Kids have more power and influence in their families, and the consequences are both positive and negative. Parents are confused about their role as the child's elders, uncertain of what they should control or demand from their children. In parallel, kids don't know if they are children or little adults.

Rather than simply bemoan such changes, we want to illuminate the social forces that make life for both parents and their children more difficult, more complex, and more in need of concerted social support. Children's interests are under threat from the ageing of the population, an increased intake of skilled migrants, and a broad social indifference to their wellbeing that we have never seen before.

Back in 1982, when Don was director of the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), he was amazed when the head of the federal Treasury told him not to continue sending copies of the institute's publications, because 'Treasury has nothing to do with families'. How times change. The 2007 federal election was largely fought around the issue of 'working families': politicians can no longer ignore the way family life intersects with the new economy and shifting social values.

What was normal just a few decades ago is not so normal anymore. Family life has become a rich kaleidoscope, and part of the job of government is to ensure that every child, growing up in whatever type of family, is given the best chance to grow into healthy and productive adulthood. A comprehensive family policy becomes ever more important.

Times have changed since the nuclear family era

By its nature, family life is in a perpetual state of evolution. Before the 1940s, it was normal that not everyone got married. There were lots of bachelor uncles and spinster aunts, because setting up house and raising a family took money. But after World War II, for the first time in history, the majority of men and women found they could afford to marry and have children. So for a few decades, the children born between 1945 and 1963 – the baby boomers – lived in what we came to regard as a normal family unit, the nuclear family. They grew up with clear expectations about what men, women, and children were supposed to do, and failure to conform drew wide disapproval.

In the face of such social uniformity, it is easy to forget what families and marriage are actually about. Families are based on love, on a commitment to one sexual partner for life. Furthermore, marriage has been the way that most societies have guaranteed that every child had parents who were responsible for raising them. Marriage took different forms in different societies, but the basis of married family life was the social legitimation of sex and parental obligations. The ties that bind – blood ties – are very strong because we pass down to our children not only a genetic legacy, but also our family traditions and the mores of our culture and society. We have to ask: what are we passing down to this new generation that is valuable as a useful guide to their future?

We married in 1960 when we were both the ripe old age of 23. That was not considered young then, and Patricia had already been treated to some fatherly advice from her dad who, although he ensured her pursuit of tertiary education, still believed that a woman's place was in the home. Don, as the son of a widow, was accustomed to women working and to men helping in the house. He had done a large share of the cooking for his mother and four siblings, and was undeterred by the fact that Patricia was seeking from marriage a partnership in every sense. When she told her dad that she would be a working wife, he gave her the speech that she had expected about motherhood and family. It was the natural order of things that women did not work after marriage, and her father feared that Don would not tolerate such independent behaviour for long.

Forty-eight years later, it seems we can claim to have made a go of it. We were both committed to having children, but we did not settle into the conventional pattern of the era. Though Patricia stayed at home when the children were infants, she began some part-time work and then returned to full-time teaching.

"Dad came home from work, expected dinner to be on the table, perhaps tucked you into bed, and read you a story."

Back then, a new mother was most likely to be aged in her early twenties; after leaving school in her mid-teens, she would have worked for just a few years before marrying. She was at home all day long, organising the household and caring for the kids. Often, she followed the routine she had learned from her own mother: do the washing on Monday and the ironing on Tuesday, clean house on Wednesday, bake on Thursday, and shop for food and other household goods on Friday.

Mum made your lunch, had a snack ready when you got home, sent you outside to play while dinner was being prepared, then ran the bath, and got you in your pyjamas. Dad came home from work, expected dinner to be on the table, perhaps tucked you into bed, and read you a story. His work was probably remote from your suburban home, his hours long, and as a kid you didn't really know what he did there. He didn't talk much, leaving all the emotional caring to the women, although he'd kick the footy with you in the yard, and fool around if he was in a good mood. As a child, you felt secure, with two parents looking after your wellbeing, a local school to go to, a stable neighbourhood to grow up in, and lots of other children to play with.

This was the life we expected to live, and reality was close to the stereotype. Most people were married, not just living together, and most married couples had several children and lived in their own homes. The mark of a good mother was her ability to maintain a clean and tidy house, cook nice meals, keep the cake tins stocked, and have her children neatly dressed and well behaved. A good dad was someone who earned a decent wage, kept a roof over your heads, and told the bully's dad down the street to call his kid off, or else.

The post-war years were a time of rising affluence, but it was not the sort of affluence children now enjoy. Kids may have eventually seen a refrigerator in the kitchen and a TV set in the lounge, but they probably shared a bedroom with a brother or sister, and expected one present, not several, on birthdays and at Christmas. If you were lucky enough to be part of a well-to-do family that could afford more valuable presents, then a watch, a small portable record player, or a remote-controlled model plane represented the last word in personal technology. Clothes, including those for school, were more often than not sewn or knitted by mum or grandma, and handed down at least once. Our own daughters had a small box that held all their toys, and we bought our first washing machine in 1962, two years after we wed.

Children in Australia aged under 17	
(percentage of population by year)	
1921	37
1946	29
1961	35 (the post-war peak)
1997	25
2005	19.6
2051	20*

* A projection made in 1996. Note that by 2005, the population had already dipped below this figure.

Source: ABS Cat. 4119.0, Children, Australia: A Social Report, 1999; ABS Cat. 3250.55.001, Population by Age and Sex, Australia, 2007.

These were years of great change that saw sprawling new suburbs with their gardens and footpaths in the process of establishment, and separate households often a long distance from other relatives. A car soon became essential to reach the big new shopping centres. Suburban isolation produced depression and marital trouble.

As a child, you might have gone to kindergarten a couple of sessions a week – if you were lucky and lived in the right suburb. But child-care centres were rare, and if mum had a job (as a secretary, cleaner, shop assistant, or perhaps as a teacher, librarian, chemist, or nurse) it was likely that you were minded by a friendly neighbour or a grandmother. A great deal of piecework such as sewing was done at home, particularly by heavily exploited migrant outworkers; there was social stigma if a wife had to go out to work to make ends meet. Latchkey children were a scandal; a woman's place was in the home.

For men on lower incomes, the ideal of nuclear family life could never be reached, and plenty of families chose to live differently, but their deviation from the norm did not disrupt the media's profound sense of certainty about how families were meant to be. After television arrived in Australia in 1956, perfect marriages and happy families were portrayed in TV programs such as *Father Knows Best, National Velvet, Leave it to Beaver,* and *The Donna Reed Show.* The myth of male supremacy was lightly satirised in *I Dream of Jeannie,* in which Tony, a single man, had a female slave, an apparently asexual substitute for a wife, to do his bidding. Throughout such programs references were made to typical 'women's concerns' – clothes, hairstyles, slimming, home-furnishing, and shopping.

The fact that real family life did not always match the ideal and that pressures for change were already emerging became clear in TV shows of the 1970s. In the United States (always in the lead with Western social trends) divorce rates were rising, and 'broken' families were given some legitimacy in shows such as *The Brady Bunch, The Partridge Family, My Three Sons,* and *The Courtship of Eddie's Father.* The lives of professional working women were the focus of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show,* in which a single, attractive woman of 30 was an associate producer of a TV news program. Yet even here the emphasis was on her need for a man to love and protect her. The show's theme song told viewers:

You can't make it on your own
Gotta let someone else come in
You might just make it after all
If you let the love come in.

Marriage is less certain

Our own daughters were born in the early 1960s. They grew up watching the television shows described above, but they were part of a household where the issues that would come to concern the women's movement were taken for granted. They did not rush to marry, completed tertiary education, and for a decade each pursued her own career. After they wed, both chose to spend the first years at home, but have returned to work as their children grow more independent.

One of our sons-in-law is the Australian-born child of Italian immigrants who came to this country for the opportunities it offered after the war. The other is a Greek South African, whose mother and stepfather migrated to Australia when he was 16. In these partnerships our family exemplifies modern multicultural Australia; our grandchildren have the benefit of mixed genes, plus an understanding view of complex family backgrounds.

Today's popular television shows now reflect the real diversity of family life, as well as the dysfunctional relationships revealed by contemporary demographic data. The long-running series *The Simpsons,* enjoyed by children and adult audiences alike, presents a family that is far from the ideal. *Weeds* depicts a single mum who resorts to peddling dope in order to make ends meet; *Desperate Housewives* satirises the complex lives of the women behind the curtains in the immaculate streetscape of Wisteria Lane. The attractions of single life made *Friends* popular for more than a decade, while *Sex and the City* homed in on the dilemmas confronting contemporary young women in search of true love in an age of singletons. In reality television, programs like *Super Nanny, Nanny 911,* and *Wife Swap* depict children out of control, and parents unable to cope. Audiences watch these shows because they reflect something of their own experience or lifestyles to which they aspire.

Contemporary family life is fragmented and comparatively insecure. Cohabitation has risen as an accepted form of family life. More than 12 per cent of all partnered people in Australia who live together are not married, and the number of children born into cohabiting families has increased to 16 per cent of all children. There is a high split-up rate for cohabiting couples, and children of such relationships have less protection than those born in wedlock, when it comes to property division and child support.

Generally speaking, the institution of marriage is no longer seen by everyone as a life-long commitment. Once the reforming Family Law Act brought in the concept of 'no-fault' divorce in 1975, any married person could decide to end the marriage on the basis that their union was 'not working' for them. The married individual, not the marital unit, became the focus of such decision-making.

Indeed, there are now competing views of the place of marriage in society. One upholds marriage as an institution larger than the individuals it comprises, and therefore warranting protection from the law, churches and civil society. The other holds that marriage is a consensual status where personal development and self-fulfilment goals make instability and change inevitable; the state should not interfere. These conflicting perspectives are both influential and help explain why families have changed in recent decades, finding themselves subject to demands for responsibility from the state, and to personal expectations of flexibility and choice.

The most central change has been in what Anthony Giddens calls 'the transformation of intimacy', with both men and women now looking for a relationship in which their needs are met, intimacies shared, and adaptations to change made readily, in sharp contrast to the rigid sex roles expected of former generations. Individual self-fulfilment is the goal, and the mutual disclosure of one's innermost thoughts and desires. In a sense, this makes love and the quality of relationships even more important than it was in the past. Sexual experience before marriage is much more common, so people tend to marry for love. Consequently, they expect the relationship to last beyond the fleeting passion of youth and become a partnership of equals committed to one another rather than to just the institution of marriage. The decision to start a family has always been central to getting married – but today it is made much later, and with full consideration.

The good news is that research shows children in well-functioning two-parent families are less prone to ill health, school failure, substance abuse and emotional and social difficulties, regardless of whether the parents are married, de facto, step or gay. Similarly, if children in one-parent families live in homes free of conflict, and have access to quality child care, schools, and an adequate family income, they are no less likely to develop adequately. Don's own experience of growing up in a one-parent family after his father died in a work accident bears this out. Poverty was not seen as an obstacle to talent, and he had the privilege of attending an excellent country high school where the teachers inspired effort and engagement in learning.

Parents by choice see children differently

In today's families, both parents will be better educated than ever before. Typically, they will have trained and worked for at least a decade before their first child is born, so they are not as close in age to their child as in previous generations. They will have saved, and tried to ensure that they can provide good housing, before having children; they want to provide the best possible circumstances for their children to thrive and succeed.

For those who have children in their mid-thirties, their ideas about life's meaning and their values for children will have taken shape more clearly, and they will resist attempts by others to tell them how to raise their children. They will seek quality child care for the times when work makes it difficult for either of them to be at home; they will demand a say in the sort of education their children receive, be less willing to accept the teacher's authority, and will resist school values and broader social norms that run counter to their own beliefs. The heated – and somewhat surprising – resurgence of debate about compulsory childhood immunisation programs is one example of their confidence and certainty.

With most young women delaying marriage and child-bearing, it stands to reason that paid work has a central role in the lives of today's new mothers. Female school retention and success rates are high, meaning that they have been well-educated, in relative terms at least; and their role models are likely to be powerful and successful women. By their thirties, most of them will have long work experience and well developed skills of value to the wider economy,

plus years of economic independence as earners in their own right. But while their life choices have opened up, many workplaces lag behind, resistant to the idea of making life manageable for working mothers. Similarly, today's new mothers will have grown up in relative affluence (compared with their parents and grandparents), but they will also have experienced the high cost of housing, and the social emphasis on consumerism, and will be aware that they can't rely on men and marriage to provide life-long security. Their lives appear to promise much more than earlier generations of women's, but the promise does not always match the reality.

If you are a new mother today, there is every chance you were raised on the principles of building self-esteem, nurturing individuality, and respecting the rights of the child, and that such principles are ingrained in your own parenting. Dr Spock was Patricia's guru when she was raising our girls. Sometimes we probably obeyed the famous American pediatrician too literally. His book *Baby and Child Care* said that you didn't need to feed a nine-pound infant in the middle of the night, so when our first child reached nine pounds she was given a bottle of water, which she objected to until she eventually fell asleep. We took it in turns to administer the water, and within a week Sue was sleeping all night. Our second daughter had the foresight to be born at nine pounds. Patricia was well organised and by 10am each morning was looking for something to do. She soon returned to further study and part-time work while a local babysitter brought her own children to our house and looked after the kids together.

Our daughters were aged four and two when we decided to go to the United States so Don could undertake a PhD in sociology. He won a scholarship to Stanford University in California, and there we lived in a student compound, in a small unit that backed on to a fenced-in yard shared by 18 families. In the morning, the kids were fed, dressed, and sent outside to play. Mothers supervised from the window as they went about their cooking, cleaning, and washing. It was an ideal environment to bring up young children, because there was always a neighbour or friend around to supervise if you needed to do something outside the compound. Soon Patricia decided to study too, in film and communication. Both of us were around at different times to look after the children.

In the United States and Australia, more and more women returned to study or to the workforce during the late '60s and early '70s. There was much debate

about the effects these women's decisions had on their children, and this debate has not let up since early childhood has become an important field of study in its own right. As parents with direct experience in raising children and as experienced teachers with a professional understanding of the needs of young children, we saw ourselves as active participants in this discussion.

With three other co-authors, we wrote a book entitled *Under 5 in Australia,* which was aimed at a general audience, and showed how neglected many children were in terms of parenting, access to quality child care, schooling, and health services. The establishment kindergarten mafia of the day was outraged that 'non-experts' would dare to write such a book, but it resonated with readers, reaching many thousands of concerned parents and educators. It was a call to arms on behalf of early childhood, then a very neglected subject in Australia. We argued that the early years of a child's life were crucial to their own life success and to national productivity.

Many of the mothers of the current generation of new parents – the educated girls of the 1960s who had children in the early 1980s – were imbued with the new literature on child development, and the need to give every child a great start in life. By the 1980s, the national birth rate had dropped to 2.1 children per woman, and so the people who are the new parents of today were also the first generation of children to live in smaller families. Fewer siblings gave them a different feel for family life. Their parents were already facing a new world, with many women wanting to return to work, but with workplaces still resistant to the needs of women.

Because it was clear that further education was the one big advantage they could offer their children, they were more open to having their adult children stay at home as students, rather than pressuring them out of the household and into paid work. Marriages that were floundering in routine familiarity were often renewed as young people matured and became stimulating housemates for their parents. This process was no doubt assisted by the baby boomers' outlook as a generation; they resisted thinking of themselves as growing older, and were open to their offspring's tastes and ways.

Those Australians now aged in their mid-thirties lived in their parents' homes for longer than any previous generation, forging a new, more equal relationship

with them. Their parents had to come to terms with their sexual maturity, and have also been intimately involved with their education and job-hunting, helping to problem-solve at every level. Once this generation moved out and became parents in their own right, they did not expect their own children to treat them with deference. Rather, they have repeated the pattern they learned with their own parents, seeing their kids as partners in the exciting process of forming a family. They explain their situation, their problems and their self-doubts to their children. Everything is open to discussion and negotiation with their autonomous, independent children.

Far from being 'seen but not heard', the New Child is seen – and also sees themself – as equal, with rights. The generation gap narrows. Observation of our own grandchildren bears this out. The kids are included in most conversations, only occasionally being told, 'Let us have some private talk now with Don and Tricia, please'. They learn a lot about life from listening in.

"No one expected every child in the family to become a brain surgeon."

This closing of the generation gap has other effects. For all that it gives the New Child a greater chance to express themself and to assert their own individuality, it also puts more pressure on them to succeed. Adults who have grown up in small families are less likely to understand the natural variation in children's temperaments and capacities. In the days of big families it was taken for granted that Johnny was smart, Mary was quiet, Max was the sporty type, Catherine was a good reader who would go far, and baby Damien was showing signs of real brilliance. No one expected every child in the family to become a brain surgeon. You weren't a failure as a parent if one child became a bricklayer, another a shop assistant, a third went to college, and the others moved from job to job.

In those days, being a good parent meant simply raising your children to be decent people, to have the basic skills everyone needed to survive – reading, writing, a bit of maths, and enough nous to make a reasonable fist of life. Today we've become more ambitious for our children: probably too ambitious for their good and for our own peace of mind. Because we delay having children, and then have only one or two, they are a very important part of life. Since it's no longer an automatic assumption that children will come along, and delay

often makes conception more difficult once the decision has been made, the emotional impact of having a child is greater. That makes the child precious, and guarantees (in most instances) a better quality of parental attention to needs. Today's new parents go further in trying to do the best for the few children they have.

That is great, but there is a downside for kids. Because they are so planned for, so unique, they must succeed. And success nowadays means topping the test scores, getting into the best schools, making it to university, and becoming a top professional. All our own failures are projected onto our kids. I didn't become a doctor, I didn't make a lot of money, I didn't become famous; but my kids will because they're special, and I've put loads of money and time into giving them everything they need.

The irony is that although the age gap between the contemporary generation of new parents and their children is wider than before, it is accompanied by the desire to be closer; in this vision, parents are more like friends and colleagues, less the remote authority figure to be feared and respected. As school principal Bill Green puts it, today's parents seem to have an absolute fear of not being liked or loved by their kids. 'It's the insecurity of the age, where our parents took love for granted, it wasn't a big deal.'

One of our daughters recently described a birthday party she arranged for her seven-year-old son. The guests were invited to a local park to play before walking to their home nearby for a 'jungle party', complete with an animal maze, tents, activities making cardboard spears and binoculars, and a jungle birthday cake made of chocolate bar trees, palm leaves of green icing, and jelly snakes. One parent had misunderstood the birthday invitation and made a spear (long, with a metal arrowhead tip) to bring along. His child was chasing other kids while holding the spear, and the father hesitantly asked our daughter whether she thought that might be dangerous. She said yes, she thought it might be. Then the child began climbing the monkey bars, spear in hand, and the father again asked if she thought he should be stopped. When our daughter agreed, the father asked her to speak to the boy, because he didn't think his son would take any notice of him. When she asked the boy, 'Would you like me to look after your spear while you are climbing?' he handed it over straight away.

Because the New Child is engaged as an equal by its parents, there seems to be a greater appreciation of the latent capacities of children, and even a suspicion that adults might not be as smart as they once thought they were. This can lead to a lack of respect by the child for its 'elders', an overweening self-confidence that they know as much as any adult and have the right to express any opinion, however ill-informed. Some adults actually believe that because their child can program the video recorder better than they can, they have no wisdom of their own to pass on.

On the upside, these children are not 'put down' and have much wider opportunity to learn how the adult world works. As a child, Patricia would overhear her father's conversations on the phone at home, because the telephone was in the dining room, the only heated room in the house. Her dad was a city councillor, and these casually absorbed discussions of politics and urban development were a crucial trigger for her own adult interest in politics and social improvement. Don was often told to 'push off' by his uncles but was treated more as an equal by his widowed mother, who discussed with him her job at the Fletcher Jones factory, her financial worries, and her ambitions for her children.

Because parents have fewer children nowadays, they spend more time interacting with their kids, even though they may be working long hours. They want to know their every thought, to see every ball game, to deal with every little problem at school, to be there for their kids. Recent Australian research on young children shows that the majority of fathers read to their children, play games with them, and are involved in their daily care, regardless of their own working hours. More than 80 per cent say they enjoy their children's company, and 77 per cent report 'warm, close times together'.

Fathers now play a bigger role in their children's lives, despite their often long working hours. In stark contrast to Don's experience of being hustled out of the hospital as Patricia was about to give birth, because 'We don't want you around, fainting or something', today's fathers are there as real partners in the experience of birth, and it makes them feel like fathers from the start. Far more of them attend parent–teacher nights, ride their bikes and walk with their kids, help with homework and teach computer skills, demand time off work to care for sick children, and share the responsibilities of parenting with their spouse.

Many men may still avoid the housework, but being a dad involves a lot more time than it used to. They actually talk, and listen to, their kids. And they have learned it is better to be a father in their own way, not simply as an authority figure to mete out punishment and be an appendage to the mother. Unfortunately for Australian fathers, time spent at work has increased, not decreased, so good intentions are sometimes thwarted. Men are still the main breadwinner in most families, with close to two-thirds 'sometimes' working at night and weekends.

So the men who become fathers (like the women who become mothers) have thought about it a long time, have negotiated the timing of parenthood with their partners, and want to be much more involved in the whole process of raising their children when they do come along. Each child is precious, rare, and he wants to be an active father to them, not a passive and remote authority figure.

For many children, though, life is a bit lonely. They have to get on well, if they can, with their one brother or sister, because their school friends are not necessarily at home next door. Parents have to fill the gap, becoming substitute friends, and even they are not always there. It becomes a problem when so many parents regard themselves as their children's 'friends' and equals, rather than as parental authority figures – the mixed messages they send say *we love you, but there's no time to talk now.* We'll give you anything you want, accept your indiscretions because we know how you feel, we were young once ourselves (indeed feel just like you still), but you'll have to occupy your own time because I'm too busy. A recent international study found that young children who were accustomed to running their own lives while parents worked were more likely to resist parental disapproval of their behaviour as teenagers. It was a case of: Who are you? Why do you think you have a right to tell me what to do? Where have you been all the years I've been growing up?

CHAPTER 2

Growing up differently

A generation ago, a new child typically entered a family-centred world of brothers, sisters, cousins, and neighbourhood kids who had already learned to survive and assert themselves. Many of their relationships were with other children who were rivals for their parents' affections and attentions. So although they had a wider range of helpers, minders, admirers of their cute little ways, they also had to learn fast in order to accommodate rivalry, jealousy, physical aggression, and even competition for food.

In turn, older children had younger siblings to boss around, and to watch over. Larger family sizes meant parents' attention was more divided. Washing, cooking, cleaning, and managing a large tribe required a great deal of organisation, and made continual supervision impossible. 'Get outside and play' was a common refrain, and mothers felt no guilt at their 'neglect'. Necessity gave priority to other forms of caring work than full-on parenting.

Most Australian children today grow up in small families: they are less likely to have several brothers and sisters, and more likely to be an only child or one of just two children. That alters the way the New Child experiences family life, in a big way. With fewer siblings to 'knock the corners off', the focus is on them – they receive full-on parenting. The high expectations about time spent together cut both ways, with lonely children relying more on their parents for companionship.

These changes are not restricted to Australia. A recent Italian survey found that, with fewer births and smaller families, even the extensive set of cousins once

associated with family life in this part of Europe no longer exists, and lonely children are becoming a serious problem, especially in urban areas. In China, even with its one child policy, the population of children is growing rapidly. But the nature of children's family experience is transformed. First sons will have no brother or sister, and first daughters will at most have one younger sibling.

In Australia, the percentage of women who have only one child has nearly doubled in a generation, reflecting delayed child-bearing and rising infertility, divorce, the rising costs of education, and workplace demands that make caring for larger families difficult. Are only children more spoilt, lonelier, and more adult-oriented than other children? Not according to the latest research, which shows they are no more prone to loneliness or depression, no more likely to divorce in later life, and generally turn out just fine. Apparent early advantages in vocabulary and maths readiness (reflecting more one-on-one parenting) seem to dissipate over time.

The decline in siblings

(by percentage by year)

	1976	2004
Women aged 40–45 who have one child	9.6	17.4
Women aged 40–45 who have no children	10.2	19.3
Women who have three children	22.7	18.1
Women who have four children	15.8	7.4

Source: US Census, 2004

On the other hand, the parents of only children find themselves subject to pressures that they did not necessarily anticipate. One recent book was entitled *The Seven Common Sins of Parenting an Only Child,* and several websites have sprung up as support groups for only-child parents. Such parents report being criticised by others ('Why bother having children at all if you're only going to have one?'); getting tired of having to play the role of a playmate; being pressured to produce a little brother or sister; and worrying that their child might be lonely.

The kids themselves are less bothered – they're likely to say, 'I have a dog' or, 'I've got lots of friends anyway'. The lesson here is that parents of only children should not feel guilty about their kids' only-child status.

Neighbourhoods can be lonely places

Because today's families are working families, and formal child care is common, the child's community will be less visibly peopled by other children, and community attitudes will be less child-oriented. Neighbourhoods are more built up, with fewer open spaces, so physical activity is often confined to organised settings. As well, traffic is heavier, and safety is a constant concern that limits the free play and social interaction of children.

When we returned to Australia from America at the end of 1969, our daughters were aged seven and five. They attended school in an outer suburb of Melbourne, still rural and undergoing development, with the feel of a village. There were kids living in most of the houses, and our girls walked to school with friends from the same street. Outside school hours, the street was their playground. They only played in the house on a wet day; otherwise, they were on their bikes or their scooters, playing hopscotch, in the sand pit, climbing trees, playing with paints in the garage, sometimes going down to the creek and catching tadpoles in jars.

Lesley recalls one day when a tree on the nature strip blew down. Dressed in raincoats, she and the other kids played on it in the lashing rain and wind, pretending the tree was a shipwreck. Another time, they drew a 'shopping centre' on the road and rode their bikes around from shop to shop. There was a cubby house in the backyard where they would play if we had cleaned the spiders out – redbacks were common. Our kids didn't stray and were pretty responsible. Children of all ages played together and sometimes parents knew what was going on and sometimes they didn't. Once we had to have the younger one's stomach pumped after she was fed poison berries while playing mothers and fathers; another time, Don sent them all home with a bellow when he found them baring their bottoms to one another in the garage. There was always someone to play with and something to do.

One of our sons-in-law recalls life as a kid in inner-city Carlton was not much different. He and his brothers played footy and cricket on the streets, rode their bikes around until dark, caught the train to go fishing in the Yarra River, and caught yabbies in the pond in the Exhibition Gardens. He remembers an acorn 'fight' in the gardens among half a dozen kids who were running around the trees throwing acorns at one another. Kids came from all directions to join in the fun – an indication of the number in the neighbourhood – until, with more than a hundred of them going at it, the police were called and they took off in all directions.

Today there seem to be fewer kids playing with friends in the street, because they're all busy being driven to school, sports, music lessons, or extra tuition. If they want to play together after school, their mothers ferry them between houses. But the internet, mobile phones, and SMS texting also open up new possibilities. They can talk to friends, exchange ideas with like-minded bloggers, pretend to be someone else, send messages about parties, meetings, or parental prohibitions, often without parents knowing who they are communicating with, or what they are saying. It's not just a 'herding' instinct driven by the loneliness of home: it's a whole new way of making acquaintances (not necessarily friends in the old sense), and it's not at all the same as mucking about in your room or at the local park with a group of mates. We delve deeper into this in Part II.

Overall, parental ratings of local neighbourhoods are very positive. More than 80 per cent of parents agree that their community has good parks, playgrounds, and play spaces, and 88 per cent say there is good access to basic services such as banks and medical clinics. A lesser number (74 per cent) have access to close, affordable and regular public transport. Of course, suburbs and neighbourhoods differ. Rural areas report less satisfaction with the quality of their neighbourhood facilities and services, but a greater sense of belonging. Inner city areas may have streets that are less safe, fewer parks and gardens, and often offer less access to affordable child care and other family support services, yet neighbourhood interaction may still be strong.

New Australian research suggests that child development outcomes are affected by the quality of their local neighbourhood and its service networks, both strongly associated with the socio-economic status of the parents, and the relative density of children in the community. Not surprisingly, neighbourhoods that are

socio-economically disadvantaged, more remote, and have higher concentrations of children, all have more negative perceptions of local facilities such as parks and playgrounds, street lighting, roads and footpaths, basic shopping, and services. This is largely because the disadvantaged are more likely to have more children and to live in cheaper, outer-suburban developments where facilities have yet to be developed.

Parents with higher incomes report a stronger sense of belonging in their communities, probably because they are in a better position to choose where they live, while those in areas with a high concentration of children report lower levels of belonging. Such research shows the need for stronger community development efforts, targeted especially at lower socio-economic areas and areas with a high concentration of children. They need more say in the services and facilities available, not one-size-fits-all provisions decided by central bureaucrats. Being heard is doubtless harder than it was in previous decades, because so many parents are out at work.

More grandparents are around

So the New Child has time-poor parents, fewer (if any) sisters and brothers, and often less access to kids in the neighbourhood. Nevertheless, there is some compensation for them in the fact that their grandparents are more likely to be alive and well. Just as birth rates are declining in the West, so the population is ageing, a trend with profound implications for children. Australians are not only living longer, but the baby boomers, a significant chunk of the population, are now reaching retirement age.

The number of Australians aged 65+ will treble between 1971 and 2031, from 1.9 million to 5.2 million. At the same time the proportion of children aged 17 and below will have declined so much that the old outnumber the young. As discussed at the end of chapter 4, ABS figures show that our birth rate fluctuates year by year; nevertheless, we are unlikely to see another baby boom.

Many of these older Australians are grandparents and (for the first time in history) great-grandparents, and we cannot assume they will be less child-friendly or more self-concerned than previous generations. In fact, they will be

very careful about what toys they buy and what their grandchildren are exposed to. As we can already observe, the wealthier among them will often contribute to the costs of their grandchildren's education and housing. They are also more involved in looking after their grandchildren.

The Australian Census has not yet asked about grandparents caring for children, but an ABS survey in 2003 found there were 31,100 children aged up to 17 who lived in 22,500 grandparent-headed families. The main reasons included parental substance abuse and associated neglect, and the divorce or death of parents. Grandparents are also the biggest providers of child care when both parents work, especially when children are very young. Of children under one, 22 per cent are cared for regularly by their grandparents, and only 7 per cent are in formal day care. By the age of one, 57 per cent are in some form of child care, with grandparents providing 31 per cent of the care. By the time children are four, 83 per cent are in formal care/pre-school, and fewer are cared for by grandparents.

It's not necessarily an idyllic picture. While most grandparents welcome time spent with these children, many are still engaged in formal work, have hobbies and community involvements of their own and don't want to be full-time, or even regular, baby-sitters. One Australian study observed that grandparent carers – mostly grandmothers in this case – had different attitudes to the care they provided and different ways of being involved, which ranged from 'avid', through 'flexible', and 'selective' to 'hesitant'. Put simply, some grandparents lived their lives around the grandchildren, while some wanted to be there when needed; others wanted their own lives and did not enjoy being defined by family relationships and expectations.

In our own case, we enjoy immensely having our grandchildren to stay, but because of our continuing work and frequent travel, our daughters have accepted that we cannot be relied on for regular care. That's less of a problem now they are all at school, but diary bookings still need to be made in advance.

Research suggests that grandparents experience a great deal of satisfaction from the experience of caring for grandchildren, but at the cost of some physical and emotional stress and financial cost.

In summary, today's child has more chance of knowing his grandparents than previous generations, because they live longer, are more affluent, and retire from full-time work earlier. But that trend may not last as increased longevity and the declining number of younger workers increase the pressure on older Australians to stay in paid employment.

Life is different for children in ethnic families

Australia has the added complexity of being a nation of immigrants. Contrary to common perceptions, in recent years there has been a large influx of migrants – many in the skilled worker category, but a significant minority also in the family reunion category. The economics commentator Ross Gittins calls this 'the biggest immigration surge in our history … net immigration has exceeded 100,000 a year in 12 of the past 20 years'. The trend is likely to continue. Our children are growing up in a multicultural world, and combined with their ability to communicate via the web with children all over the world, their early experiences of diversity have to be an advantage in dealing with a communication-dependent global age. The new Labor government plans a huge increase in migration, both skilled and unskilled.

In Australia, more than a quarter of children under 18 – around 1.09 million – have both parents born overseas; another 41.9 per cent (1.79 million) have at least one parent born overseas. For one-parent families, 14 per cent have both parents born overseas, and another 17 per cent have one. That's a massive number of children, even if the majority of these parents are of an English-speaking background.

Of the total Australian population of 21 million people, around 3 million speak a language other than English at home. More than 1.6 million, or 8.2 per cent, are of Asian origin. Four per cent are southern European and two per cent eastern European. More than 55,000 speak an indigenous Australian language. That means a huge number of children live with parents and relatives who speak a language other than English at home. And this phenomenon will probably grow, since immigration is increasing to help make up for the decline in our national birth rate. We cannot ignore the different cultural and social circumstances of this large group of New Children.

For them, the business of forging an identity, of learning how to deal with the wider world outside the family, is particularly complicated. Given the prevailing emphasis on individualism – doing your own thing – in Australian society, children living in a more 'collective' family culture have a special struggle. Everything else in the wider society – mass media, schools, universities and government instrumentalities – competes with the minority family values of their 'little culture'. For many ethnic groups, being a minority in a strange land means feeling threatened, at least insecure, and turning inwards to preserve language and beliefs through a tight-knit community network of like families. Their lives centre round family collectivism, religion, and language as core values to sustain their ethnic identity. But that is often hard if they don't occupy a distinctive territory or neighbourhood or have the support of other institutions such as a church.

"For many ethnic groups, being a minority in a strange land means feeling threatened, at least insecure ..."

In the typical Anglo-Australian context, family is seen as a group of individuals, free to pursue their own interests, success marked by personal material possessions. There's an early training for, and expectation of, individual achievement. Family members may enjoy being with the extended family for special events, but they expect time alone, keeping an emotional distance, not being too reliant on kin, often separating children from adults at formal family gatherings. With many ethnic groups, in sharp contrast, there is a more collectivist orientation, with intimacy between family members maintaining cohesion, solidarity, and a collective identity. Children stay part of the unit even when they marry; many share finances between family members and across families, their language serving a unifying, identity-maintaining purpose. Unlike Anglo homes, where separate bedrooms are seen as private spaces, often with their own TV set as well, there's no such thing as 'my room'. Instead, the house belongs to the whole family (and no-one expects them to pay rent for a room); the group feeling is strong.

Alice Pung's memoir *Unpolished Gem* is an amusing and poignant account of growing up in Melbourne's western suburbs as the daughter of Chinese Cambodian refugees. Grandma sings the praises of 'Father Government' who

gives her money every fortnight, 'wah wahs' with delight at the cheap kitsch ornaments she can buy in the shops, insists on filial piety, and treats Alice's mother, an outworker, as her servant. Alice is picked on at school, and laughed at for admitting her grandma prays to many gods, but she does so well she wins scholarships and comes close to a nervous breakdown as a result of all the pressure. The family spies lead to trouble, her mother saying, 'People talk. Boys talk to you, you talk to boys, and people talk.' Life is not easy, an experience of difference that is common among the children of immigrants. But clearly, the primacy of family in social values is not incompatible with individual achievement, as her experience and those of many other Chinese Australians show.

In Pung's account, her mother's own struggle for security and independence is depicted with painful clarity. The sense of ethnic family togetherness is of course a generalisation. Such cohesion can be oppressive and authoritarian, and can lead to family conflict. Usually, the greater the feeling of threat from the dominant culture (as, say, with Muslims after 9/11, or the Cronulla riots), the stronger the attempts to maintain close ties and ethnic identity: language, dress codes, and moral codes are more strongly adhered to. For younger members of the family, there is a conflict between two worlds, their ethnic group interests and the individualist values of the host Australian society.

Much research has shown a convergence in values towards the Western individualistic norm, and continuing conflict between younger and older members of ethnic groups. And the ways ethnic groups sustain their group identity varies too. For example, Greek and Latvian ethnic schools help reinforce their 'little culture' and the Greek Orthodox Church reinforces strong collectivist values, compared with the Catholic Church which (despite Italians' strong family values) pushes more towards mainstream individualism than an 'Italian' ethos. Boys are often given free rein more readily than girls, a problem particularly for Greek and Islamic girls, who often find cultural expectations oppressive in the teenage years. The Chinese community in Australia is strong on collectivist family ties, but they don't push their own regional languages, preferring their children to learn the majority Mandarin, for both economic and nationalistic reasons.

Traditionally, migrant families tend to be poor and in particular need of social resourcing. But the picture of Australian immigration has changed somewhat

over the past 15 years, with many highly educated, English-speaking migrants resettling here for lifestyle reasons, including many well-to-do migrants from Asia and the United Kingdom. Skilled migrants will encourage their children to be high achievers too.

The current threat to our tolerant, multicultural society seems to come from an increasing segregation of new groups (particularly non-English speaking African immigrants) in certain suburbs, and also from what the new Parliamentary Secretary for Multicultural Affairs, Laurie Ferguson, describes as 'white flight' from public to private schools. Whether this is racially based or simply a middle class exit from poorly funded state schools, the danger of ghettoisation is there. The New Child will bifurcate into two classes – the poor, non-white immigrant child versus the more affluent, middle-class Anglo or ethnic child enjoying the privileges of private schooling and better serviced suburbs.

Australia's indigenous families

In Australia, indigenous children have much lower life chances because of income inequality and the poor quality of community services in their communities. Researchers Michael Dillon and Neil Westbury say that remote indigenous communities in this country are even comparable to the 52 failed nation states shown on the Brookings Institution's matrix of disadvantage.

They ascribe the problem to a demographic explosion of Aboriginal population, which increased by 11 per cent in only five years to 2006. Birth rates are high, and the indigenous population is growing, along with the social problems of multiple disadvantage. Failed government policies have not taken into account such a surge, resulting in a 'ghettoisation' of rural communities as services fail to keep up with growing needs and white families move out. The extent of the problem is reflected in the startling figures given below. What they show is that indigenous children are far less likely to survive the first year of life, and to live to an age older than 65. They are much more likely to be placed under a protective order by the authorities than other Australian children, reflecting problems at home. At school, many fail to master reading. Among indigenous children in the Northern Territory, almost two-thirds cannot write and are innumerate.

Indigenous disadvantage

	All Australians	Indigenous
Life expectancy (years)		
Males	76.2	59.4
Females	81.8	64.8
Infant mortality (per 1000 in first year of life)		
NT	5.0	15.6
Children under protective orders (per 1000)		
Australia	4.7	33.4
NT	4.1	12.1
Year 5 benchmarks (failure rate by percentage)		
Reading:		
Australia	12.5	37.2
Writing:		
Australia	6.7	25.7
NT	27.6	63.9
Numeracy:		
Australia	9.2	33.5
NT	30.4	64.9

Source: *The Age*

Indigenous families are more difficult than other Australians to describe statistically, because they do not conform to conventional Western forms. For a

start, their households are more likely to be multi-generational and multi-family than just one small family unit, their definition of kinship is wider, and there is more mobility in and out of the household. As well, only half of indigenous households have indigenous-only members, the other half being 'mixed' households. Though most attention focuses on the poor health, alcohol abuse, and sexual violence in isolated Aboriginal communities, in fact, 67 per cent of indigenous people live in the major cities and 21 per cent in inner regional areas. Only two per cent live in the remote or very remote settlements of Australia's north. Even for them, only 54 per cent speak an indigenous language, 17 per cent speak some indigenous words, and 28 per cent do not.

A greater proportion of the indigenous population is still young, partly a result of high birth rates, and partly because of lower life expectancy. Almost 40 per cent of Australia's indigenous population are under 15 years, and just 2.8 per cent are 65 years and older. The median age is 19.6 years for males, 21.4 years for females; so it's not surprising that the influence of 'elders' has waned, or that child protection has become such a big issue.

"Almost 40 per cent of Australia's indigenous population are under 15 years ..."

It is estimated that eight per cent of the indigenous population aged 15 or more had been removed from their natural family, and more than one third have experienced the removal of a family member, a figure that made Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's recent apology to Australian indigenous people truly significant. Mothers in places such as Wadeye, Alice Springs, and Moree are desperate to get their children away from violence and abuse, but agreement is hard to reach on how best to tackle the problem. The Howard government's 'intervention' remains highly controversial. Even the recent 2020 Summit split between political advocacy for a Treaty and a stronger focus on the wellbeing of indigenous children.

While over a third of the indigenous workforce have mainstream employment, the unemployment rate is 23 per cent, a figure that goes up to 43 per cent if the CDEP scheme (which provides wages, training and enterprise support to indigenous organisations) is not counted. The average income of $394 a week is little more than a third of the average wage for the rest of Australia.

Children's life chances depend very much on the resources parents are able to provide – their level of educational and social know-how, their income and relative earning power, their values and motivations, their religious and cultural values, the support networks of extended families and friends. So life chances for a new indigenous child are inevitably less benign than for those whose parents are employed, on good incomes, have access to good schools, health and service supports. As with all disadvantage, problems tend to 'cluster' in particular areas, with particular social groups, so interventions cannot afford to be piecemeal. Services for indigenous families, especially, must work together in an integrated way.

Family incomes are increasingly unequal

Overall, the picture of family income in Australia has been rosy in recent decades, but economic inequality is growing, and as the 2007 federal election showed, a considerable number of Australian families are feeling financially stressed. The average Australian wage is $57,324 a year. The average household is earning 30 per cent more than 10 years ago, and 77 per cent of Australians reside in homes with at least one bedroom that is usually empty. Average household wealth is $563,000, but Australians owe more than $41 billion on their 13.7 million credit and charge cards, almost double that of five years ago. The cost of housing has risen beyond the capacity of most young people entering the family formation years, and fears of rising interest rates and inflation loom large for many families living on the edge of bankruptcy. ('Housing stress' is the term used to describe having to pay over a third of your income for housing costs, either rental or loan repayments, but relative stress varies of course with income level.)

Unfortunately in Australia, family incomes have become increasingly unequal. Recently, within the space of two years, the number of families earning $5000 or more a week jumped from just under 60,000 to almost 100,000. The wealthiest 20 per cent of households account for 61 per cent of total net worth, an average of $1.7 million per household. In contrast, the poorest 20 per cent of households account for only one per cent of net worth, averaging $27,000 per household. That's quite a gap. Of households made up by couples with children, 20.3 per cent earn more than $2500 a week, but only 0.6 per cent of sole parent families earn this amount.

More than half a million Australian children live in a family with income below the poverty line and 400,000 children live in a family where no adult member is employed. What is life like for this New Child? What life options does he/she have compared with a more affluent counterpart? Just to illustrate, two examples from the Brotherhood of St Laurence study of children's life chances may suffice:

> 'Mike' has just started at an independent secondary school (fees $14,000, uniform $800). His mother works full-time as a lecturer, his father is a full-time consultant. Family income is $120,000 a year, that's $2300 a week. They own their own home, Mike learns Aikido, tennis, had a Fiji holiday last year and enjoys family meals at restaurants. He says his school is 'good, because you get to learn so much that you can get a better job', and he thinks having money is important because 'if you needed something you'd be able to get it.' Mike believes 'Nothing will stop me from achieving what I want in later life.'
>
> 'Lee', in contrast, is one child in a large refugee family from South East Asia. Dad works at a car wash earning $25,000 a year, or $350 a week. They also get CentreLink benefits. Mum says they cannot afford food some days. Lee attends a local high school (fees $174, uniform $250) and was bullied for being different. He plays soccer once a week, has not had a holiday, but likes family picnics. Lee says 'Money is not your life.' But he notes that 'When my father became poor, we became poor. Wearing ripped clothes, some had holes.' His Mum wants to hire a tutor for him but they can't afford it. Asked what might stop him achieving what he wants in later life, he says 'Not learning and not going to university.'

Poverty clusters in particular regions and suburbs, with public facilities and support services of every kind much less available. Parents in such areas face an uphill battle trying to ensure the optimum development of their children. Recent research supports what commonsense tells us: neighbourhood disadvantage does damage the learning outcomes for children. In disadvantaged areas, children scored significantly lower on learning outcomes and socio-emotional outcomes. The key point is that, even if you are a relatively advantaged child living in such an area, the effect of the neighbourhood neutralises some of your advantage, and your performance is lower than if you lived in a non-disadvantaged neighbourhood.

The 2007 UNICEF Report on Child Wellbeing in wealthy countries found that Australia lags behind on many measures of equality. Nearly 12 per cent of children fell below the 'poverty line', defined as living in a house where total income is less than half the country's median. Casualisation of the workforce is blamed, and a tax regime which penalises low-income families.

Some highlights from the UNICEF report (below) give a telling picture of life for Australian children.

Australian children, as measured by Unicef	
Material wellbeing (by percentage):	
Living in poverty	11.6
Children reporting less than 6 educational possessions	16.4
Children with less than 10 books in the home	4.9
Households with no employed person	9.5
Educational wellbeing (by percentage):	
Students aged 15–19 and in education	82.1
Not in education or employment	6.8
Peer and family relationships (by percentage):	
Living in single-parent families	12.5
Eat main meal with parents at table several times weekly	69.9
Parents spend time talking with them several times weekly	51.3
Personal wellbeing (by percentage):	
Agree 'I feel like an outsider or left out of things.'	7.7
Agree 'I feel awkward and out of place.'	8.9
Agree 'I feel lonely.'	6.5

Children in poverty are likely to have fewer books in the home, poorer health and lower educational aspirations than those whose parents are employed and paid adequately. As a nation, we cannot afford to let any child slide away from fulfilling what is, at the outset, a promising start for most of them.

Difference, in summary

When we think about the New Child we have to remember the picture is not uniform. Though the majority of today's kids are born into families with older parents, fewer siblings, and more living grandparents, and into neighbourhoods where the sound of children is diminishing, for some life is different in another way. It is disturbing to think that so many children face growing up in poverty in such an affluent nation. It is alarming to think of the severe and continuing disadvantage of indigenous children, despite decades of financial and social intervention. And it is a surprise to find so many of Australia's New Children have parents born overseas, speaking languages other than English and bifurcating into the affluent, well-educated, skilled migrant families versus the refugee families whose circumstances make for a future less promising for their disadvantaged children. The Rudd government has started to address some of these issues, but only continued pressure to consider the wellbeing of all children will guarantee them a secure and positive future.

CHAPTER 3

'Both my parents work'

Recently, one of our grandsons came home from school and reported that every kid in his year seven class has a mother with a paid job. Australia once lagged behind the United States and some European countries in women's workforce participation rates, but today the majority of Australian mums are in paid employment by the time their child reaches the age of six.

There is no going back to the traditional family model of male breadwinner and housewife. The New Child will have two parents in paid employment, even though the Australian workplace has yet to catch up with this fact. Moreover, the average time that mothers spend at home after the birth of a child has fallen. In 1996, it was three years; now it is one. And very significantly, the proportion of women who have babies and are working part-time is now the same as for those with a one-year-old – 31.4 per cent. As their children get older, even more women return to work.

Going out to paid work is probably the biggest change that women have wrought in the family lives of children. It was women who decided they wanted to work after marriage and children, often in the face of resistance from their husbands and their own parents; and, not surprisingly, it is women rather than men who have made the adjustments so that they can deal with joint work and family responsibilities. So far, part-time work has been the main solution.

Legislative reforms in the 1960s and '70s relating to equal opportunity, affirmative action, equal pay, abortion, and sexual discrimination made a huge difference to women's lives, but they were not driven just by radical feminists; nor were

they simply a response to economic necessity. Rather, they reflected a shift of focus and aspiration in the lives of ordinary women, renegotiating their role with husbands and children in ordinary families.

This fundamental change couldn't have happened without the advent of reliable contraception. The Pill, first available in Australia in 1961, gave women control over their bodies and separated sex from reproduction. Inevitably, the place of children in society and in individual families was transformed. Women did not have children just because the act of sex made pregnancy likely; they became mothers when they were good and ready to. This change occurred at a time when Western women were beginning to question strongly the unequal ways in which our supposedly enlightened society forced them to live.

We began our own working lives as secondary school teachers. Each of us had a BA and Dip Ed, and we taught in similar subject areas at the same school in suburban Melbourne. But Don was paid more than Patricia, and the minute we married, Patricia could not hold a tenured teaching position. She had to resign, and although she was allowed to continue to teach casually, her responsibilities were restricted because she might get pregnant and leave the teaching profession. It seemed incredibly unfair – and it was. Patricia was just one of many thousands of women who wouldn't accept such a poor bargain.

Men were dragged reluctantly through these years of change. Many a marriage foundered when wives confronted their husbands with questions raised by radical feminist texts. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* was Patricia's battering ram for an already comparatively enlightened Don. We argued over various passages in the book, and it helped us both to a deeper understanding of institutional sexism.

The sexual revolution was followed by the divorce revolution, articulated by the no-fault Family Law Act of 1975. It tried to move divorce away from litigation between separating partners to mediation, and recognised that the problems associated with children had to be met both by the parents (through custody arrangements and child support) and by the state (through supporting parent benefits and other family support services). Thousands of children were affected by the separation and divorce of their parents, and the Act was framed (if not always administered) in 'the best interests of children'. Since 1980, over 1.25

million children have been subject to Family Court divorce settlements, altering their view of the permanence of marriage and its responsibilities.

Since the 1970s, women have consciously changed the balance of time they devote to raising children and have engineered the timing of their families. Education and work have become a sort of Moebus curve, with no start or end point, perpetually curving into one another. Moreover, getting married and having children is no longer the major goal of adult life. The group labelled Gen Y say that career is a more important consideration to them than starting a family. They claim that they are deferring children rather than abandoning parenthood, but delay inevitably means having fewer or no children and a different place for children in their lives.

"… women have consciously changed the balance of time they devote to raising children and have engineered the timing of their families."

Analysts such as Daniel Bell and Joseph Schumpeter see the seeds of a declining birth rate in modern capitalism, which promotes individualism, materialism, instrumentalism, and the prizing of choice and autonomy over all other human capacities. All these values run counter to the unselfish, affective, long-term commitment associated with good child-rearing. And, as Matthew Taylor puts it: 'Having children is a double whammy, because it usually also involves making a long-term commitment to another adult – with yet more loss of choice and autonomy.' He suggests we need to consider ways to build a society where the desire to have children seems 'natural' again.

It's probably not so simple as that. In Australia, young adults without children say, 'It's not for lack of wanting kids'. What they mean is that factors such as longer years in education and training, housing costs, insecure jobs, the high cost of children themselves (in both time and money), and the example of their friends delaying children, have altered the pathways to parenthood. Their focus has been on getting educated, building up a career, and shoring up their income.

The arrival of the Pill and other reliable forms of contraception meant that sex became safe outside marriage, without the fear of pregnancy that had dogged former lovers. Old taboos faded away. This has made for later marriage, and lower fertility rates. The lifestyle of a single person is attractive, often the 'right' partner fails to come along, and they find themselves getting older before they marry. Lori Gottlieb, an American single mother, recently wrote an amusing essay, 'Marry Him!', in which she exhorted single women who wanted children to 'settle' for suitable husbands, rather than waiting for Mr Perfect to come along. Her point was that the longer a woman waited, the less likely it was that Mr Right would turn up; yet some rejected suitors might well have made good husbands and fathers. This is usually a subject women are reluctant to discuss frankly, at least in public, so Gottlieb's candour was refreshingly welcome.

In countries where the Pill was available, the birth rate has fallen, sometimes by a frightening amount. In Britain, the rate 30 years ago was 2.4 children per woman; it is now 1.16. In Germany, the birth rate is 1.34, in Italy 1.19, and in Spain 1.16. In Australia, the birth rate fell from 3.4 in 1961 to 1.76 in 2005.

Differences in government support for families, through tax concessions, child care rebates, access to quality child care, and family-friendly work practices, explain why the birth rate has dropped more in some countries than others. Italy, despite its Catholicism and family values traditions, has very poor provisions for family support, hence its low rate. Sweden increased its fertility rate (but not dramatically) through the provision of quality child care, then (more successfully) through paid parental leave and by encouraging more sympathetic workplace cultures.

But these days a number of other factors also influence family size. A recent AIFS study shows that a third of couples expect to have fewer children than they would like, not because of a reluctance to reproduce, but because they lack the financial capacity to support a larger family. The key reason they cite is financial, followed by a lack of confidence in their own capacity to support and emotionally nurture a larger family, and concern that they are not in a secure relationship. They worry about whether their partner would make a good parent and the security of their job. Others comment that although they had good incomes 'it was more the change of lifestyle and the impact it would have on our lives and our career'. The main author of the report, Dr Matthew Gray, suggests that 'the

message that raising children has an intrinsic richness and is an enjoyable part of life needs to be conveyed widely … To be effective, however, such a message must reflect reality. Couples need a secure income stream, a loving and stable relationship and the skills and confidence to be parents.'

Do working parents lack time to be parents?

Much nonsense is written about parents (especially mothers) who do paid work outside the home. For the New Child such work will be taken for granted. And guilt-producing rhetoric aimed at working mothers should be a thing of the past. Media stories imply lack of time spent with children is a form of neglect. Polemicists like Penelope Leach, Anne Manne, and Bettina Arndt quote numerous studies showing that formal child care is bad for children, saying mothers should be at home full-time in the early years. But not every study can be trusted.

There's no doubt time for parents to be with children is short. With both parents working, parents and children spend an average of only three and a quarter hours, together on weekdays, and six and a half hours on Saturdays and Sundays. The question to ask is: What would children be doing if you were at home with them all day? One answer is playing with them, teaching them, talking to them, encouraging them to learn and grow healthily. And many of today's parents who are at home do this; they devote every hour of the day to providing a stimulating and caring environment for their children. Toys, games, walks, watching selected videos, bringing desirable friends over, guiding every thought, driving them to dance class or little gym or early swimming lessons are what it's all about.

2007 figures on time poverty	
(by percentage of interviewees)	
Both parents in family unit employed	60
Interviewee works more than 45 hours per week	63
Interviewee works more than 50 hours per week	22
Interviewee says family life less enjoyable	37
Interviewee says job detracts from parenting	45

There is no doubt that all this time and attention helps the child, but it may not help sufficiently to warrant the loss of income, and possible loss of social contacts and life satisfaction that would have come from the stay-at-home parent returning to a paid job. On the other hand, there's not much evidence that having children in long day care in the early years helps their cognitive and social development either, unless it is quality care that substitutes for a deprived home environment.

Too often, claims about the supposed inadequacy of child care rest on nostalgia for the days when mums were at home and not 'trying to be men'. But those mums did not spend every minute of the day interacting with their kids. They were busy working too – doing unpaid work in the home. Kids may have been underfoot but they were not being talked to or played with or instructed in the finer arts of language or music. And not all those mums were happy doing all that housework either, so their dissatisfaction rubbed off on children, often hustled outside while mum got on with other jobs. The crucial factor seems to be the mother's satisfaction with the life she has chosen – if that's being at home with the kids, then they thrive, if it's going out to work and she's happy with that, they thrive also. It's not enough to consider the 'needs' of children; the needs of parents are important too because their sense of fulfilment rubs off on the wellbeing of the child.

"... parents try to compensate by 'buying love', their guilt being measured in credit payments and pocket money."

Dads were not often at home in the good old days. Professional men in particular were remote from everyday family life. Brian Jackson, a British researcher on fatherhood, found that men who worked a traditional 9-to-5 or 8-to-6 unskilled job spent more time with their children than better educated men in the professions or administrative work. Because their work did not spill over into family time, working-class sons benefited from being near their dads as they did some gardening, household repairs, or sat around relaxing at the weekends.

In a US study on how children respond to the working lives of their parents, Ellen Galinsky found their top four wishes were:

Mothers	
My mother would make more money	23%
She would be less stressed by work	20%
She would be less tired by work	14%
She would spend more time with me	10%
Fathers	
My father would make more money	23%
He would spend more time with me	15.5%
He would be less stressed by work	15%
He would be less tired by work	12.5%

The children's reactions reflected the ways that their parents felt about work impacts and talked about work, rather than their own beliefs that they were being neglected. Most of the kids were very positive about their parents and the way they tried to be there for them, but could see the stress of workplace concerns reflected in their parents' behaviour.

Barbara Pocock, in her book *The Labour Market Ate My Babies,* describes the way parental guilt is manufactured by advertisements still showing the perfect mum at home, providing snacks for her children when they come home from school. Since most real mums are not at home, or have just rushed to collect the kids and pick up some groceries along the way, they can't match the ideal. As a result, Pocock says, parents try to compensate by 'buying love', their guilt being 'measured in credit payments and pocket money':

> … In face of the squeeze on family time, parents are encouraged by advertisers to create family experiences that are special – 'special' meaning commodified and preferably expensive, the more expensive the more special.
>
> Children themselves liked the goodies bought for them (including dad's purchases at the airport, after business trips), but would prefer to spend family time together, chatting and sharing experiences.

As Pocock puts it, 'The suggestion that stuff signals love and can substitute for it has many parental supporters. In this way, parental guilt feeds consumption, creating fertile commercial terrain. However, the expression of "contrition through spending" appears to work better for parents and the market than for young people. Children are not so convinced about the merits of the trade.'

It's harder now to draw a line between work and family time. Telephones, computers, the internet, and global market forces blend the boundaries, and the 24/7 schedule typifies many jobs, making family relationships difficult. A report by the marriage guidance group, the Relationships Forum, claims that Australia's high work intensity deprives men and women of time for fulfilling relationships.

Some two million people lose at least six hours of family time to work on Sunday and at other unsocial hours. Over 20 per cent work more than 50 hours a week. Over half (58 per cent) said work interfered with their parenting, 46 per cent said it interfered with their relationships and 50 per cent claimed their jobs had ruined their sex lives. A slightly more positive picture emerged from the ABS 2008 Year Book Australia, which found excessive work hours peaked between 1995 and 2000 and have fallen since then. Full-time employees now work an average of 39.4 hours compared with 41.4 hours seven years ago, but dads average 45.9 hours a week.

Changing patterns of work have produced a polarisation between extended unsociable hours, the demise of the standard working week, and the parallel increase in part-time work as a family strategy to manage child care. As we saw above, Australian research shows that economic security and job uncertainty are major factors relating to the decision to defer having a child. Employment today is precarious, not something you can plan on as a secure base, and children need security of income.

Yet, as business journalist Leon Gettler writes, most working people love their jobs and say they are happy. So what is going on here? The confusion lies in the assumption that work life is or can be separated from family life and that life satisfaction comes from one versus the other. In fact, paid work is a key aspect of our lives and all of life is work of one sort or another, so it's best not to obsess about either work or family. The crucial factor in life satisfaction is how the two combine for self-fulfilment, social status and a sense of achievement.

Probably a person who is exalted by their work, who enters the 'flow' of the task they are undertaking, and who enjoys the intellectual challenge of problem-solving, the stimulation of colleagues, and the subtle dance of negotiation, will be a better parent than one who is not. But it's not that simple. Many of us will find we love our jobs sometimes, and hate them at others. Some jobs are not intrinsically satisfying, and in these cases, people get their rewards from extrinsic factors such as pay, socialising with their colleagues, or fixed hours, rather from any intrinsic job satisfaction. And there are other jobs that are simply not rewarding in any sense. For women in a culture that has defined their key role as that of mother and homemaker, the dilemma is real. They are more likely than their partners to be the family member involved in unrewarding part-time work in order to care for their children. And for those women who have a job they treasure, a stubbornly male workplace culture and rigid workplace practices often conflict with their need and desire to engage in paid work outside the home.

Mothers are better educated than ever before, and are needed in the paid workforce in increasing numbers if our national economic growth is to continue. But the large increase in working mothers alters forever the way children and parents relate to one another. Guilt about lack of time, the frenetic juggling of family schedules, the desire to help their children to be the best they can, make for an explosive mix, and women are standing closest to the lit fuse.

It's encouraging that Australia finally has a prime minister whose own wife stayed at home while their children were young, but then began a successful business which she still runs. Her husband appears to understand the new form of partnership that makes modern marriage so different from traditional Australian families, so we await with great interest the Rudd Government's policy reforms in regard to working parents.

The majority of working mothers in this country want to have the first months with their newborn child at home, partly because breastfeeding has become the norm compared with the regime of bottle-feeding that was popular in the 1950s and '60s. Australia must catch up with some system of paid maternity leave; this need is becoming urgent as the number of working mothers of infants continues to grow. As well, most mothers prefer to stay at home during the first years of a child's life; once again, Australia must catch up with better arrangements for parental leave.

As a reminder that having children means taking on an extra cost burden, the table below estimates costs for low, middle and high income families with different numbers of children. It's not cheap.

How much children cost

	Av. income	Number of children		
		One	Two	Three
	$ pw	$ pw	$ pw	$pw
Low income	729	114	231	337
Middle income	1538	195	366	509
High income	3216	341	607	815
Average	1722	209	388	537

Source: AMP.NATSEM, quoted in *The Australian.*

Women now contribute close to a third of gross domestic product (GDP) through paid work. They also do two-thirds of all the unpaid work, an estimated $261 billion on 1997 figures, or around 48 per cent of GDP. It's blindingly obvious that if they are to continue in this way, then the arrangement has to become a two-way street. Yet government and corporate policy have for the most part failed them. Why? By 1991, Australia had ratified the International Labour Organisation's Convention 156 on respecting work and family responsibilities. Virtually every study done by the Australian Institute of Family Studies had made clear the negative impact of a rigid, male-oriented work structure on the lives of men, women, and children.

This ILO convention, though not binding, finally enshrined the new rights of women in the workplace and forced men to reconsider their patriarchal habits. Even the Business Council of Australia created an Office for Equal Employment Opportunities and established the Corporate Awards on Workers with Family Responsibilities. (Don recalls with some amusement the shocked looks on the faces at a Business Council meeting where he told these leaders they were at fault for the rising divorce rate, because of their refusal to change a rigid workplace culture.)

Many companies have responded to the needs of women employees in a positive way and see their work/family policies as a key to being an 'employer of choice', attracting and retaining the best workers seeking a more sensible work/life balance. Back in the mid '80s Lend Lease/MLC set up the first work-based child care centre in Australia, at its Sydney headquarters. But it was the more flexible attitudes of supervisors, and their encouragement of employees to take a couple of days on full pay to help their local community organisations, that shifted the workplace culture. The employer put their money where their mouth was.

Several companies offered directories of accessible child care, aged care, marital and youth counselling and other family support agencies. The Body Shop group opened the child-care centre at its suburban Melbourne factory to general members of the local community. At Alcoa, our employee survey identified various stages of parenting as of major concern, so the mining and refining company contracted Graeme Russell and his team at Macquarie University to run employee workshops on men with infants and fathers with adolescents. These workshops, held in the company canteen rather than offsite, were extremely popular and successful, and are continuing.

What we have learned from evaluations of work/family programs implemented in Australian workplaces is that:

There's no such thing as an even 'balance'. No worker expects equal time to meet job and family responsibilities; they do need, however, some flexibility to be able to cope with mismatching time schedules and family emergencies. The job is a responsibility to be met, but it can be done without making life impossibly difficult when family responsibilities have to be met as well.

There are clear cost-benefits to companies in being responsive to employees' family needs – less absenteeism and less illegitimate leave-taking, better morale and performance, lower accident rates, better recruitment and prospects and lower turnover and retraining costs. They attract and retain better employees because of their more understanding culture and management practices.

Most work/family programs are not expensive, not confined to big companies, but reflect a work culture that says work is part of life and life outside the workplace cannot be ignored.

These findings should encourage other corporations to dive in, and yet Australia still lags behind other developed countries when it comes to recognising how significant workplace reforms are to the wellbeing of its children. The Howard government's attempts to dress up its WorkChoices industrial relations changes in terms of flexibility for family workers were a thin disguise for undermining family-related leave and other benefits, and they exacerbated the uncertainty of employment and job conditions for workers who needed some security and self-control if they were to support their families well.

Parental leave is essential

In 2001, Equal Opportunity Commissioner Pru Goward produced the latest in a long list of proposals for paid maternity leave. Instead, the Howard government brought in the baby bonus, a payment of $3000 as an incentive to boost the birth rate. In the UK, mothers enjoy 39 weeks of paid maternity leave (funded by employer and employee contributions topped up by government. Sweden offers 18 months paid parental leave; and many other European countries, Korea, Vietnam and New Zealand all have paid national maternity leave schemes. By contrast, in Australia only a third of employed women have any sort of paid maternity leave, usually about six to 12 weeks paid for by their employer. The rest do without, and one in five women quit the workforce (and thus attachment to it through superannuation and in-service training) due to a lack of paid leave. Over 20 percent of women with children under five work from home.

It is important to distinguish between maternity leave and parental leave. The former is essential for new mothers to nurture their infants in the early months and retain job attachment. Parental leave, on the other hand, is a means of allowing choice for both mothers and fathers about how they wish to raise their children; it allows for home-based care as opposed to centre-based care, an ongoing topic of dissension.

In 2007, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission recommended a government-funded scheme of 14 weeks paid maternity leave, plus extra parental leave, but this has been shelved while the Productivity Commission yet again examines the issue. The Rudd government plans to abolish individual workplace agreements, and build into its changes the right to request part-time work and parental leave. As yet, there is no right of appeal if an employer refuses.

It's time Australia caught up. Women, mothers, are an essential part of Australia's labour force and future productivity; children need their mothers at home in the early stages and need shared parental attention while infants. The costs, compared to parental stress and guilt, would be minimal. The Blair government in the UK shifted away from its apparent policy of pushing every woman back into paid employment and introduced extended paid maternity leave. Sweden also found that paid parental leave was shared more between men and women when it was extended beyond the first six months of a child's life – and leave was preferred to putting a child in care, even though Sweden has a record of high quality child care provision.

The work/family balance is now also a core demand from men who want to play a real part in raising their own children. Such men are not the sensitive new age wimps so maligned in the media; they are the men most confident of their own masculinity and those with a clear concept of what fatherhood and a decent life is about. In Sweden, the men most likely to take paid parental leave are those for whom being a dad means more than being one of the boys. In Australia it has been men in mining and heavy industry who demand workshops on partnering and parenting – especially when they have infants and/or teenagers, the two most critical stages for forging the bonds of fatherhood.

"Contemporary fathers are at last insisting they are human beings first and economic tools second."

Contemporary fathers are at last insisting that they are human beings first and economic tools second. Increasingly, they put personal relationships on a footing with workplace obligations, saying to their employers, I have a life, and you ought to get one too. They are saying that their first loyalty is to the team at home, the ones they love and carry direct responsibility for, not to the fickle and short-lived workplace or to a footy or cricket team.

In a sound partnership marriage, the best love leaves room to move. The battle to share the care is one that will escalate in the new century – part driven by women who won't put up with an uninvolved dad, part driven by fathers with a new attitude to life and work, but resisted still by corporate automatons who insist being a parent is a private choice and not their problem. As well, an ageing

society produces a double bind for caring families – the 'Sandwich Generation', caring for both their own offspring and their older parents.

The main thrust of Julia Gillard's approach to education and training is to ensure that early childhood experiences, school curricula, and training programs work on two fronts: developing every child's personal capacities and enhancing general economic productivity. That is also why Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has flagged his personal approval for a move towards integrated child and family support services, in 'one-stop' centres possibly based around local schools. Linking family, child care, workplace policies, and family support programs is clearly a desirable goal.

Backlash

Despite these positive attempts to reconcile work and family life, there is a growing backlash from employees who do not have children against what they see as discrimination against their rights at work. Books such as *Women Who Choose to Say No, The Baby Boon: How Family-Friendly America Cheats the Childless,* and *The Childless Revolution* complain bitterly about the benefits allowed mothers who work (school holidays off, flexible start and finish times, tax concessions, what they call 'breeder benefits'). In Australia, a website has been set up to lobby for non-parents' rights at work.

Their arguments confuse meeting family responsibilities with wanting a better work/life balance. It's doubtless correct to say children are not the only family-related responsibility and that parents of children should not be singled out. A truly family-friendly workplace is one that recognises worker caring responsibilities to others apart from children, such as ageing parents, sick spouses, or disabled family members. It may well be true that having time off to play golf, learn the martial arts, or study Spanish during work time is valuable and would contribute to a better work/life balance, but it is not the same thing as enabling employees to meet their dual responsibilities. Perhaps the best solution would be to guarantee paid maternity leave and then provide a new form of carer's leave rather than parental leave, to ensure all workers with caring responsibilities gain some benefit. After all, as the population ages, many single, childless Australians are caring for older parents.

Moreover, it is short-sighted to argue as Canberra policy analyst Tom Nankivell does that 'I can't see any rational reason for people to have to subsidise others who choose to bring children into the world. If there were some kind of shortage, maybe, but I can't see any need at all for more people – the hordes of skilled migrants wanting to enter Australia represent a far more cost-effective future workforce than educating and training local children and ... it's not even certain they're going to support us all in our old age.' If he thinks skilled migrant workers don't want to have children and see them well-educated in their country of choice, he's not thinking. A country without children is a country without hope.

Caring well for children is the employers' problem, because in a future short on labour supply they will have to compete for the best workers. And there won't be enough skilled migrants to go around. Evidence shows the best workers, both women and men, are those with parenting responsibilities. The day may well come when fathers demand equal parenting time within a flexible work career, during marriage, not just equal parenting post-divorce. That will be a true revolution.

Child care is for kids

It has always 'taken a village' (meaning non-parental carers) to raise a child. But such a phrase has new meaning in today's world. It's no longer possible to have the relatives and neighbours watching over children, or have children playing side by side with parents in a village workplace. Today, children need informed, professional care (both knowledgeable parents and trained assistant carers) and it's the quality of that care that matters.

It's time Australia acknowledged this fact and did something about it. Time to stop the endless debate about whether formal child care is good or bad for children. Just provide it, making sure that every child-care centre is of good quality to ensure positive development for all children. A complete rethink is needed on how best to finance more child care places. The recent debacle of ABC Learning was partly caused by the Howard Government's promise of increased subsidies to the centres themselves rather than to parents. This led to a speculative jump in ABC's share price, which in turn led to its unwise borrowing to expand into the USA.

Commercial child care leads to over-provision in areas where parents have money, and competition with community-based child care centres where parents have a better say in the quality of service provision. COAG's *National Reform Agenda* (2007) found that despite increased funding through child care assistance, child care benefit and child care tax rebate schemes, the value of these subsidies had been offset by the rising cost of child care, doubling in Melbourne over the past decade. Some 70 per cent of families report some difficulty with the cost of child care and this has reduced labour force participation by up to 14.6 per cent for lone parents and 3.9 per cent for married women with children. Accessibility of child care is also a problem, with 41.8 per cent of Victorian parents reporting there were no services available, 40 per cent on waiting lists, and some families waiting up to three years for a place.

The research on maternal employment and child care is riddled with contradictions. Findings range from long-term damage to clear developmental benefits of non-parental child care. Outcomes such as 'brattiness' (a biased word which may mean self-confidence or assertiveness) are interpreted as a result of poor 'bonding' with mothers, not of poor quality care or other factors in the child's upbringing such as low income, low parental education or poor neighbourhood quality.

Mothers are made to feel guilty because psychologists claim maternal attachment is damaged by too early a separation; the child needs to bond with the mother and that requires full-time mothering attention. What they do not say is that a child can (and should) 'attach' to more adults than just the mother, and most children have established healthy bonds with the mother well before she returns to work. In Australia by 2002, a quarter of four-year-olds were in some form of formal long-day child care, but very few children under age one. The trend, however, is clear and it is the quality of that care that counts above all else.

In view of the extremism of some writers who accuse mothers of harming children by placing them in early child care, the following table may put it in some perspective:

Australian children in child care	
Long Day Care Centres (0–5 years)	5% of infants
	21% of 1-year-olds
	30% of 2-year-olds
	38% of 3-year-olds
	28% of 4-year-olds
	6% of 5-year-olds
Family Day Care	2% of infants
	7% of 1-year-olds
	11% of 2-year-olds
	11% of 3-year-olds
	6% of 4-year-olds
	2% of 5-year-olds
Pre-school/Kindergarten programs (3–4)	30% of 3-year-olds
	94% of 4-year-olds

Source: COAG National Reform Agenda

This table is hardly a portrait of massive parental neglect, with much smaller percentages of younger children in care, and a large majority of four-year-olds receiving the desirable exposure to kindergarten or pre-school to ready them for school. Through COAG, the Victorian government and other states are moving to insist that all day care centres have pre-school programs co-located, to make life easier for parents. Better integration of early childhood and family support services would resolve much of the time conflict parents face. However, without human effort, Kevin Rudd's one-stop-shop, with co-located services, will not be enough, because co-location does not guarantee cooperation between different service-providers, and does not ensure the twin keys of success – parental involvement in decision-making and varied responses to locational differences.

Careful longitudinal studies have found that non-parental child care and its relative quality have a variety of impacts on children; it's easy to become confused about what is right for the child. American research has found disadvantaged children placed in good quality child care are more likely to succeed in school, less likely to drop out, to be delinquent, unemployed, or to get pregnant when teenagers. The HiScope Perry pre-school project in the US showed huge long-term gains for disadvantaged children, with an average return per student of $24,000 – in lower social security payments, reduced crime and taxation benefits. For every dollar spent on quality child care, over $7 in later social disruption and failure to perform were saved, a lifetime benefit per child of $100,000. The initial investment was small relative to the social benefits and economic savings. It's important to note that this was a small-scale, intensive intervention which cannot be generalised to every form of child care. Importantly, the Perry scheme involved very high ratios of staff to children and a concerted home-visiting program to improve parenting skills, both a key to success with disadvantaged families.

"If you can put a cost-benefit to the notion of investing in children, attention levels rise."

But this is where the economic rationalists have finally taken note. Talk about the caring responsibilities of parents and the public–private divide gets in the way. Talk about public costs of the lack of good quality care in early childhood and the hairs are raised on the back of bureaucratic necks. If you can put a cost–benefit figure to the notion of investing in children, attention levels rise. An ANU study of child care showed for every $1 spent on government-subsidised child care, $106 million is saved in terms of social security benefits no longer needed and in taxes gained from increased female labour force participation. Say no more. But keep in mind, child care has to be good for children, not just for the national economy.

Several forces have now converged to make what we do early in the life of every New Child of economic and national significance. In 1994, a Carnegie Corporation publication, *Starting Points,* underscored the need for high quality health care, child care and parent education. For the first time it highlighted how emerging neuroscience work on the young child's developing brain offered a justification for federally-funded services for babies and toddlers.

Though at that stage inconclusive about the impact of good experiences versus neglect or abuse, the report was picked up by child advocate Rob Reiner and Hillary Clinton. Reiner warned of children becoming 'toxic' members of society, and of the potential costs of neglect and abuse through the creation of angry, violent adults who would deplete the tax base and threaten the quality of life. This push led to the White House Conference on Early Childhood Development and Learning in April, 1997, a key event in publicising the new work on brain development. It created a welter of media interest, not to mention enthusiastic misreporting of the research, with excesses such as The Mozart Effect and Baby Einstein capturing many a naïve parent, as discussed later in this book.

Nonetheless, there was plenty of evidence of the value (both to the child as a child and to later economic cost–benefits for society) of special provisions for early childhood (not just quality child care) and the White House Conference was a key point in public policy recognition of the issue. Every dollar invested in prenatal care saves $3.38 in avoided medical costs for young children. Intensive care for a low birthweight baby costs $54,800 on average. Every dollar spent on immunisation saves $10 in later medical costs. For every dollar spent on Head Start, a massive intervention in disadvantaged areas in the US, costing now $6.9 billion a year, there are between $2 to $4 in benefits.

In another excellent American long-term study – the Brookline Early Education Project (BEEP) – the children enrolled showed marked benefits compared with their non-enrolled counterparts. Ninety per cent of those who had good access to quality early childhood services, plus effective parenting programs and family support services, had good outcomes on health and fewer serious developmental problems compared with those who did not. In other words, properly planned early childhood services that involved parents closely as motivated educators of their own children had very positive outcomes. And this was regardless of parental income, education level, or time spent at work.

Families need more than just child care. So to argue that non-parental care is good or bad for young children misses the overall point: parents need family-friendly workplaces, family support services, family-oriented communities, because they cannot do it all alone. Not that they ever did, but today's world has so changed the circumstances of childhood that a whole range of new family supports is needed.

So we should not allow debate about the rights and wrongs of mothers being employed to ignore the wider picture: if society as a whole, the culture and structure of the workplace, and the system of family support services operated as resources for parenting, rather than as hindrances, we would not even need to discuss such an issue.

Overall, the message is clear: both mothers and fathers are better educated, both want to be gainfully employed at some stage during their children's lives, and the national economy needs their skills. Such parents may place a different value on the place of work vis a vis children, but it's not really a competition – they value both children and their jobs. At present many children are rushed into child care, to and from school, and organised into multiple outside-the-home activities because the system has not faced up realistically to the dilemmas facing the parents of young children.

We believe the evidence is incontrovertible that every child benefits from good quality child care and pre-school education, especially when their social and cognitive development is rapidly expanding as young children. To have some suburbs oversupplied and others with no access to affordable child care at all is a national disgrace. As we discuss in Part III, the early years are crucial for a child's intellectual and social development and neglect at that stage means a ticket to a failed future. Every child has a brain with wonderful potential. Every child in Australia has a right to develop that potential. And parents have a right to demand proper support in their crucial job of raising the next generation.

Australia needs its own version of the Scandinavian experiment after World War II, whereby a determination to give women more equal opportunity and a determination to ensure the best quality experiences for children in the early years were combined in an integrated social policy framework. Instead of the fragmented, confusing, blame-shifting exercise that fails to provide the best for children an affluent nation such as Australia can afford, we could have paid parental leave, quality children's health services, urban planning with children's needs in mind, and the adequate provision of publicly funded child care, under an overarching policy philosophy that insisted that workplaces help parents balance their work and family lives, and supported the right of parents to choose how they want to raise their families.

CHAPTER 4

The new individualism

Family life for the New Child is much more complex and uncertain than it was even 20 years ago. The child's view of parents has been changed forever by the new freedoms demanded by women and the new expectations of fatherhood. Work and careers outside the home are now a normal part of childhood and the impact of non-parental service professionals (such as child-carers, school teachers, nurses, paid mentors, and coaches) is more widespread.

Conventional families are increasingly a minority, and having children is no longer seen by everyone as a natural part of adult life. In all, there are 1.6 million 'family households' in Australia. Of them, only 28 per cent are families consisting of couples with children. Although more people are getting married, they are having fewer children. Australia's birth rate is now 1.76 live births per woman, well below the natural population replacement level of just over two births per woman.

Parenting itself has become a central concern, given the smaller size of families and the new awareness of how important are the early years to later life outcomes. There are big implications for what happens to children in this new environment – what they learn in child-care settings and pre-school, how schools should be reconfigured, how teachers' roles will change, and the impact of new technologies on how and what children learn. Childhood is an evolving process.

The challenge facing today's parents is how to raise children who are intelligent, optimistic, and confident of their own abilities, without turning them into

self-centred, arrogant little individuals unconcerned with the wider common good. This is a central dilemma of the post-modern world: there are so many options for personal growth and self-fulfilment that we are in danger of drowning in a welter of choice. The doctrine of individualism has become so strong that we forget that we are who we are because of our social circumstances, as much as because of our own efforts.

Psychology seems to have triumphed over sociology. We have been indoctrinated to challenge the traditional order, and to create – and recreate – ourselves as though we could do that in a vacuum, struggling to forge an identity and make a place for ourselves in the world without the guidance of traditional institutions and norms; thrown onto our own resources, and feeling that if we fail to reach our potential or find great personal happiness it's our personal failure, not the product of a messy and confusing society. As the British writer, thinker, and social activist Paul Ginsborg puts it: 'Freedom of choice, superficially so appealing and liberating, is often extremely difficult to manage in real life.'

Australia has recently come through more than a decade when the mantra of choice pushed by the Howard government served as a form of muzak, muffling the sounds of dissent (labelled as mere political correctness) and hiding the growing inequality we have pointed to above, while public schools and universities were deprived of funds, there was a serious failure to invest in new infrastructure such as hospitals, public transport, national communication systems, and renewable energy alternatives, and the ability of working families to manage their joint work and family responsibilities was under attack. Women were needed in the workplace but given few concessions to their double load. They were urged to 'Have one for the father, one for the mother, and one for the country', with a few dollars' encouragement from the government's baby bonus, but nothing else in the structure of society changed.

John Howard presided over a decline in civil society, encouraging self-interest, racism, consumer rights, tax concessions that drove up house prices, non-means-tested welfare payments, self-regulation in a media world gone mad on exploiting children, and an industrial relations system that undermined family time and financial security. Interestingly, the employer body the Australian Industry Group (AIG) has now found its voice, deploring the neglect of the Howard years and calling for real investment in education, training and the

physical infrastructure needed to keep Australia's economy strong. The AIG's Heather Ridout, the Sex Discrimination Commissioner Elizabeth Broderick, and the ACTU's Sharan Burrow have joined forces in calling for a sensible system of paid maternity leave.

Children do not – indeed cannot – make their own way unguided. The game of choice is not equal, it's a crooked fix. Their family resources – parental education, income, language, values, community networks – are the keys to life outcomes. Some children can, by dint of hard work, good schools, and parental encouragement, break out of a cycle of poverty (as Don did), but it's kidding them to suggest it's only up to them and if they succeed it's all to their credit rather than the help of others.

> ***"Children do not – indeed cannot – make their own way unguided."***

Moreover, if children are to become genuine individuals in their own right, as mature, responsible adults able to finance and manage their own lives, they cannot be left to think that the sort of individualism represented by rebellious youth organising mass street parties,
or taking ecstasy and binge drinking at city nightclubs, represents anything other than self-indulgent hedonism and conformity to a media-manufactured phoney shadow of true autonomy. Grown-ups have a duty to change the culture of a rampant marketplace to one more conducive to mature growth and a meaningful life.

And because families with children are becoming a minority group in a hostile world, parents need to unite in defence of their own position, their rights and responsibilities. They will need a new and united activism to push their uniquely shared interests. No one else will stand up for them. Think for a moment about what we have been saying. The family with children has already become a minority. It will be outnumbered by the aged, a group that will be increasingly active politically in their own interests, taking a huge proportion of the nation's tax revenue in health services, aged care services and tax concessions, and a group not necessarily sympathetic to the needs of families with children.

As the box on page 59 shows, close to a third of those now in their child-bearing years will never have children. Project forward – they won't have grandchildren

either and will likely resent benefit flows to young families. This trend produces a new demographic group – the 'Solo Generation'. Because of prolonged education, the contraceptive pill, delayed marriage, and the time demands of work, close to a third of our population will comprise free-living young adults, aged between 25 and 40, enjoying long but insecure work hours and very adult-oriented entertainment, and with little interest in marriage or other people's children. And though many of these young adults hold on to the family ties they have, and claim an interest in eventually marrying and having children, the longer they delay the less likely it is to happen.

Why would or should such singles accept the notion that other people's children are also their responsibility? What meaning to them does the adage 'Our children are our future' have? They live in the present, often pursuing hedonistic self-interest, and the media respond by catering to their quixotic tastes with more violence, more sex, more far-out virtual experiences.

It is this group of singles that is driving much of the culture change the older generation fears or fails to understand. The Solos now serve as role models for children, who aspire not to parenthood but to a life free of adult control, open to new pleasures, a world of constant entertainment. The market increasingly caters to their tastes, not the tastes of children as we have known them. In Europe, as here, television programs catering for positive child development are disappearing and the very young are being fed a diet of cartoons linked to selling toys and other products; children have become a commodity to be exploited from birth. The pre-adolescent group is shrinking, and some say 11-year-olds are no longer children. Rather, they have become the new arbiters of taste, dressed in short skirts and petticoat skimps, strutting their painted stuff like little adults. And the older teens see themselves as adults, and want the same programs that adults watch. We see a similar pattern in the trend for kindergartens to have 'graduation ceremonies', for three-year-olds to want a disco birthday party, for children to wear designer clothes. With adult experiences pushed down the life cycle, one wonders what will be left to fill the hours of blasé adult boredom later on.

Parents will need to become an ever more militant group, precisely because the downsizing of government in free market societies means that services in support of parents and families are being cut. They will direct their fury not

only at government, but also at those companies whose products are aimed at exploiting children. We look into this further in the next part of the book.

And for those singles who would like to marry and have children but who are forced to delay because they are unemployed, or still in education, or working in unresponsive work cultures, what does 'choice' mean for them? Many young Australians say they would prefer to have more children, but can't afford to, or can't find a reliable partner, or they fear relationship breakdown, or loss of a job, or doubt their own ability to be a good parent. Delays are only partly a matter of choice, and fertility time runs out for some who would dearly love to have children but cannot.

As well, we have an increasing inflow of migrants, including many skilled migrants to be sure, who may or may not stay in Australia and become long-term citizens with children of their own. Various commentators suggest this is the way forward, it's cheaper to import labour than to educate and train our own children. Who needs children anyway when the world is already overcrowded? They forget the logic of renewal and hope that each new generation promises. Older people, no matter how skilled, will not solve the problems of the future and Australia is in global competition with this source of labour anyway. They also forget that global warming, rising sea levels, and mass refugee migration are more likely than a continual inflow of selected skilled migrants, and they will not be tolerant of a society that denies their children a chance.

Choice in education is another issue to which we shall return, but suffice to say here that the state system was set up to spread education beyond the privileged classes attending private schools. It was set up to teach a common set of civic, secular values, now under threat from the Howard government's encouragement of small, religious schools which exacerbate sectarian separation and potential conflict, not guaranteeing quality education for the children who attend. As Irfan Yusuf wrote recently, when he was federal education minister, Brendan Nelson insisted that Muslim schools had to display the National Framework for Values Education (superimposed over an image of Simpson and his donkey), yet he exempted schools run by the Exclusive Brethren from testing computer literacy for year six and year 10 students. Yusuf points to mismanagement of some such schools and asks 'what about the students attending such religious schools? How will they cope at university or in the job market where they will

be faced with pluralism in religion, culture, ethnicity and sexual preference? ... The community may be paying too high a price for a small minority of parents to exercise choice in their children's education.'

Parents with dependent children are also the only ones who can take up the cudgels in the cause of a more caring workplace culture and a society designed round the needs of all families, including working families. It's interesting that the so-called Gen Y group are asking employers about their values, about work–life balance, about self-development and growth potential and see work in better perspective than previous generations of workaholics, but we ask how long will this last when many of them will not marry or have children? Work–life balance is not the same as having a workplace sympathetic to your having family responsibilities you cannot avoid. Here again the mantra of choice, the assertion that it's your decision to have children so it's not our problem, hides the reality.

A self-indulgent lifestyle, 'enjoy life while we can', is a self-fulfilling recipe for the apocalypse. If we are in survival mode, we need a sense of common purpose, not a philosophy of me first, and the devil take the hindmost. Raising children is society's duty, and not only the responsibility of parents. Why else do we have schools, hospitals, playgrounds in the parks, and tax concessions for child care and for low income families? If it's your choice to buy a car, is it your responsibility to pay for all the roads? If you choose to get fat and ill, can the government refuse to offer medical treatment, or the employer sue you for irresponsible behaviour? Some would say that's the way it should be, but we don't think so.

The logic of individualism and choice is a mantra of despair. For we are social animals, not just individuals. Our first loyalty may be to our own family, but no family can sit alone without severe dysfunction and disadvantage. Children are social animals and need to be brought up to be social, to be civil members of a civil society in which differences are respected but the common good overrides particular interests. Children cannot be left to their own fate in the human task of 'finding themselves'. As Paul Ginsborg says, 'the individual's self-realisation is intimately and imaginatively linked with a collective project'. For that to happen, we need more family-friendly workplaces, neighbourhoods, media and schools, topics to which we now turn.

What ever happened to families?

In the past few years we have become accustomed to the idea that we are in the middle of a 'mini baby boom', but this is something of an illusion. In 2007, the birth rate rose to 1.81 births per woman, up slightly from 1.79 in 2005. But the continuing trend is to delay having children, thus reducing the odds of having a large family. Natural fertility declines as people age, and with 68 per cent of those in their twenties still living with their parents, later marriage and later child-bearing will remain the norm.

The average age of women having their first baby is 30.8 years, fathers even older, at 33.1. Children are a delayed choice, not an inevitability, and people think carefully before having them. So children are more precious than ever. New parents have more life experience and maturity, and are desperate to do the right thing by their own children, trying to find the best child care, the best schools, the best approaches to parenting.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics projects that close to 30 per cent of all those now in the child-bearing years will never marry and have children. That alters the place of children in society as a whole, with many of the 'child-free' arguing that children are the parents' responsibility, not theirs, ignoring the social value of caring for and educating the next generation. There is a growing resentment against parents in the workplace whose supposed privileges of flexible work times, family leave, and choice of school holiday times off 'discriminate' against those without children. Individual interests seem to override an interest in the wellbeing of our future citizens and a sense of the common good.

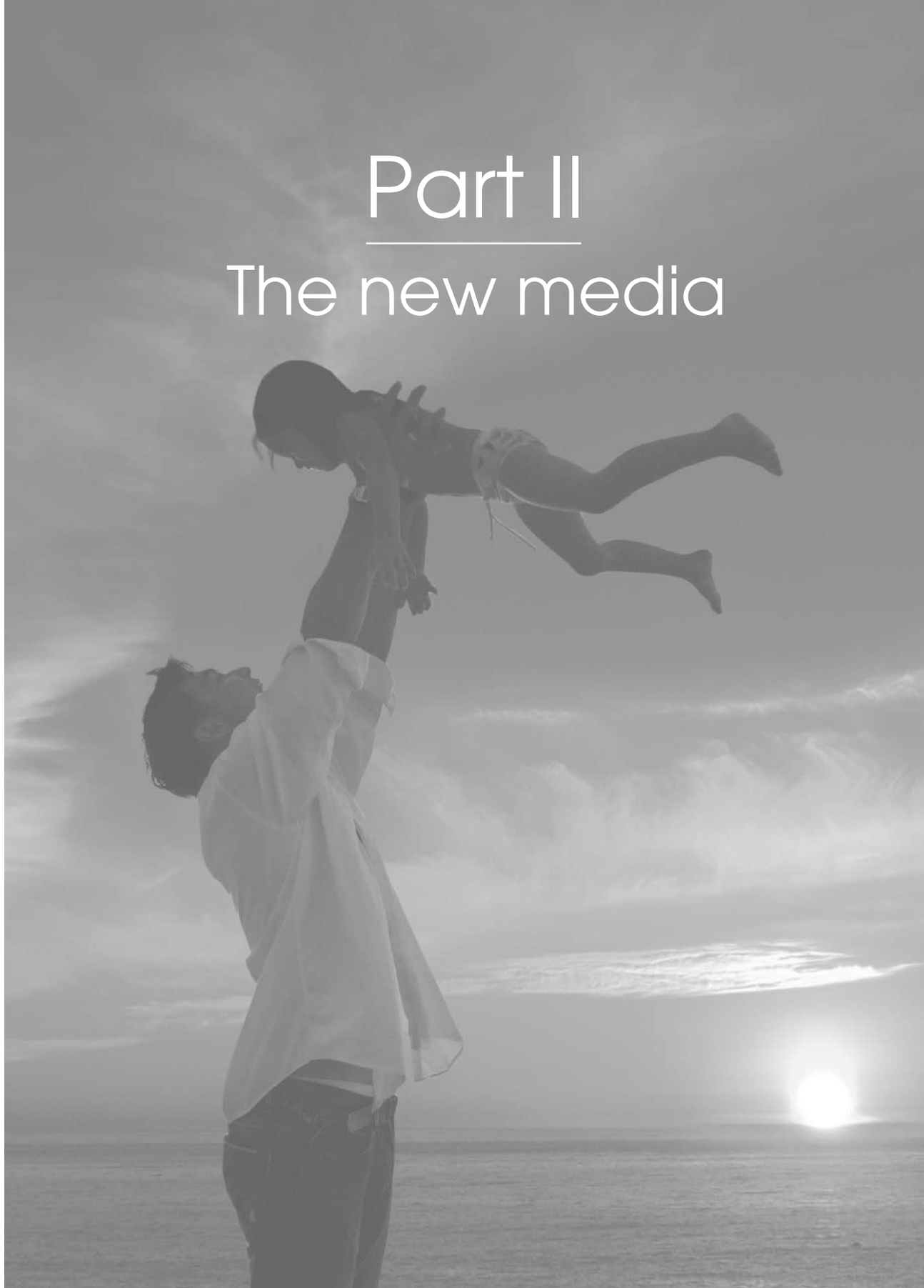
It's alarming to realise that, already, in 70 per cent of Australian homes there are no children under 15. This means that despite the diversity of families these days, families with young kids are well and truly a minority of households.

Some statistics about children	
Total Australian children aged 0–18	5,081,120
Living in intact two-parent family	77.5%
Living with one parent	22.5% (1996 – 19.6%)
Living in a de facto marriage	9.7% (1996 – 6.6%)
Living in a step or blended family	8.2%
Living with neither parent employed	6.5%
Living below the poverty line	11.2%

Source: 2006 Census, OECD data.

Part II

The new media



CHAPTER 5

Children are immersed in media

As a child, Patricia always loved to hear one of her father's stories before she went to bed. His love of literature was infectious. She became a great reader, as well as an avid consumer of popular culture. She had an impressive comic book collection, listened to the *Top Ten* hit songs on Sunday radio after morning church, and she would sneak into the Mildura Ozone Theatre on Saturday afternoons after orchestra practice to watch the matinee. When she reached high school her father took her to the pictures every Friday evening; it was the highlight of her week.

When television came to Australia, Patricia, like most people, became an enthusiastic viewer. When we had our own children, we did not restrict what they watched, only how many hours a day they spent in front of the TV set. Patricia did not come to teaching, research or film production as an enemy of mass media, but rather as a critical viewer. She taught the first film courses at any Australian university, and wrote her doctorate on children's perceptions of television violence.

Our grandchildren, like their grandmother before them, are all happily immersed in mass culture, but unlike any previous generation they have a close relationship to the technology itself, not just the content. This change is revolutionary. It has overtaken us in the past two decades, and accelerated in the past 10 years, and it leaves many parents confused and wondering if their children are being transformed in ways that are out of their control.

Many kids today spend seven hours of cumulative time each day, every day, exposed to different forms of media – more time than they spend in school.

Their informal education absorbs more of their time than their formal schooling; some children who may not enjoy school, or be able to read and write at their year level, willingly and enthusiastically spend time with media.

As grandparents and as experts, both of us believe that the media has much to offer today's children; yet, there are major hazards in exploitative and increasingly dehumanising media content. Parents are right to seek guidance in deciding for themselves what's OK and not OK for children to be viewing; whether they should worry about the amount of time their children spend with TV and the many other forms of electronic media; what all this media might be doing to their minds; and how parents can effectively assist their children to negotiate the pervasive consumerism of media content.

Some of the things that concern us are that children's extraordinary media usage has turned kids into a massive global market: the interactivity of the new media makes children particularly vulnerable to aggressive marketers. There is also evidence that as today's children develop, using the internet and digital technology, their brains are being wired differently from earlier generations, and the way that they learn will reshape schools and teaching. There are well publicised fears for children's safety and wellbeing as they confidently inhabit virtual playgrounds. And while there is much for children to learn from these new electronic media and digital gadgets, parents still need to be vigilant and thoughtful about their children's media use, even when they doubt they really understand the media tools their children are using.

As noted in chapter 1, there has been a shift in the balance of power between children and their parents as the market has discovered the Net-savvy child audience and set about exploiting them. A combination of rising affluence, the relative importance of fewer children born to highly motivated parents, and the power of the new media to target younger and younger children, has transformed children into consumers rather than citizens. We believe that this distorts their healthy development, and diverts parents from their real task of helping children become active learners in control of their own destiny.

The 19th century electric telegraph was really the first internet; it caused a social and technological revolution. The world began to shrink as information and communication flowed and brought us closer together. As a parent, it's

comforting to realise that modern reactions to the internet – fear of information overload, of changes in social mores, and new forms of crime – precisely mirror the bemusement, fear, and misunderstanding inspired by the telegraph.

Radio and then television, which arrived in Australia in 1956, were central to 20th century family life. Research could easily describe the patterns of usage: we knew what people watched, but the role of the television within the family itself was not so easy to define. We still know very little about the communication styles of different families, and about the role of the media in family communication.

Some social observers believed that television was a negative influence on families; others believed that it helped keep families together. Many were unsure. Nevertheless, family life was organised around the set. We watched out of habit, out of interest, out of boredom, and for companionship. It provided an easy way to 'drop out'– to be a part of, but apart from – the family. Television became a resource available to use in the process of making family life work. It could be especially useful and important when life was rushed, money was short, and there were no friends or close family nearby. What was on television was often secondary to other considerations.

For several decades of television, the medium was the message. But that is no longer the case; media content is once again more important. In the near future, families will not be sitting around together watching television. Smart companies in the entertainment business are busy redefining their purpose from content distribution to the generation of interactive content with the ability to download programs for viewing on diverse platforms when convenient. This is the model the BBC is following, which our ABC would do well to emulate. Broadcasters should now be originating content for every possible medium if they are to survive.

Time spent with media is increasing

Although parents worry about the time their kids spend with media, a benign picture of family media use emerges from a report on *Media and Communications in Australian Families,* issued in December, 2007, by the Australian Communications and Authority (ACMA). This body was set up by

the Howard government to oversee federal media regulation. Despite some shortcomings of its research, which we will come to later, this study provides the first comprehensive picture of new media usage by Australian children, confirming what any parent of children today knows. Their kids are 'digital natives' who have never known life without integrated technologies. In contrast, parents are 'digital immigrants', many unsure how to manage their children's media-driven social networking, web-surfing, downloading, and gaming. But learn we must, for this is a social and technical revolution unlike any that has gone before.

Technology has changed childhood in ways that we could never have imagined and cannot yet predict. It is clear that children's media use is increasing, and that kids of younger and younger ages are being encouraged to play with electronic gadgets and to watch more television. ACMA reports that Australian family households are 'technology rich'. Most families have three or more televisions and three or more mobile phones. Nine in 10 families have an internet connection, and three quarters of those who are connected have broadband. The invention of the World Wide Web, a global network of computers that use Hypertext Markup Language (HTML), made the internet easy and attractive to browse, which is why internet use has grown so rapidly in the past decade or so. In 1995, less than 10 per cent of families had Net access; now less than 10 per cent of homes are without it. Families with incomes below $35,000 are not necessarily missing out; those on a limited budget are more likely to choose an internet connection than subscription television.

"Kids' total media usage has grown, and their immersion in media is deeper."

Youngsters between the ages of eight and 17 spend an average of 1.25 hours online every day, according to ACMA. The advertising industry guru Harold Mitchell quotes an even higher figure. His corporate research shows internet usage at two hours a day for people under 40, with the figure still growing. The same group also watch television for an average of just under two hours a day. This is about 10 minutes less viewing time than in 1995, but the difference is that kids are doing other things at the same time as watching TV – talking on a mobile, playing a game on their Nintendo DS, chatting on the computer, or listening to the radio or recorded music on CD and MP3 players. They

multi-task, a computing term that describes a machine's ability to run several programs at once, but has now entered the popular vocabulary to describe attending to several different media at the same time.

This increased media use should be seen in perspective. It's still the fact that the majority of kids aged five to 14 engage in school or club sports (65 per cent of boys and 58 per cent of girls). Seventeen per cent of all children nominate swimming as their favourite sporting activity, and almost half a million of them play soccer. The majority of kids are neither inactive nor lacking in leisure pursuits.

The point is that kids' total media usage has grown, and their immersion in media is deeper. Almost three hours a day is spent engaged in multiple media activities simultaneously – listening, reading, looking, interacting, communicating – bringing their total media usage to seven hours a day. This is a different childhood from any that has gone before, and this pervasive media use extends even to very young children.

The ABS reported that during the 12 months to April 2003, almost 1.7 million Australians aged five to 14 years accessed the internet. This included 90 per cent of 14-year-olds and 21 per cent of five-year-olds. More than 60 per cent who accessed the internet at home did so more than once a week; 14 per cent were online every day. The heavy internet users were mainly aged 12 to 14, but almost a quarter were aged nine to 11. Seven per cent of those online every day were aged between five and eight.

The World Wide Web can provide a diverse range of activities for kids. A child can connect with others who are not physically present, engage with them, chat, play games, and create content. They can download videos or recorded music from an unlimited resource. They can do their homework, and send messages or email. Unlike television, the Web is a powerful interactive tool for communicating with others, managing interpersonal relationships, building identity, creating and learning. Parents need to understand this new form of interaction better if they are to help their children use it wisely.

More than 40 per cent of children and young people in Australia now have some of their own material on the Web, and a third have a page on a social networking

site. This includes user-generated content websites that are collaborative and interactive such as YouTube and Flickr, and social-networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook. Around 70 per cent of girls aged 14 to 17 have a MySpace or similar profile, compared with 50 per cent of boys, who prefer video games. (If electronic games mystify you, see the break-out box at the end of the chapter for an explanation.)

Since it launched in June, 2004, Facebook claims to have attracted 59 million users. Every week, two million new users reportedly join up. At the present rate of growth more than 200 million active users will use the site by 2009. Facebook users upload their ID details, photographs, and lists of their favourite consumer objects. People share information with their friends about things they do on the Web. This information is sold to advertisers. In November, 2007, Facebook announced that 12 global brands had 'climbed on board'. They included Coca-Cola, Blockbuster Verizon, Sony pictures and Condé Nast. George, 12, says of Facebook: 'I don't see the point'. He'd much rather participate in online chat, but many older adolescents don't share that view.

While it remains the case that most children say they would prefer 'hanging out with their friends' than playing with media, much of the time spent with friends is actually spent extending the media experience. They discuss the entertaining or bizarre videos that they have found on YouTube, update each other on games, music, and game consoles, and compare their progress with online games they've found on sites such as BattleOn, Addicting Games, and Miniclip.

Many kids enjoy spoofing corny traditional TV programs such as *Neighbours*. Although they don't watch it they know all the characters and can act out scenes just from seeing the ads for the show. They make fun of ads and merchandise such as Barbie. Bernadette, 10, told us about a sleepover party she attended where her friends had fun reinventing a well-known pop song. Jumping up and down on the bed they sang:

> I'm a Barbie girl, in a Barbie world.
> My boobs are plastic, isn't that fantastic.

There were other less polite adaptations:

> I'm a Barbie girl, my tits will make you hurl.

Listening to her story, some older boys added:

> I'm a Barbie girl in a Barbie world.
> Put on a gas hole and blow up my ass hole.

Talking about what they are doing with media is an essential part of life experience for kids growing up today. When they go home after a sleepover or a day at school, it is often to engage with their friends on MSN Messenger and Yahoo, looking at and talking to each other via webcams, playing chess or solitaire online, and logging in to *RuneScape* – an online game with rules but without physical limits – to meet and trade game items such as virtual armour. Our grandson aged seven tells us he has 'moved on from Club Penguin', a website for young children, because his friends are now into *RuneScape.*

Parents generally support their children's engagement with media, the vast majority reporting that their child's television viewing, gaming, internet use, and mobile phone use are 'easy to manage'. Almost all parents see the internet as 'beneficial' to their children for the learning or educational opportunities it provides. These parents also report that watching television 'is beneficial for its educational value' and 'for keeping children in touch with the world around them'. Mobile phones give parents 'peace of mind' about their children's safety. Video games are also seen to have a role 'in developing the child's hand–eye coordination and in their entertainment value'. While parents expressed 'some concerns' about their children's media use, overall they appear to be 'reasonably comfortable' with their children's engagement with new media.

In terms of old media, ACMA reports that almost half the time children spend watching television is spent with adults, and almost all parents report spending some time discussing adult concepts on television with their children. Trust plays an important part in the way families negotiate the use of electronic media and communications.

A reader could come away from the ACMA report feeling all's pretty right in the world of media, that parents are being responsible, negotiating their children's use of media, and kids are leading balanced lives. But consequences flow from this increased pattern of media consumption for the child, for parents, and for society, and such research does not attempt to answer the very critical questions on which new media policy should be based.

What research can't tell us

For a start, the picture that such reports present of viewing patterns is conservative, as average figures conceal the reality for many people. The methods used by ACMA – telephone surveys, filling in diaries – rely on respondents telling the truth and reporting activities accurately. Social science research can provide accurate information on factual questions such as the number of televisions and mobiles in the home. But it is less likely to provide an accurate picture of parents' decision-making in the home, and the way they monitor their children's viewing: these are sensitive issues.

In the early days of television, surveys frequently reported that people said they watched the ABC, but the official television ratings did not reflect those claims. Patricia can recall keeping quiet in the school staffroom when the talk turned to television, and older teachers were tut-tutting about the rubbish on TV. How many people tell the truth when their doctors ask how many drinks they have each day, even when an accurate diagnosis may be at stake? And how many parents tell the truth when asked whether they supervise their children's television viewing and internet use?

Parents should be wary of the word 'research' and claims made on the basis of 'studies'. Research on media effects is a notoriously difficult and contentious field of study. After 50 years of research, and the expenditure of millions of dollars on thousands of studies, there are no unequivocal findings about the relationship between media violence and behaviour. Rather, methodological limitations and academic grandstanding have confused our understanding of the effects of television, with some psychological studies demonstrating there are effects on behaviour that sociological studies are unable to verify in the real world.

It is an impossible task to isolate the impact of media violence from other influences, and even more difficult to develop clear and sensible production guidelines: the context of violence is the important issue. Yet we are still required to make judgments about violence, sexual content, and other potentially troubling material that children might see, and we do so based on values, experience, and good sense.

Censoring offensive language is a case in point. Patricia first heard the word 'fuck' when she was about 15: not surprisingly late, perhaps, given it was the 1950s, but in an unexpected context (she overheard a conversation after choir practice at the Methodist Church). She thought it such a strange word, unlike anything she'd heard before, that she walked home saying it out loud, over and over again. She knew better than to repeat it within the family, although she wasn't entirely clear what it meant. Looking back, she laughs at this memory: today, the word is in such common parlance that many children encounter it at pre-school. If not, they don't escape it for much longer.

"It is an impossible task to isolate the impact of media violence from other influences."

Peter, 10, told us he had watched a very funny movie with his parents' permission, which was given 'because there were no sex scenes'. The movie, rated MA15+, had lots of swear words and drug abuse, and one of the reasons he found it so entertaining was that it used 'the F word' lots of times. The movie was *Tenacious D: In the Pick of Destiny,* one in a long line of media productions by the satirical rock duo Tenacious D (Jack Black and Kyle Gass). It included a melody by Mozart to which profane modern lyrics, not unlike rap, had been set:

> If you think it's time to fucking rock and fucking roll, out of control,
> Well then you know you've got to rock a block
> You fucking suck my fucking cock.
> 'Cos when you rule you fucking tool, all of the fools are out of jewels
> 'Cos if you think it's time, if you think it's time to, if you think it's time, if you think it's time to, if you think it is time to fucking roooock.

Peter thought this funny because a word that he would not normally use, and that he knew his parents would not allow him to repeat, was repeated over and over to classical music. He was incredulous at the juxtaposition, and instinctively understood that the ludicrous incongruity was intended as a joke. (And Mozart might have also appreciated the joke, since it is now well established that he wrote quite a number of scatalogical lyrics, which he set to his own music.)

As Danny Katz would say, 'Gratuitous gore and rampant sex are so 10 minutes ago for kids today.' It is often the case that parents want to prevent their children

from hearing bad language that they believe degrading, and yet they can't stop using it themselves. Even if they do, kids will hear it almost everywhere else – from other kids and certainly in the media. They understand very well the hypocrisy that underpins such censorship. Yet they are very capable of understanding when behaviour or speech is appropriate and when it is not.

We asked Peter to show us the funniest thing he had seen on YouTube. It was a music clip depicting a classic image of Jesus sitting, set against a glowing sunset sky. Jesus turns and bursts into a high-pitched bouncy rendition of the Gloria Gaynor standard, *I Will Survive:*

> First I was afraid
> I was petrified
> Kept thinking I could never live
> Without you by my side …

Suddenly 'Jesus' is striding down the middle of a busy city street with cars and pedestrians. He whips off his white robe and strides along in his loin cloth, still singing heartily and bouncing pedestrians out of the way:

> Go on now, go walk out the door
> just turn around now
> 'cause you're not welcome anymore ...
> I will survive …

and he steps straight in front of a big bus and is wiped out.

Again, incongruity and surprise are the devices on which this rather primitive comedy turns; young kids understand these elements. 'Do you want to hear a joke I heard at school?' Peter asked. 'What do Michael Jackson and Xbox have in common? They are both plastic and little boys like to play with them.' We would never have dared tell such a joke to an adult, let alone have known what it meant at the age of 10.

Yet open communication and discussion with children about their lives and their culture is essential in order to help them develop a moral basis on which to make sense of the world, and to assist them to form the values by which they will live as adults. Mum and dad will need to be very tough gatekeepers if

they think they can keep their children from being immersed in these cultural experiences. It is a world where ACMA's 30-year-old guidelines for 'C' classified children's television programs are no longer relevant.

While there has been much theorising, there is very little empirical research yet that examines the potentially harmful impact of internet content on children. The internet is a global network of computers whose users and content providers may be largely invisible to scrutiny and, given the ease with which offline identities can be hidden, it is near impossible to collect reliable data. It is such a new phenomenon even the issues that need to be studied are just emerging. By the time academic research is designed, financed, and published in reputable journals, the situation itself will have changed.

The television industry, with all the resources available at its disposal, is finding it difficult to predict future trends, much less resolve what to do about them. Advertisers, however, are hard at work refining their techniques to use the technology to focus on highly specialised audiences. As one commentator noted: 'Sign up to Facebook and you become a free walking, talking advert for Blockbuster or Coke, extolling the virtues of these brands to your friends. We are seeing the commodification of human relationships, the extraction of capitalistic value from friendships.'

Apart from the impact of advertising, there are other concerns. It is the psychologists at the coalface, working with extreme cases, who are suggesting there is no place for complacency regarding the internet. Michael Carr-Gregg, a psychologist and authority on teenage behaviour, believes the issue of young people online challenges almost every aspect of our society – psychological, legal, ethical, and educational – and the parents aren't the least bit ready for it. He argues we don't know who is raising our kids online.

Carr-Gregg's clinical experience leaves him in no doubt that there are lots of kindergarten age children and pre-teens wandering around Cyberia, and he sees cases that signal we should be concerned for children's welfare. The dangers are real; there are pedophiles waiting to ambush unsuspecting children under the cloak of avatars. But this does not mean kids should not go there; they need a sound education about the ways of and traps on the internet, just as they have to be taught how to cross the street, and who you can talk to on the way home.

There are rules to be learned, and codes of conduct to be established as we have done in the past for television and the cinema, but this time children must be welcomed as active partners in the process. They will locate many of the hazards before we do; for the first time adults do not have control over the environments kids are exploring with such curiosity and excitement. This is a new experience for children and for parents, as kids lead us on a road less travelled. And they will lead us responsibly if we give them an opportunity.

Fortunately, there is a body of work that we can draw on; it demonstrates clear associations and conclusions from earlier media studies that can be applied to new media. We can also get a clearer picture of where we are headed in Australia by looking at trends in America and Europe where cable, satellite, and digital television and a wider diversity of media have been available for longer. We need to apply our minds to these issues quickly, for the way things are now will not represent the landscape five years on.

Kids today seem to be doing more of everything (including sport) than they were ten years ago. This may reflect the intensive parenting children are receiving from their better-educated and informed parents. But averages conceal the real picture. Patricia's PhD research found film violence was less disturbing to children than violence on the news. But it was children of low self-esteem who watched the most television who were the most likely to be affected by viewing violence.

It has always been true that one-third of kids do two-thirds of the viewing. These heavy users are children whose lives are not in balance; they represent a large number of kids. Like the children found to be most upset by television violence, they lack friends, are not doing well at school, may live in a troubled household, are home alone, and turn to media for company. They are more likely to be influenced by messages from the media world than other children, and are more likely to have a distorted view of the world around them. There are lots of these kids now roaming cyberspace, an even more powerful medium than television because of its interactivity and ability to engage children individually.

Even if the hours of media usage revealed by ACMA's study are underestimated, as our experience would suggest, they are still higher than they have ever been. Kids have new skills and are exposed to many experiences that their parents

don't know about. These changes have come about over one generation as the media and advertisers have segmented the children's market and gone after kids with all the research artillery at their disposal.

The growth of gaming

Many Australians between the ages of 40 and 50 can probably remember Space Invaders. It had a big, clunky console with a flat top, rather like a school desk, and was memorable for its enjoyably ominous sound effects. For years, it cluttered up the corner of the local hamburger store or fish 'n' chips shop, providing harmless entertainment while you waited for your take-away.

Along with Pong, Space Invaders was one of the first video games invented, during the 1970s. Three decades on, it's not surprising that the average age of committed gamers is 28. But the youth and children's market is growing fast as game software becomes more user-friendly, and media corporations grasp the commercial potential.

We took our grandchildren to see Game On, an exhibition of the history and culture of video games at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) in Melbourne. As they walked into the large gallery and saw the plethora of gaming machines, the 10-year-old turned and wisecracked, 'In other words this is heaven.'

The early games were played on a dedicated video device, but now platforms range from personal computers to small handheld devices. Many mobile devices with user-friendly screens – mobile phones, PDAs, graphing calculators, GPS receivers, MP3 players, digital cameras and watches – can be used to play games offline or on. This increased accessibility has helped create a huge explosion in gaming. Many gamers have drifted away from television to spend time with interactive play.

As the production values of video games have improved over the years, both in visual appearance and depth of storytelling, their creators

have produced more and more life-like, complex games that push the boundaries of the traditional gaming genres. But verisimilitude is only one of the qualities of video games that make them an increasingly important communication, entertainment, and educational medium:

- A video game needs to be understood in terms of its rules, interface and the concept of play that it deploys.

- Video gaming has traditionally been a social experience. From its early beginnings video games have commonly been playable by more than a single player. With the advent of local area networking technologies and home broadband connections, the number of players involved in games can be 32 or higher, sometimes featuring integrated text and voice chat.

- Modern video games are a unique synthesis of 3-D art, computer-generated effects, game architecture, artificial intelligence, narrative-making, music, storytelling, and most importantly interactivity. This interactivity enables the player to explore environments that range from simulated reality to stylised artistic expressions – something no other form of entertainment can allow. Even when a game is highly scripted, it can still feel like a large amount of freedom is given to the person who is playing.

Lara Croft, Sonic the Hedgehog, and Mario have become informal teachers in problem-solving, lateral thinking and hand-eye coordination since the computer game revolution in the mid-1980s. But although they are more complex and challenging as learning tools than many parents think, they have been largely ignored as an educational resource. This is a subject we will return to later in this book.

Steven Johnson, in his book *Everything Bad is Good For You,* argues that video games demand far more from a player than traditional board games like Monopoly. To experience the game, the player must first determine

its objectives, as well as how to complete them. Then they must learn the game's controls, and how the player-machine interface works. As Malcolm Gladwell, writing about Johnson's book, noted:

> This is why many of us find modern video games baffling: we're not used to being in a situation where we have to figure out what to do. We think we only have to learn how to press the buttons faster. But these games withhold critical information from the player. Players have to explore and sort through hypotheses in order to make sense of the game's environment, which is why a modern video game can take 40 hours to complete. Far from being engines of instant gratification, as they are often described, video games are actually, Johnson writes, 'all about delayed gratification — sometimes so long delayed that you wonder if the gratification is ever going to show'.

If you've never played a computer game before, we suggest you try a very simple one like the games on Club Penguin. This is a Disney site for very young children. Players adopt and name a penguin animation; then using their computer mouse, they can skid around various games, throwing snowballs at other penguins, or buying hats and coats for their own bird. (Go to http://www.clubpenguin.com)

Video games for older players require the player to navigate a highly complex system with many variables. They require strong analytical ability, as well as flexibility and adaptability. The process of learning the boundaries, goals, and controls of a given game is often a highly demanding one that calls on many different areas of cognitive function. Indeed, most games require a great deal of patience and focus from the player. Some research goes so far as to suggest that video games may increase players' powers of attention.

Online multiplayer games provide gamers with the opportunity to compete in real time with other players from across the globe. Millions of players around the globe are attracted to gaming simply because it offers such unprecedented ability to interact with large numbers of people

engaged simultaneously in a structured environment where they are all involved in the same activity.

To the uninitiated, many video games appear mindless – you can mow down aliens and demons with machine guns and move from one level to another – but for many others they are completely absorbing; kids' wrists and fingers ache, but they play at every chance they get. 'Wii shoulder' is now a recognised medical condition.

Aficionados become seriously absorbed in their gaming, and those who don't understand – including parents – worry about the effects. There is frequent controversy and debate about the depiction of graphic violence, sexual themes, and profanity in games. These are the same issues that arise in discussion of all forms of entertainment and media, so the controversy is not unique to video games, but it does not make examination of their content less important. Australia regulates its game industry, and games are classified much as films are, with the view to providing some guidelines to content.

Jason, 10, loves to play games of all types on his PlayStation, Nintendo DS, or the Web. His mother monitors the games he plays. To him, the violence that saturates these games is of no consequence: 'Every game has violence in it. I can't think of a game without violence. No games without guns. Even in *The Simpsons Hit and Run,* the mission is to deliver stuff, but you can hit people on to the road and run them over. Smash though trees. Blow up your car. Even *Harry Potter* games are violent.' Phil, 6, enjoys playing *Dawn Over War.* He says, 'You kill people, but it's not really violent.'

As Tim Guest wrote, computer games 'offer experience without risk: that is their gift as well as their curse'. Nevertheless, Patricia's PhD research confirms the view that it is not television, films, or games that make young people violent, or prevent them from relating to others. Rather it is other problems, such as the absence of a stable home, or the lack of friends and discerning teachers who can contribute to a satisfying and enjoyable

life, teach constructive solutions to the problems children face, and give them hope for the future. When these ingredients are missing and young people become alienated, they can turn to violence against others or against themselves. It is the violence that children can relate to personally that disturbs them. The further violence is removed from the reality of their lives, as in fantasy narratives, the less affected and concerned they are. The nightly news is the most affecting program on television.

Gaming is a sub-culture which the market is doing its damnedest to turn into a culture. *Time* magazine reported that when the popular game *Halo 2* came out in 2004, it did US$125 million in sales within 24 hours. The game, designed for Xbox, concerns a genetically enhanced 'super-soldier' who is trying to save the world from destruction. It can be played both off- and online; between 2004 and 2007, online players racked up a billion person hours of play.

The industry still has some challenges if it wants to become more popular with girls and women. In many games, women are still represented as super-sexualised stereotypes, and military and generic male power fantasies still dominate.

Just as concerning for many parents are those games where the protagonist is a criminal or a psychopath on a killing/robbing/maiming spree. Recently Patricia got into conversation with a taxi driver, married but separated, who told her how it hurts him to see his eight-year-old-son playing MA15+ rated games that the boy's mother buys for him. He was particularly concerned that his son was playing *Grand Theft Auto,* a hugely popular game about underworld figures and gangland wars. What could he do, the cabbie asked Patricia. She had no useful answer.

CHAPTER 6

The rising commercial power of children

Over the past three decades, the personal transformations wrought by advertising have been startling. Women have always been treated as fair game by this exploitative industry, both as consumers and selling tools, but from the 1970s advertisers began to work on men as well. Relatively unsophisticated Australian males were persuaded to wear gold chains, highly scented aftershave lotions, and flowered business shirts. Working man's denim became a high fashion item, and when the market was saturated, the fashionistas began to tear holes in the fabric and fray the seams, turn clothing inside out, bleach it, crush it – do anything to create a new style and a new market.

Since then, retailers and media companies have discovered kids as consumers: in their quest to grow their bottom lines they are encouraging our children to grow up more quickly. This is a big problem. It's not so much the amount of time that children spend with media – although that is considerable – that worries us. It's their exploitation as little adults with purchasing power and consumer judgement that creates serious issues.

Changes in technology have accelerated the transition from childhood to adolescence through access to specialised media platforms, supported by commercials. Today's media introduce kids to an adult world that they aspire to join well before we would consider them ready. This is the most insidious effect on children of the media technology revolution.

Kids have become a super-sized market

For our girls, born in the 1960s, the demarcation line between childhood and adolescence was their entry into high school; after that, they were allowed more freedom, began to choose their clothes, and spent time with their friends outside school without adult supervision. There were a few magazines that catered to their interests, but little on television designed especially for their age group.

Even 20 years ago, children were considered too small a market to be profitable. Indeed, the lack of advertising focused on children was seen by some television networks as a reason why there should be no children's TV programs at all. But in the interests of children, agreement was reached between government, the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, and the public that television networks had an obligation to educate and develop children as well as entertain them, and that children's programming required regulation.

Australia led the world with a model for the development of quality children's television programming. Kids saw themselves on television in their own stories, with profound consequences for their confidence and understanding of what it meant to grow up in Australia. Advertising to them was within clearly defined limits. What was then viewed as the beginning of a process of reform is now seen as a golden age.

Patricia first saw a threat coming to what had been achieved through our own production of Australian stories, when she hosted the First World Summit on Television for Children in Melbourne in March 1995. This meeting drew together representatives from 72 countries, to debate what could be done about American media corporations' plans to swamp the world with subscription-based children's television channels and programs.

The first TV channel designed exclusively for the children's market was Nickelodeon. It operated advertisement-free for one year only; promoting its responsible approach to programming to attract parents, then took corporate underwriting for 10-second IDs that quickly became full commercial spots. A special kids' channel was an incentive offered to parents to subscribe to cable, so their kids could watch television at any time. Nickelodeon's culture was built on a principle of 'them versus us'. The programs were 'for kids only', no parents

wanted. Their style was frenetic and cacophonous, the content was zany, and vivid with stridently-coloured sets.

The programs were generic: Nickelodeon was selling a brand with a style, not looking for distinctive programs from particular regions of the world. This content was packaged in the US, then dressed up to give the appearance of local content by using local presenters to link the shows.

The Cartoon Network, Fox, Disney, and Discovery soon followed with kids' channels, each with their own branded style, and the competition between them for market share was intense. The marketing strategy behind them all was similar: to create a child's world, a place where they could be away from grown-ups. In the process, the channels studied the habits, opinions, and pastimes of young people as they had never been studied before. Weekend research retreats were set up for market researchers to observe children over several days of slumber party and play activities, to plumb their interests and responses.

> ***"Children's television would never be the same again."***

This development coincided with a steady rise in the spending power of children: it doubled between 1960 and 1980, then tripled in the '90s.
Family change helped the process: the increased number of working mothers with dual income households meant there was more spending money; the rising divorce rate which led to more single family households meant there was more responsibility in the hands of young children. Some were doing the grocery shopping, and companies began introducing special versions of their popular brands designed especially to target these new young shoppers.

In the 1990s, American food manufacturers launched a new generation of 'fun' food. Colour consultants were engaged, and garish colours were added to food products. These were accompanied by entertainment cross-promotion strategies, to create products that were doubly appealing to kids. Retailers created new divisions especially for children and teens, including Gap Kids, Kids Foot Locker, and Kids R Us. Kids became more and more effective in influencing their parents' decisions, even on big items like cars and houses. The market followed every move, and kids talked to them willingly online and in shopping centres.

A major turning point in the transformation of the entertainment business was the release in 1977 of *Star Wars,* and the simultaneous release of Star Wars merchandise. In terms of box office, *Star Wars* and its sequel, *The Empire Strikes Back*, returned US$870 million by 1983. But the merchandise was even more profitable, grossing US$2 billion. The film's director, George Lucas, was the brains behind this merchandising venture. He did it partly because he loved toys and games, but also as a pragmatic scheme to make money: 'I figured the merchandising along with the sequels would give me enough income over a period of time so that I could retire from professional filmmaking and go into my own kind of movies …'

Lucas' concept transformed the toy business and childhood play itself. By 2005, Lucas had raked in more than $US9 billion in sales of everything from lunch boxes to every imaginable Star Wars toy. Many of the new toys were based on characters which were not even human: they were monsters, androids, or alien life-forms. They came with pre-packaged characteristics defined by their role in a television show or movie; in many cases, they were completely foreign to parents who had not even seen the films.

Disney had originated the practice of licensing cartoon stars to toy companies as far back as 1929, when Walt Disney began marketing Mickey Mouse, but *Star Wars* was something new. Light bulbs went on in the heads of toy companies everywhere, and they began producing program-length commercials to launch mass market toy lines. *He-Man and Masters of the Universe* was the first such series produced. Its success led to *G.I. Joe: a Real American Hero, Care Bears,* and *Strawberry Shortcake*. By 1985, the top 10 toys had their own television shows. By 1987, about 60 per cent of all toys sold in the United States were based on licensed characters. The US regulator, the Federal Trade Commission, obliged the toy business by deregulating children's television and abolishing a prohibition against cartoon series linked to toys.

Such programs were cheap programming fodder for television stations as they were subsidised and often came with a share of the profits from merchandising. They were popular, so channels claimed to be serving the child audience. Children's television advocates protested, to no avail in the US, with some success in Australia. But children's television would never be the same again. Programs that producers claimed were made especially for children, brought to

life a toy or range of toys including Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Transformers, Mighty Morphin Power Rangers, Action Man, and Pokémon.

They were all animated films, purposely. Animation is the most popular form of children's television to market because it is easily dubbed, and the images, set in an invented world, can be culturally neutral. Production companies could see there was no end to the possibilities for marketing to kids through the most powerful medium available: television. Those in charge of the new children's television channels snapped them up.

Video games and film showed the same symbiosis. Sometimes, as in the case of *Lara Croft, Tomb Raider,* the popular game preceded the movie (which made its star Angelina Jolie a household name); sometimes the movie preceded the game. Today, video games are huge business. In 2007, they generated receipts of $US8.7 billion, almost as much as Hollywood's earnings of US$9.7 billion. Much of this profit comes from children.

Pre-schoolers become big business

It's difficult to credit this now, but for three decades, the Walt Disney Company – the studio that produced Mickey Mouse – stopped producing animated films. In the late 1980s, changes in digital technology, and the persistence of Roy Disney, Walt's younger brother, led the company back to animations for children. They were immediately profitable, in a big way. *The Little Mermaid* (1989) grossed US$110 million at the US box office and $222 million worldwide. The company moved straight on to produce *Beauty and the Beast,* which more than doubled *Mermaid*'s sales. Disney reported a record profit of US$1.4 billion in 1992, demonstrating the revenue-raising potential of licensing through publishing, music, videos, games, clothing – any children's product that could carry the logo. *The Lion King* exemplified the Disney formula for success, with fans spending US$3 billion on associated merchandise.

In 1995, Pixar challenged Disney with the very successful *Toy Story,* which it followed with *A Bug's Life, Monsters Inc, Finding Nemo, Cars,* and *The Incredibles.* Disney acquired its competitor in January, 2006, for US$7.4 billion. Dreamworks also entered the animation feature market, and was successful with the first of

the *Shrek* movies in 2000. Other successes included *Antz, Chicken Run, Shark Tale,* and *Bee Movie*. Producers worked their way through the animal kingdom, leaving no stone or zone unturned for popular new characters. The Australian director, George Miller, was wildly successful with penguins in his award-winning movie *Happy Feet*.

Public broadcasters observed this commercial bonanza and saw the opportunity to capitalise on commercial spin-offs from their own puppet and animation programs. This marked a significant shift in thinking about new program ideas. Public broadcasters began to exploit the public trust they had built up over the years of service to children. They claimed their new programs were 'educational'; their merchandise could be 'trusted' and understandably, parents felt they were doing the best for their children by buying videos and other paraphernalia touting brands promoted by the public broadcasters. But the engine driving program production was the merchandise. The profits to be made would help compensate for the funding cutbacks and increased competition for television audiences.

"... in 2005, the Wiggles became Australia's wealthiest entertainers."

Along came *Barney* on the American public broadcaster PBS, *Teletubbies* on the BBC, and *Bananas in Pyjamas* on the ABC. It was clever marketing to design branded clothing, lunch boxes, bed-linen and baby bottles, and to adorn kids with a brand to promote program loyalty: what better advertising could a producer and the numerous merchandise licencees get than that? Merchandise was promoted on air and sold in shops owned by the broadcasters, as well as elsewhere.

These programs were designed for the global market with minimal cultural value, easily dubbed for foreign audiences. They sold internationally and from then on, success in financing a children's program was largely based on character merchandising as a starting point. In programs like *Postman Pat, Bob the Builder, Thomas the Tank Engine, Fireman Sam, Spongebob Squarepants* and Channel 9's *Hi-5,* education was a veneer. The best interests of kids and the developmental focus of the program was subordinated to the exploitation of the characters; the heart of the program became its merchandise, not the quality of the idea.

A booming niche market was established for pre-schoolers, as parents embraced these programs and the videos they spawned to divert their children at the end of a long day or while they were getting ready for work. This was a global development, with some of the most successful products coming from Japan. Manga and animé, the traditional forms of Japanese animation, became huge business as Pokémon, Transformers, card games, toys, and other merchandise spread around the world. Enterprising producers scoured classic children's literature looking for characters to become television stars. But the stories developed were not even true to the literature they scavenged. Disney's *Cinderella* bears little relationship to the heroine from the Grimm's fairytale, whose modesty, kindness, and sense of responsibility exposed her stepsisters' cruelty and ambition. Any moral lesson from the Cinderella story has disappeared.

The pre-school market became so lucrative that in 2005 the Wiggles became Australia's wealthiest entertainers, earning more than other celebrities such as Nicole Kidman and AC/DC. The children's music group had a legitimate claim to the education tag, since it was formed by a bunch of pre-school teachers with a professional understanding of child development research and with experience teaching children. They devised a set of regular characters and set out on concert tours around Australia. Patricia took one of our grandchildren to a concert at Dallas Brooks Hall in Melbourne when he was two years old. He and the other small children in the hall loved the music, and responded actively.

For some years, the ABC refused to put the Wiggles on air, but as the interest and excitement that the group generated grew, even the ABC children's department saw they were missing out on an opportunity. The Wiggles forged a strong connection with the US when, despite 'stated risks', they travelled to America to perform after the 9/11 terrorist attack. New York embraced them, and in 2003 they performed 12 sold-out shows at Madison Square Garden. Their success has taken them down the inevitable commercial path that children's entertainers have followed in the last decade, and now the Wiggles have an extensive array of branded merchandise including books, toys, and clothes. They have franchised the concept to Taiwan and to Latin American markets with versions of Mandarin and Spanish-speaking Wiggles. By 2008, they had sold more than 17 million DVDs and four million CDs but the experience offered to young

viewers in the tennis stadium does not compare with that of our grandchild in the smaller venue.

Hi-5 has attempted to emulate their success, although it is more Spice Girls than Wiggles. It is classified as a pre-school program by ACMA, and its executive producer, Helena Harris, has claimed the education mantle for it:

'With our program each of our presenters demonstrates a different style of learning – linguistics, mathematics, spatial intelligence, musical intelligence, and physical intelligence. Noticing your child reacting to a certain presenter and style can show your child's learning styles, which is helpful information for parents.' Such claims treat parents like gullible fools.

Some commentators argue that the American program *Sesame Street* had been marketing to kids for years. But *Sesame Street* was built upon a developmental philosophy and solid research; its primary objective was to serve its audience. It aimed to reduce the social and educational disadvantage of ghetto children and was supported by the US State Department of Education. The marketing considerations were secondary; the Muppets served the program's central aims.

Sesame Street was the first program to be designed with the best of contemporary child development research and theory for guidance; it was the first program to be designed based on extensive formative research with children. It still maintains this curriculum emphasis, attempting to improve vocabulary levels when children start school, and to influence their long-range futures. However, where *Sesame Street* was once famously 'brought to you by the letter P and the number 6', now it's a pharmaceutical company, a sportswear manufacturer, a resort chain, and McDonald's, at least in the US. How times have changed.

In the early 1990s, *Lift-Off,* an early childhood program produced by the Australian Children's Television Foundation, was also a learning experiment without peer. Internationally, it was seen as a likely successor to *Sesame Street* by the head of BBC Children's Television and others. But in Australia, the ABC took it off air in order to support its own commercial programs for children. *Lift-Off* still represents the type of programming that should be produced for the early childhood audience; we will come back to this point.

The coming of tweens

Children of upper primary school age have also been singled out for special attention by the marketing companies. With more and more women entering the workforce, the negative term 'latchkey children' gained currency. The advertising industry, recognising the sensitivity of the term, invented the more appealing name 'tweens' – those children aged eight to 12 who were gaining economic clout as the independent children of single mums and working parents. These pre-pubescent kids act out like teenagers, but are still subject to close parental control. They cling to the security of home, yet also want their own adventures. Such ambivalence means great vulnerability.

The marketing specialist James McNeil has calculated that in the US alone, tweens have become an economic powerhouse, spending close to US$14 billion a year. Companies have used every research method available, from focus groups to telephone surveys, to understand this new market, stopping kids in shopping malls to talk to them and tap into their habits and interests. Advertising then blitzed children's media, co-opting their dreams and aspirations and encouraging kids to enter the adolescent world much earlier with the false props provided through merchandise.

Psychologists were employed by companies to define the characteristics of tweens, and new media products were created. Lifestyle magazines were tested which initiated young girls into the teenage world of fashion, sex, and pop stars. In the magazines, child models are photographed wearing trendy clothing and make-up, posing like fashion stars. They are airbrushed to shop-window perfection creating the illusion of flawless, precocious, premature adults to which these unsuspecting children aspire. These magazines promote a culture that encourages consumption and the desire to look and behave like adults. The magazine *Shop Til You Drop 4 Kids* doesn't beat about the bush in its blatant branding. Others such as *Barbie, Total Girl,* and *Disney Girl* have a significant following in Australia.

This magazine culture is not about the harmless dressing-up that all kids love. It is big business with ill-thought-out consequences, encouraging kids to grow up too fast, and contributing to future eating disorders and low self-esteem among

young girls. In 2007, a 12-year-old girl was chosen as the 'face' of Gold Coast Fashion Week.

Through the promotion of unreal lifestyles with unreal images, the media are cultivating an obsession with body image. We have a serious obesity epidemic, but in countering that we have to be very careful we are not promoting other serious eating problems. The Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne has recorded a surge in the number of children as young as 12 suffering anorexia. Young children report starving themselves because they want to be like the movie star ideal depicted on magazine covers in the supermarket, on TV screens, and on ubiquitous billboard advertising.

But it does not begin and end with thin-ness. Girls as young as 10 are targeted by the makers of hair removal products to wax and chemically remove hair from their prepubescent bodies. The Royal Australasian College of Surgeons has reported teenagers with problem acne are more likely to have suicidal thoughts. Thirty years after Australian women fought against the widespread use of images of women as sex objects, we are seeing a much younger generation targeted, and softened up for exploitation, both as consumers and sex victims.

Australian research has examined risk-taking activities among school children in 26 schools. The study found that smoking, drinking, engaging in sexual intercourse, and drug-taking begin earlier and continue with greater frequency. This is evidence of the shrinking of childhood, and its potentially dangerous consequences. Such a mismatch between biological and social maturation leads to mental and physical health problems for young people.

All children want to be older than they are: there is nothing new in that desire. Younger siblings spend their lives envying the capacities and interests of their older brothers and sisters, and all children look at the power adults wield over them and want to grow up faster. The difference now is that the desire to grow up is manipulated by the media, which promotes products to satisfy latent dreams and urges. Enticement into an artificial 'adult' world has consequences for children's health and wellbeing. *Time* magazine reported that in 2007, the number of breast augmentation surgeries performed on American teens was 7882, 55 per cent more than in 2006. This is shocking news, since it indicates that

a large number of adults are consenting to plastic surgery on their daughters' still-developing bodies.

Tweens are caught in a world going backwards and forwards between clothes and toys, curious about sexuality, absorbing the messages of love in television shows like *Dawson's Creek, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Blue Water High,* and teen movies like *High School Musical,* while experiencing anxieties and aspirations unique to their age group. Slumber parties used to be for teenagers, but now eight and nine-year-olds demand sleepovers; then parents find themselves dealing with children bursting into tears at midnight, wanting to go home to their own bed. The psychologist Michael Carr-Gregg claims that girls as young as 10 are writing to magazines reporting that they have lost their virginity and can't understand why 'he' doesn't return their calls. 'By the time girls turn 13 they look like they're ready for anything. But they're not.'

"By the time girls turn 13 they look like they're ready for anything, but they're not."

In 2007, the Australia Institute released a research paper, entitled 'Corporate Paedophilia: Sexualisation of Children in Australia'. It examined images of sexualised children in advertising and marketing material which the researchers argued put children at risk by encouraging them to initiate sexual behaviour at an early stage, and played a role in grooming children for sexual interaction with older teenagers or adults. David Jones, one of the companies whose advertising was discussed in the paper, responded by suing the Australia Institute and its director Clive Hamilton.

Since a corporation with more than 10 employees has no right to sue for defamation, David Jones' lawyers used a provision under section 52 of the Trade Practices Act – in a very different way from that in which the Parliament originally intended it to be used – alleging the Australia Institute had engaged in 'deceptive and misleading conduct against the department store'. Interestingly, David Jones' advertisements for children's clothing changed markedly after the discussion paper was released, as any observer following the case could notice. And in May, 2008, David Jones Ltd. discontinued proceedings.

The Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA) has certainly noticed the widespread community concern around the sexualisation of children and the

changed climate around the new government in Canberra. In April, 2008, they announced they were tightening their code of conduct on advertising to children in response to concerns about the portrayal of youngsters in advertisements. The changes include the prohibition of sexualising children in marketing, and the placement of ads aimed at kids in 'unsuitable' media. The AANA has expanded the definition of advertising to include 'marketing communications' to bring activities such as product websites and sampling activity under the code. The amended code also includes a ban on ads that promote 'pester power', a requirement that ads are distinguishable from editorial content, a tightening of the rule banning links to alcohol use, and a stipulation that ads can't imply that products targeted at children are affordable for all families.

Parent activists have seen this kind of scurrying before as the AANA becomes concerned about government regulatory intervention. They also argue that the changes are merely window-dressing, adding conditions that do not go to the type of material that parents are complaining about. Advertisers continue to ignore the spirit of the rules, and to exploit the loopholes in the definitions. Meanwhile, community anger at the growing commercialisation of media aimed at children, the effects on health flowing from the surfeit of junk food advertising in children's programming, and the sexualisation of young children, is growing.

In Melbourne, Julie Gale, a young mother of two, has single-handedly taken on the corporations over their advertising. She formed a group called *Kids free 2b Kids* about the sexualisation of kids in media and marketing. Recently, Gale wrote to a major chain store, Bras N Things, about the 'adult only' merchandise it had displayed in its stores at children's eye level. Some of the merchandise included: pole dancing kits, The Sex Game, a 'Kiss my pussy' g-string, 'Dick on a stick', an 'Erotic Kit', complete with a picture of a dildo, and Sexual Favour & Love cheques, which promised the recipient 'a blissful blowjob', 'a loving blowjob', 'a spanking session', or 'to be blindfolded and tied up'.

Via her group's website, Gale drummed up public interest in the Senate's inquiry into the sexualisation of children in the contemporary media environment, encouraging more than 400 submissions. Bras N Things also wrote to the inquiry, responding to Gale's complaints. The corporation said it was reviewing the way the products she had complained about were packaged, and that it had already

ordered that one item in the range be shrink-wrapped. We need more parent activists like Gale, with the tenacity and determination to take on the system.

But it's not just mothers and fathers who are worried; increasingly, the authorities are sounding the official alarm. In 2007, Britain's official media regulator, Ofcom, banned junk-food advertising in children's programs and announced an inquiry into the possible harmful effects of advertising on children and the commercialisation of childhood. ACMA is undertaking a similar review in Australia.

The consumer advocacy body Choice is calling for a total ban on junk food advertising on television between 6am and 9pm to reduce rising rates of obesity among children. The AANA has responded with the spurious argument that such a ban might actually increase consumption, because food companies would cut their prices to boost sales. The advertising industry has a lot to learn. It's time both governments and the public pulled them into line, and regulated the excesses.

Babies and toddlers: the newest market

It was not just pre-schoolers and tweens whose worlds would be redefined by the media. When the corporates saturated those markets they turned to babies. Infants showed an interest in the array of merchandise created for their older siblings, so they too became a lucrative market. In a few short years, the birth-to-three market has grown into a highly profitable global business.

Toddlers can discern character brands from the age of 18 months, and by 24 months can ask for products by name. Top name brand awareness for this age group includes Cheerios, Disney, Pop Tarts, McDonald's, Coke, and Barbie. Scientific research has been unable to demonstrate any proven educational benefit in shows directed at toddlers such as *Baby Genius, Teletubbies,* and *Barney,* but such findings have not affected the enthusiasm parents have demonstrated to shop for their infants, nor prevented marketers from trying to persuade mums that their products are good for babies.

Marketers applied their techniques to the mothers of toddlers, recruiting social scientists to devise products with 'educational' credibility. Suitable products

were endorsed by these paid 'experts', and parents bought them with enthusiasm, creating another specialised market distinct from the pre-school market. Once again the market and the parents were aligned. The now widely held notion that infants and toddlers can be made smarter through exposure to 'educational' products and programs has created a $3.2 billion infant and pre-school toy business.

What made parents queue up to buy these products is an interesting and complex issue. Widespread changes in work and family life characterised by single mums, working parents, and latchkey children, coincided with the emergence of a commercial television culture that deemed program-length commercials as acceptable programming for children. Early childhood became a field of academic study as women entered the universities and the workforce, and a plethora of books on how to bring up baby led to the professionalising of motherhood. Just to complicate things further, there was an emerging clash in the childhood experience and parenting styles of baby boomers and Gen X.

> ***"Babies do not demand to be sat in front of television, mothers must decide."***

Then child development experts who had studied the brain and its development concluded that a child's brain develops more rapidly and makes more significant connections in the first three years of life than it ever will again. In 1997, the Clinton White House staged a conference on early childhood development that impressed on both the US Congress and the public the importance of funding early child-care programs to assist early intellectual development. The extensive media coverage of this conference, including *Time* magazine's cover story and *Newsweek*'s entire issue, 'Your child from birth to three', sold widely all over the world. More parents became concerned about raising their babies 'the right way'.

There was no evidence reported at the conference that television could assist babies to learn but that fact escaped most parents and the media. Within a month, the Baby Einstein Company, founded by Julie Aigner-Clark, the mother of a toddler, launched an educational video series for babies. It struck a chord with busy mothers like those we have described in the first part of this book: well-educated, thoughtful women who were giving birth to fewer children, later

in their own lives, and who were determined to ensure their children had the best care and attention. *Baby Einstein* videotapes sold 40,000 within a year; its successor, *Baby Mozart,* sold 60,000 copies within eight months.

After just five years, Aigner-Clark sold the Baby Einstein Company to the Walt Disney Company for an estimated US$25 million. What started with a single video advertised by word of mouth and distributed to local groups became a major division at Disney, featuring 16 videos, 50 books, sets of flash cards for infants, puppets, mobiles, bouncy seats, shape sorters, stackers, teething rings, and other products emblazoned with the video's signature animal-puppet characters. Then Elmo stepped out from *Sesame Street* into *Elmo's World* and the options for toddlers grew.

The products were so effective that they changed the culture of early childhood in the US, where it was estimated that nearly 30 per cent of American homes with young children owned a *Baby Einstein* video. The Henry J Kaiser Family Foundation reported that more than half the parents surveyed believed that educational TV and baby videos, such as those produced by Baby Einstein, were very important to their babies' intellectual development. By 2006, Baby Einstein stopped billing its videos as 'educational', after a formal complaint to the Federal Trade Commission by the advocacy group Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood. The group objected to claims that the videos could 'give babies a leg up in learning'.

One activity that had united Gen X children was watching television, and the toddler market tapped into Gen X mums' nostalgia for the medium, in new shows like *Dora the Explorer.* The associated publicity material frequently claimed that children were learning spatial skills and bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, along with interpersonal intelligence. Nickelodeon stressed that they were cultivating children's multiple intelligences, but Howard Gardner, the author of the ground-breaking multiple intelligence theory, was sceptical of such arguments. Play House Disney represented its programs as based on 'a whole child curriculum', promoting emotional, social and cognitive development, ethical development and motor skills. To back up their claims they hired firms to conduct tests.

In the late '90s, the BBC invested millions of pounds into *Teletubbies,* a controversial program whose educational merits were debated around the

world. No recognised academic research ever demonstrated that *Teletubbies* was developmentally sound for babies or toddlers. The American Association of Pediatrics strongly opposed such programming designed for children younger than two which was also designed to market products. Alice Cahn, who purchased *Teletubbies* for PBS in America, countered, 'What's so sacrosanct about one-year-olds?'

Babies do not demand to be sat in front of television, mothers must decide. And they did. *Teletubbies'* merchandise sold, and mums turned the televisions on for their toddlers to watch these creatures babbling nonsense at them while their developing brains were striving to master language and communicate properly with those around them. Undeterred by such criticism, the producers joined with the BBC to create another show, *In the Night Garden.* The idea was that parents could play the program to their babies to settle them for sleep. The characters in this series, Tombliboos, also babble (which does save dubbing for foreign markets).

In 2007, *In the Night Garden* became the BBC's biggest cash cow, earning £10.8 million in five months – more money from spin-off toy sales in the UK than Disney's *High School Musical* phenomenon generated during the entire year. In February, 2008, the ABC announced it had purchased Australian rights to *In the Night Garden.* The BBC has since announced what it describes as 'a new breakthrough in multi-platform entertainment format' aimed at four to six-year-olds called *Kerwhisz.* The debate about the value of these programs for young children rages on.

Such programs trade on the fact that television is an integral and accepted part of every household today, but the evidence that they are produced to help children develop and learn is questionable. We don't yet know very much about what babies and toddlers glean from such television programs; we don't know what children understand, believe, or enact as a consequence of exposure to brand messages in this new marketing environment. But as parents' expenditure clearly demonstrates that they accept the technology, and believe it can help their children to learn, the market is responding. Parents need to attend to this debate, rather than shoving another 'safe' kid's video in the supermarket trolley. Furthermore, it's not just about kids' media products, either, but about other toys that are supposed to be benign.

As the market strives for bigger and bigger profits, and cuts corners in this cause, a number of products have been found to be hazardous to children. Contaminants in plastics in a range of toys sucked on by babies – chewable teething rings, rubber duckies, soft covered books, rattles, and dolls – have been banned in San Francisco. In June, 2007, 1.5 million Thomas the Tank Engine toys were recalled because they had allegedly been covered in paint with excessive levels of lead. Illegally imported asbestos-filled toys from China have been sold to Australian children through online site eBay. Last but not least, a popular craft toy was banned in Australia after the product's 'magic' beads were found to contain a chemical that the digestive tract metabolises into the toxic illegal date-rape drug GBH. These discoveries leave parents wondering just how safe products for children are. Do we simply allow the free-for-all to continue, or insist there is a need to monitor and regulate this market for the benefit of our kids?

CHAPTER 7

Little consumers, or connected kids?

In 2000, we attended a conference in Beijing. Back home again, we showed our two-year-old grandson our photographs of the city. 'There's McDonald's,' he said. A photo taken from a high elevation showed the city's system of *hutongs* or alleys. There, in the middle of the frame, were the Golden Arches. We hadn't even noticed them, but by the age of two, our grandson had the brand implanted in his brain.

The phenomenon of branding has tied together the whole kit and caboodle; one product can advertise the other and they can all benefit. Television, magazines, and fashion and food companies have produced phenomenally successful marketing campaigns by combining toys, clothing, and fast food to sell a lifestyle to a new market. McDonald's is the star performer: parents mark their children's years with parties at McDonald's and a Mac burger is seen as a special treat. 'Premiums' included with food or beverages, such as a toy with a McDonald's Happy Meal, are an integral element of the product on sale.

But nowhere is this partnership between food, fashion, and media for kids more apparent or well integrated than online. The rise in the commercial power of children has coincided with the dramatic growth in use of the Web; this electronic playground, where many parents, teachers, and activists fear to tread is a natural home to the young. We have barely begun to assess the scale of advertising to children there, much less work out what we can or should do about it.

When families began moving online in the early 1990s, tweens and teens were heavy and avid consumers of electronic media. Most had video tape recorders,

many had videogame systems, and in the US, 50 per cent had a TV in their own room, while 40 per cent had their own portable cassette or CD players. Parents buy these devices for children because, as well as pleasing the kids, they believe they make their own lives easier.

In 2006, one American study showed how kids' media use helps parents cope. The report revealed many children live in 'heavy media households' where TV is on throughout the day in several rooms. One in three children under the age of six has a set in their bedroom to free up other sets for adult viewing, and to keep the child occupied or help them fall asleep; half the time, 12 per cent went to bed with the TV on. This is really an implicit partnership between parents and the media companies, with parents unwittingly helping media companies to reach their kids.

If television is almost a constant in the lives of kids, then computers are also significant. By 1999, families with children represented one of the fastest-growing segments of the population using the internet. In Australia, about 90 per cent of families have internet access at home. As the early adopters of new online technology, children and teens once again became one of the most valuable segments of an exploding marketplace. As they actively used the new technology, the market adapted to keep up with them and to exploit their interests and needs.

Hundreds of eager digital content providers hurried online to take advantage, including the established big conglomerates such as Disney, Nickelodeon, Burger King, Hasbro, Kellogg, and Tonka. Again it was market researchers rather than academics that had a head start, developing methods for penetrating this sub-culture. Their methods included hosting slumber parties for teen girls, as they had done with subscription TV programs. Others communicated directly with children online.

These researchers found that interactivity fed effectively into children's natural desires for attachment to others and for social interaction. It also satisfied their curiosity and their instinctive drive to master new learning. When kids go online they quickly move into a kind of hypnotic flow state where they are fully immersed and highly focused in an activity with a high level of enjoyment and fulfilment – the perfect environment for advertisers. Children have always done

this when absorbed in fantasy play, but the Web provided a different challenge – a variety of experiences at once, testing them while keeping them engaged in relationships with friends and characters.

As a result of smaller families, fewer siblings, mothers working, less home time and peer play after school, the Web has provided kids with creative new ways to build relationships: they keep in touch, share feelings and thoughts online. Advertising has capitalised on this knowledge to create online product spokes-characters for kids to relate to like Ronald McDonald, The Gummi Bears and Snap, Crackle and Pop. The Australian online advertising market was worth $1 billion in 2006, and is expected to almost triple by 2011.

A Kaiser Family Foundation study that looked at online food advertising found that the internet has enabled creative new forms of marketing that draw attention to a brand in a playful way over an extended period of time. In 30-second television spots there are barriers between content and commerce. On the Web, ads are embedded seamlessly in branded entertainment environments, creating an intimacy between advertisements and content that has not previously existed. The study found 'advergaming' – online games in which a company's product or brand characters are featured – on 73 per cent of the websites it scrutinised. A majority of sites also encouraged 'viral marketing', whereby children are recruited as marketers to promote branded messages to their friends, for example by clicking on a button to send an email greeting or a free gift.

> ***"Children merge television and the internet by engaging with both at the same time."***

Promotions, free downloads, and media tie-ins proliferate. Online advertising's reach isn't as broad as that of television, but it's much deeper. Children who visit are exposed to a diverse and extensive array of brand-related information far beyond anything they would see in a 30-second TV ad. One example of a highly involving site is Mattel's *Barbie.com.* Positioned as a community for girls, it has a variety of online activities designed to appeal to girls such as sending e-post cards, receiving newsletters, entering contests, and voting for their favorite Barbie. Of course, there are lots of Barbie products on display.

Production companies experiment with cross-platform strategies to encourage young viewers to stay involved with programming over long periods of time. As tweens and teenagers engage in multiple activities without missing a beat, the fear that they will get bored with only traditional television programming to watch is acknowledged. Children merge television and the internet by engaging with both at the same time. The market interacts with kids as it experiments with tactics to control and shape the childhood experience, while many parents seem unaware of this dynamic and how eagerly their offspring are being pursued as an audience and as a market.

The internet of the 1990s served as a test bed for sophisticated advertising approaches – behavioural marketing – that treat the child consumer as an individual and not part of a mass demographic. Behavioural targeting tracks, analyses, and predicts online behaviour based on where you have gone before on the internet. An algorithm determines that you would be a good candidate for particular ads. Advertisers are willing to pay higher rates to reach such filtered audiences. The child market can now be broken down into age categories and gender differences.

While burgeoning online commercial enterprises have been studying the child and the internet, academic research and activists have continued to focus attention on television as the major area of concern, without realising the world of children's media has been changing rapidly under their noses but on the computer screen. They are now trying to catch up.

The internet's potential

During her last contract as director of the Australian Children's Television Foundation, Patricia, by then convinced of the powerful educational potential of new media, focused on two projects to demonstrate how she believed independent production for children could develop in partnership with the education system.

The first was Kahootz, a protected online kids club, a community where kids could be creative, show one another the stuff they had made, exchange ideas and chat. On an accompanying CD there were tools to help create whatever kids

could imagine, with sound, pictures, text, and animation. A member would design their own icon (and could have as many icons as they liked). They could make their own music, add it to pages of text, pictures, sounds, and animation which they linked on pages called Xpressions. They could publish their Xpressions into the Kahootz world, mail them to other kids' icons, and chat online about them. Kahootz provided comprehensive libraries of fonts, stamps, background scenes, accessories, clothes, face-parts, knick-knacks, and objects. It was the brainchild of Paul Nichola, the head of new media at the ACTF.

Produced under a partnership with Telstra and Hewlett Packard, Kahootz had infinite potential. Unlike other sites under development at the time it did not contain prescribed content and manufactured games; the content was generated by the kids themselves. It was intended to be a self-perpetuating site for kids, in that it would rely on the audience's imagination and creative input, a commodity in limitless supply with children when properly harnessed. It carried no advertising and had significant educational potential. Australia had an opportunity to lead the world in this field for children in the '90s when we were at the forefront of educational computer software development. Sadly, this did not happen. To put this time in context, two young American men had recently dropped out of the Stanford University to develop their idea that later brought about the Google search engine; YouTube was still almost a decade away.

Patricia also devised a television concept and produced – as a co-production between the ABC and the BBC – a 13-part series entitled *Noah & Saskia.* Through this series she aimed to demonstrate how to use television as an educational resource to further an understanding of the potential dangers facing young people through the internet while exploring the potential and the understanding of new digital technology, providing meaningful entertainment with a strong curriculum basis.

Noah & Saskia tells the story of an unlikely relationship between two adolescents living on opposite sides of the globe. They meet online and a friendship develops between them that becomes the most important relationship in their lives. The problem is that it's all based on lies. Noah is a geek, but online he is Max Hammer, a legend of internet surfers worldwide, and the hero of Noah's web-based comic, *The Very Real and Excellent Adventures of Max Hammer.* Max is everything Noah wants to be; smart, strong, sensitive, capable

and respectable. Saskia also has an online persona, an avatar called Indy, who is a self-assured, sexy, and talented musician, everything Saskia feels she isn't in real life. Saskia fears that if Max finds out who she really is – a rather prickly, shabby-looking teenager – the most fantastic friendship of her life will be over in an instant. Noah fears the same in reverse.

The series explores how these assumed identities impact on one another in their real lives, and how they each approach the growing need to come clean about who they really are: if their relationship really is so special surely they'll survive the truth. Placing our heroes in the contemporary connected world recognised that this generation is leading us to places we have never been. Noah draws his own online comic, Max Hammer, and interprets his life through the characters he devises. Saskia writes innovative music; so they form a partnership to produce a regular animated comic strip. They use the medium for making other media, and they are adept users.

"From a young person's perspective, media are neither amazing nor particularly special."

Throughout the series, the actors playing Noah and Saskia interact with the live actors who play Indy and Max Hammer in real-life settings, while animated avatar versions of Indy and Max separately interact with each other in a number of animated internet environments, including an online chat room called Web-Weave. Distinctive looks were carefully designed for each of the various live action and animated environments. Traditional animation and visual effects techniques such as CGI, motion capture, and split-screen gave a unique look to the scenes set in the online chat space.

By 2000, empirical research in the US had shown that the internet provides opportunities for adolescents to develop their sense of identity and social skills. Girls who go online several times a week report that they find it easier to talk to boys, to express their feelings, and to grow a sense of self online than in real interpersonal situations where their 'physical looks' often inhibit such self-expression. Noah and Saskia are part of that culture. The series became a curriculum resource for upper primary and junior secondary schools: the key learning areas were English, social education, media studies, and technology.

Together with a novel based on the series, accompanying teaching resources, and the television series, the ACTF developed a unique educational package for English text studies, multi-literacies, internet issues, media production, and information and communications technologies.

Lesson plans covered a comprehensive range of the technical, production, and social issues embedded in the series. Sometimes students were just becoming familiar with basic applications, or with the forms of online communication (gaming, chat, email, mailing lists, browsing, use of programs such as Word and PowerPoint, website authoring, and construction). At other times, they were involved in far more complex exercises, analysing the influence of context, audience, and purpose in determining the different types of communication people use. The series presented a wealth of possibilities for educators, and won an ATOM award from the Australian Teachers of Media. It went to number one in the top children's programs on the BBC and rated exceptionally well in Australia.

From a young person's perspective, interactive media are neither amazing nor particularly special; they are simply tools for negotiating a networked world. *Noah & Saskia* reflected that reality. Technology is moving so quickly that self-generated video – like the productions Noah and Saskia created with their animations and music – are now the very stuff of YouTube and other Web destinations. Our older grandchildren move around YouTube with ease, while the younger ones explore sites like Club Penguin and online games such as *RuneScape* and *Adventure Quest.* They chat and download, create their own videos, and upload.

There are opportunities for creative producers to move into the new media area of production, but so far we have seen few attempts. One may result from the announcement that management consultants Deloitte, the chip maker Intel, and the Australian Interactive Media Industry Association are to partner with the ABC in a 'world first initiative to find and promote Australian-born digital content'. Dubbed AIMIA, they have announced they 'will support radical or breakthrough innovations in the digital content world'. Deloitte will manage the process while Intel will provide technical support. This is what is needed; we wish them success.

Assessing the damage

As *Noah & Saskia* demonstrated, there is huge potential for education and positive social development with new media, but the damage being done by an unfettered marketplace preying on children is also clear. This market is growing as we write, and the big corporations are gobbling up smaller initiatives. Club Penguin was recently acquired by Disney for US$350 million, extending their dominance and their power over young children. Child consumerism has already contributed to a significant increase in levels of obesity among children, with 30 per cent now said to be overweight; it has also caused a juvenile diabetes epidemic. Then there are the claims of corporate pedophilia in children's fashion advertising through extreme marketing practices targeting young children. There is now a mountain of evidence that lifestyle products are damaging their health and wellbeing, accelerating their move into sexual experimentation and adult pursuits. Body image has become the biggest worry for young people, with 32 per cent of 11 to 24-year-olds ranking it as their biggest concern, above family conflict and coping with stress .

Not so long ago, advertising was carefully monitored and its effects debated, in a national discussion about television and children that went on for over 20 years. We won the battle but lost the war: kids are now bombarded by advertising, enveloped by its sounds and images from an early age, and for half their waking hours each day. It has become accepted that they are legitimate targets, exposed to the best brains in the selling business who dream up innovative ways to grab their attention through advertising and programming designed to sell products. The advertising business is leading the field of behavioural research as the industry seeks to stay up with the technological changes in entertainment media. In the process, childhood experience and kids' perception of the world has changed.

Too much of the time children commit to media is squandered, even though it is a powerful tool for informal education. Their media use is dominated by infotainment that is trivial, insidious, commercial, and debasing of human values. It does not have to be this way. We have a choice. We can abdicate responsibility and leave children to grow up immersed in a digital phantasmagoria that teaches them little of value, except to consume, or we can develop policies to treat media as a resource that can be harnessed for their educational and social development,

which will nourish them and enhance their wellbeing. An education revolution cannot ignore the opportunities that kids' enthusiasm and talent for new media offer outside the school. And parents who are better informed about the media can help work out the way that their children can positively engage with the opportunities it offers.

Parents have a responsibility to educate themselves about what is happening in relation to new media. It's not good enough to say, 'I don't know how that works', and shrug it off. Mums and dads may not want to send video messages or play games on their mobile phone, but they should at least gain a basic understanding of how to do so; they should also familiarise themselves with the websites their children constantly talk about. Many gaming applications and websites come with parental locks or controls; the parent of a young child who does not investigate these and come to grips with them is simply failing their young one. It's not that we advocate parental bans or censorship; more that children need to gain the skills to self-regulate. When our own girls were young, although we never restricted their choice of programs, we certainly talked to them about what they watched.

More than that, parents also need to be aware of the wider media environment, keeping up with controversies in the news, and changes in government policy. The minister for communications, Senator Stephen Conroy, is very determined to protect children. But the Rudd government's 2007 election promise to deliver a 'porn-free' internet may be a promise it simply cannot keep, though it is compelled to try. Internet service providers will be required to filter out content that is identified as prohibited by ACMA. The list will be comprehensive in an attempt to ensure children are protected from harmful and inappropriate online material. Such a clean-feed system is unlikely to be implemented before 2009.

Internet service providers reject the idea that they should be made responsible for the content that users download and – as most media companies have always done – they throw the onus back on parents. The Electronic Frontiers Association (EFA), a national non-profit organisation promoting the civil liberties of users and operators of online communication systems, dismissed Labor's plan as 'good politics' but bad policy. Any such system will incur significant costs and may affect internet speed, but this is a legitimate cost of doing business; as the

minister says, some successful European economies including Sweden have implemented such policies and claim success.

Complete success with any comprehensive filtering scheme is unlikely, however, and the implementation of such a system could promote a false sense of security on the part of parents and teachers. Child pornography is an emotional issue so prohibition is the first call made, but prohibitions do not usually work, especially where there is so much incentive to get around them and so much technical skill applied to the task. Unpalatable as it may be to accept, education initiatives will be the most effective means of dealing with this issue: the pace of technology is such that filtering technologies are unlikely to do a comprehensive job.

When Patricia attended a school open day a couple of years ago, she got into conversation with a group of boys while she was looking at their work. It didn't take long before they were telling her about their love of computers. One boy showed her a memory stick that sat inside his watch band, another had a memory stick in his pocket. They explained that they could download games from the memory stick to the school's computers to play them in the classroom. 'We'll show you.' And they did. They also explained how they could hack into the computer to get around the ban on Google the school had in place. 'Is your teacher aware of this?' Patricia asked. It turned out the teacher who was in the room while this was going on didn't know a thing. These boys were both 10-year-olds.

We need to work with children from an early age, and develop trust so that they learn to identify and deal with internet dangers appropriately. Banning is a poor option and what is forbidden will always be more appealing to kids. Talk to them. Answer their questions as they ask them. They will come back with more when they are ready and when their friends expose them to more of the realities of this world.

Evaluate children's media products

The research industry is tied in to funding systems and publication protocols, and is as slow to change as any bureaucracy. When new fields open up the research is often driven by personal interest: the research on children and child

development burgeoned as women moved into academe; likewise, women's studies were driven by feminists. Research on the social effects of technology and the internet has lagged far behind research on the technology itself, which has gone ahead in leaps and bounds because that is where the interest lies. Related literature focuses more on philosophical and theoretical writings about the free speech ethos of the internet, reflecting the values behind its birth.

The internet was born as an alternative information-sharing tool for academics, where there were no controls over content. The World Wide Web was launched in 1994 when postmodernism, which sees truth as socially constructed, was a powerful ethos among younger academics, intellectuals, and creative producers. The internet is still viewed through that lens by many researchers, who typically see media consumers as powerful individuals exercising their own choices.

"…increasingly content is itself becoming a medium; one for interaction and a means of connecting with others."

We are told repeatedly that media is a conduit; television, radio or websites simply deliver content in some form. But increasingly content is itself becoming a medium; one for interaction and a means of connecting with others. The young generation is the connected generation; media is their social currency. Their use of mobile phones and SMS, iPods, and the Web has driven new and unanticipated developments in communication. The digital world is crying out for some informed assessment of the multitude of digital products on the market that target kids. Academics should evaluate their effectiveness or the harm they may be doing.

Some work has recently begun in the United States to assess their educational potential, it comes out of the television context. The Joan Ganz Cooney Centre, housed at the Sesame Workshop in New York, was established late in 2007 to focus on the question: 'How do new media help children learn?' Founded on the belief that you can both educate and entertain children (and pointing to *Sesame Street* as the iconic example), the centre aims to find ways to leverage children's natural interest in popular entertainment-based digital media products to help children learn. As they put it, 'Pokémon cards are more

challenging than many fourth-grade textbooks but no one is taking this seriously.'

As befits an American enterprise, the centre is committed to the view that market trends should drive the development of educational products, identifying two areas – educational video games and educational toys that capitalise on the virtual world – as obvious candidates for immediate development. They recommend breaking the traditional model of one child alone in front of one screen, and suggest intergenerational games may provide a bridge enabling adults to play with children and in the process 'scaffold' and build on children's learning as Nintendo is now attempting to do.

The Centre recently released a paper analysing mass-market interactive products that claim to promote learning, identifying the major media used by the three-to-11 age group but making no judgments about the products. They were looking for market trends and gaps in the market. They included virtual worlds, gaming, video content on the Web, user-generated content and media convergence, where kids can access TV shows on cell-phones, radio on the internet, and movies on iPods.

The report identified many examples of virtual worlds for children; Patricia asked a small group of children to visit her and tell her what they thought of them.

Some popular children's sites: an informal evaluation

barbiegirls.com – a player can play girl games, make an avatar, customise their own room and adopt a pet. Every Barbie product is on view. Chat room for registered users.

be-bratz.com – you need to buy a Bratz doll, which comes with a USB that activates your account to enter the site. There is a chat room.

cartoondollemporium.com – a website where you dress up celebrities, a complex site that is not easy to navigate.

clubpenguin.com – a well designed site which is fun, where you can play games for money, talk to people, buy clothes and dress your penguin.

panwapa.com – the virtual characters are similar to the *Sesame Street* characters for very young children. You create your own avatar and house to play with.

stardoll.com – has numerous celebrities to dress up and make up and is packed with advertisements.

vmk.com – you make your own games, walk around and talk to people. OK but not great.

habbo.com – is a lot like vmk but better, it's OK, more focused on walking around than on games. You can customise your room.

myepets – you need to buy a plush dog that comes with the code to get on this site.

neopets.com – this is probably the best site of all because you get to have four neopets, nurture them, buy clothes for them, buy weapons for them, and have heaps of fun playing a wide range of games.

weeworld.com – games, chat, change avatar, change your room.

nicktropolis – played games, chatted, looked at advertisements and had no fun.

webkinz.com – have to buy plush pets.

These websites follow a pattern. There is no shortage of sites for kids to explore online, but the emphasis in most sites is on selling rather than education and development. The same is true with games for kids. The Nintendo Wii, with its motion-sensing wireless controller, is something of an exception since it encourages group play. *Halo 2,* mentioned above, can be played by up to 16 players at once, and this format could be adapted to educational games.

Even with the plethora of digital options available, playing with toys remains the second largest leisure activity for children aged two to 12. Youth electronics is one of the fastest growing toy categories, contributing US$1 billion to the US$20 billion toy industry in 2006. All of these electronic toys are focused on fun, although they claim, in order to attract parents to buy, that they provide educational benefits. As such they are referred to as Electronic Learning Aids (ELAs).

Parents have swarmed to this ELA market, believing they can help their child to become the next Albert Einstein. In addition to objects like Nitro Notebook, an electronic notebook for five to seven-year-olds, and SMART CYCLE, a stationary bike that is also a 'learning centre', they include computer games like Atari's *Dora the Explorer* adventure pack, and Scholastic's *I Spy.* But parents' understandable enthusiasm for ELAs is not always warranted. Such toys require careful, neutral evaluation. Once again, parents need to keep their eyes and ears open.

Mums and dads who are comfortable going online should also consider exploring the Web for non-commercial sites and games that are appropriate to their children. There is an indy sector which creates games without charge, accessible via the Web and mobile telephony. Many of the creators are idealistic, community-minded Net citizens who support the concept of an open-access Web, and write games with a thoughtful social agenda. One example of such a game (now concluded) was World Without Oil, described as a collaborative imagining of the first 32 weeks of a global oil crisis. It included lesson plans for teachers, and overviews for students, and can still be viewed at http://www.worldwithoutoil.org

Back to the future: regulate!

Regulation flies in the face of the approach that the media industry has been championing. They insist they can police themselves with self-regulatory codes but the evidence they can do this satisfactorily is hard to find. On the contrary we are in the midst of an advertising free-for-all where advertisers seem prepared to try anything they can get away with. Governments must intervene in the marketplace when it becomes clear corporations do not take their

responsibilities seriously enough to implement responsible policies. Parents need to become activists to change this toxic culture.

The cumbersome legal regulatory structure makes it difficult but not impossible for an individual parent to lodge complaints effectively against advertisers exploiting children. Advertising and marketing are self-regulated; the Advertising Standards Board investigates public complaints. If it finds that an ad breaches the Australian Association of National Advertisers' codes, it can request it be withdrawn. The AANA has two codes relevant to the sexualisation of children. One says ads should comply with Commonwealth law and should treat the matter with 'sensitivity to the relevant audience'. It also has a special code for advertising to children, defined as those under 14.

Commonwealth law concerning child pornography is covered by the Criminal Code Act (1995). It says that depictions of those under or appearing to be under 18 cannot include sexual acts or poses. When these rules were devised no one was contemplating that in order to sell clothing to tweens, child models would be photographed Lolita-style – with lollipop, hot pants, spread legs, exposed breast or skin-tight jeans, and lots of makeup, posing in a way that directs the eye to the crotch of a 12-year-old. Regulatory structures are needed to catch up with the raunchy advertising culture directed at young girls. Amendments to the AANA code in April, 2008, do not go far enough (see chapter 8).

The early history of children's television demonstrates change can be achieved. It is time to intervene again creatively, to determine appropriate regulations for new media in the 21st century. The Australian Communications and Media Authority has conducted a review of children's television standards, and as this book goes to press its final recommendations are still forthcoming. But in our view, judging by its terms of reference and the conduct of the review, it does not appear to encompass the radical rethink that we deem necessary.

Under the Children's Television Standards that have been in existence for more than 30 years 'a children's program is one which is made specifically for children or groups of children; is entertaining; is well produced using sufficient resources to ensure a high standard of script, cast, direction, editing, shooting, sound and other production elements; enhance the child's understanding and experience; and is appropriate for Australian children'. A number of very ordinary programs

and programs of dubious value have slipped through this quota net. Standards relevant to today's needs should be based on the following principles, and cover all electronic media:

> The media we produce on all media platforms aimed at children should place educational purpose before merchandising potential.
>
> All media aimed at children must be trustworthy, putting the interests of the child as citizen and outcomes worthy of the good society above the interests of profit.
>
> The new media context for children requires risk-taking, both on the part of producers who should test new boundaries and on the part of educators guiding the young. Media for children should not be sanitised, bland, middle of the road.
>
> And, crucially, exploration of ideas should centre on storytelling, the most powerful means by which every culture understands itself and represents itself to the world outside.

Although children are not sitting watching television as much and using new media more and more, television remains an important source of drama content. Children will always need the life-sustaining Australian stories that television is capable of telling them, and the drama quota serves that purpose but its objectives need revisiting. As well, pre-school programming needs a major review to stop the exploitation of kids and offer a better focus on their development.

A new quota is needed for the product kids generate themselves. Children and young adults are at the forefront of a new movement. They are the new communication nomads, and will be always on the move, using media and its tools adaptively to suit their own purposes and control their own virtual space. The internet is a magnificent way to distribute culture, serving this generation as the library did previous generations.

Reform of the current C requirements should therefore include:

- a new quota for productions by children with new and experimental formats encouraged;

- a quota for hybrid programs that link television, computers, mobiles, and the internet;

- all pre-school programming should be reassessed to ensure qualifying programs have a sound educational development basis and do not exploit children;

- the drama quota should be halved to a quota of 16 hours per network per year but these programs should be high quality made up of a diversity of programs, not one or two series. These should be well promoted as special events. They should be repeated at least three times in a three-year period. And they should be downloadable for viewing when and in the diverse forms children want to see them; and

- advertising that exploits children and is potentially harmful to their health should be banned by ACMA.

The provision of children's programs must remain an obligation on broadcasters and all media carriers, as they occupy so much of children's lives and interest. Australia's regulatory policies for the broadcasting industry once differentiated us, and enabled us to enhance understanding of our own identity and place in the world. It is essential to reinforce this once again, in order to build a cohesive nation.

Australia needs a children's media commissioner to advise government on developments in research and policy, and to liaise between government, industry, regulators, and audience groups. The role could include sitting on the boards of the ABC and ACMA. Without doubt, we need government policy for children that integrates their health, education and social development; someone needs to take a helicopter view. At present, policies and programs affecting children are scattered between federal, state, and local governments and divided piecemeal across different functional departments. A national strategy for children which stands any chance of making a difference must include the media.

Yet neither government advisors nor early childhood experts talk about television, advertising, or the internet when they speak of child education, health, and social policies. Nor do they apparently see the potential of quality

early childhood media programs that employ drama, music, and information to enrich the lives of children to play a positive role in the development of the New Child's brain power. We seem to have lost sight – yet again – of the positive potential of the media to help children learn to understand the world they live in, and to gain some control over it. How stories can do that – the ones other people create for us in books, film and video; the ones we create ourselves – is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 8

The importance of stories

Throughout human history, every child has enjoyed a good story. Once, tales were told orally, then came the printed word. Now films, television, games, and recorded music provide the stories that families and communities share: they entertain and enlighten us. The experience can give children an important start in life as they are introduced to the utterly private pleasure of a rich fantasy world. Stories are a resource to educate children, and if chosen with care – to teach, to enthral, and to inspire, not to sell character-based merchandise – they guide us in all we do.

The benefits that flow to children from good story-telling are many. Kids develop their interest in reading, and acquire skills in language and vocabulary. Their future at school and work is enhanced if they learn to read well. Moreover, stories are the glue that binds us together in a community; they give children a shared purpose, a road map for their lives, and teach them about their tribe, their culture, their place in the world. They stimulate the child's imagination, and open up the infinite opportunities and potential that life presents to young children. Forty-three per cent of Australian parents understand this, and read to their kids daily from their first year.

Not every book is equal, of course.

Publishing houses have not been immune from the same licensing bonanza as the television industry. They too capitalise on the latest media fad. Too many books are the products of branding, tied to television programs and character merchandising. Such books are generally cheaper, and parents think that kids

will be encouraged to read by seeing illustrations of their favourite character. But most of them are churned out by contract writers; by definition, they are not the product of an author's vivid imagination.

In the US recently, there has been an attempt to target consumers through product placement in children's books. Some companies pay to get their merchandise mentioned in books for tweens. Stories refer directly to Coca-Cola, McDonald's, CoverGirl lipstick and Converse; parents may not even be aware of this trend, but it shows how important it is to choose children's books with care.

Surprisingly often, books chosen to teach important reading skills in school are depressingly insubstantial. Focusing as they do on technicalities, and lacking in story and character, they devalue the experience of reading, and little meaning about life is gained. 'Betty can jump' and 'Spot can run' is hardly the stuff of life. When you consider the forces at work that counter enthusiasm for reading: the boring, technical, repetitive writing within some school texts; the censoring and sanitising of stories that are meaningful by well-meaning adults; the lack of enthusiasm for reading when parents can't be bothered; it's not surprising that many children don't want to read.

> ***"If you cannot read then you are handicapped for life."***

If you cannot read, then you are handicapped for life. Today in Australia 90 per cent of children in grade three can read at the national level, which means, sadly, that 10 per cent cannot. It was concern about children's literacy that led to the iconic *Cat in the Hat*'s creation more than 50 years ago. This story about a gangly cat in a striped stovepipe hat, which featured a host of crazy characters and a madcap plot told in galloping verse, was revolutionary. Theodore Seuss Geisel, aka Dr Seuss, accepted the challenge to write a book that first graders couldn't put down and succeeded using only 220 words. The wonderfully seductive rhythm and rhyme of the words, along with the imaginative illustrations, transformed the nature of children's books and overturned accepted teaching methods.

It was not only the use of language, but the nature of the story itself that challenged the status quo. The cat is a trickster, a reckless and cheeky subversive whose

purpose is the creation of chaos, and that's what makes the story so appealing to children. They love an element of danger and mischief, and the pandemonium that can result when left to their own devices or 'home alone' as the very famous film of that name demonstrated.

Both Paul Jennings, the popular author of stories used as a basis for the television series *Round the Twist,* and Emily Rodda, author of the *Deltora Quest* fantasy series, began writing their stories for reluctant readers, enticing them with plot-driven, incident-packed, funny stories that could be easily followed and absorbed. *Round the Twist* plots hinged on bird droppings, regurgitated spaghetti, magic underpants, ghosts in the dunny, goat's droppings, and a peeing competition – all subjects young children found funny. They were not gratuitous elements, but important ingredients in very clever plot-driven, imaginative stories.

Entertainment and fun provide the incentives to get children reading, and once mastered – like riding a bicycle – it is a skill for life. Children are empowered when they can read alone, and they take pride in demonstrating their skills as they read out loud to parents. Recent scientific evidence of the importance of stories in children's lives has come from Professor Kathy Silva, an early childhood expert based at Oxford University in the UK, who studied 3000 pre-school children in their home settings. She and her colleagues concluded that family rules (like being tidy, having meals together, and general discipline) make less difference to children's social development than reading stories with them.

Children who are read to and are encouraged to read regularly are more cooperative, less antisocial, and cognitively more advanced, because stories help them think about what it feels like inside another human being. In other words, fictional stories about family life can teach children emotional empathy, values, communication, and conflict management skills.

The importance of story-telling is not reason enough to accept any old book, film, or television program. Stories should be appropriate to their age group, but with children's interests at heart. For a story to hold a child's attention it must be authentic and not speak down to them: it must entertain, arouse curiosity, stimulate the imagination, and develop intellect. Good stories contain an emotional journey with which a reader can identify. They help clarify emotions,

reflect anxieties and hopes, recognising problems, while suggesting solutions to overcome hardships and worries.

They should be funny, in tune with children's culture, but they can also be sad or uplifting, exploring the full range of emotions. The best stories are moral tales about good and evil, right and wrong; portraying sociable and civilised living. These stories can enrich a child's life and teach children the truth about our culture; what we have done well and what we have failed to do. Stories should tell children about the world they live in and what they may expect of it.

Bruno Bettelheim, an eminent American psychologist who worked with troubled children, has documented the need all children have to understand, and learn how to cope with, the complex world we live in. Children need ideas to draw from to put their lives in order, cope with bullying, and sort out right from wrong. They need to understand the advantages of moral behaviour, drawing on concepts that are meaningful to them, not simply being told how to be good. So stories need to be based around the real world experience of children with its severe emotional pressures: inner rage, jealousy, sibling rivalry, fear, and frustration. Children need to learn about courage, that our friends can make us strong, that nothing works out neatly, that bullies don't give up completely, but that heroes can take action despite their fears.

Television stories for children

All the principles that we have outlined for reading also apply to stories for children through electronic media. Film and television should be as rich in its offerings as the best library of books. Yet this is not how it has turned out. As we have discussed, the advertising industry has turned children into niche markets, and changed the nature of story-telling. Stories are now required to be both commercial and bland; suitable to be linked with a range of products, but not so offensive that the mass market would turn away.

As a result, it's not only children who have been changed in the past 15 years. So too have the fundamental values that underscore the decisions we take and the way we live our lives – from a concern for the community we live in, to a concern for ourselves. It is the individual that now matters most. Story-telling in

media for the adult world has reflected this shift, and the values of a commercial era have seeped down to our children.

Television production is an expensive business, hence a debate about whether children deserve to be treated as a special audience, to be served as a matter of responsibility, or are simply to be exploited like everybody else, has gone on since the introduction of TV in 1956.

For more than 30 years, Patricia has been involved with others in a struggle to bring the resources of broadcast television to the service of child development and into the school system. First as a regulator of children's television programming, then as a producer, she was involved in the process of bringing brighter, better, more imaginative and educational children's programs to their audience.

In Australia, reform of children's programming was hard won. By the mid-1970s, afternoon television for kids comprised endless repeats of old American sit-coms. It was action by lobbyists, most of them parents, that led to demands for reform. Parents wanted quality Australian programming for their kids, and when an inquiry was established in 1976, there were 500 submissions to the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal and the federal government, demanding a better deal for kids. There should be no industry self-regulation they said; instead there would be a set of legally binding standards which required the commercial television networks to cater for Australian children. Regulations requiring the production of pre-school programs, programs for primary-age children, and an Australia drama quota were introduced. The Australian Children's Television Foundation (ACTF) was established to demonstrate what was meant by quality Australian children's television; Patricia became its founding director.

One of the difficulties in developing ideas for television series was an attitude of political correctness among critics who believed a good children's program should model 'good' children rather than the full range of human behaviour. They believed that goodness and virtue should be demonstrated without recourse to violent action, and programs should contain nothing that might frighten children. Since the yardstick then becomes the most timid child in the audience, such views lead to the editing and sanitising of stories to the point that no self-respecting child wants to watch them. This is what has happened to our traditional fairytales. Telling stories shaped by politically correct values

destroys their usefulness and their entertainment appeal (and, ironically, works for the commercial market which wants product that can be sold as widely as possible around the world). Cultural differences are suppressed. Animation in particular follows this pattern.

Distributors told Patricia that the ideas in *Round the Twist* would be too disgusting to be shown on screen. Yet when she managed to get it made, *Round the Twist* became a cult series worldwide. Writers Paul Jennings and Esben Storm pushed the boundaries and tapped deeply into the crazy world children inhabit in their minds, that they as two big kids understood: that was the secret to the program's success. The stories may have been earthy, but they were also inventive, brilliant, witty, crazy, and unconstrained by propriety, conformity, and convention. At its core, *Round the Twist* was a ubiquitous story about family: in this case, how a single parent and his three children managed their lives.

All the stories the ACTF produced dealt with contemporary issues relevant to children in Australia in the '80s and '90s. The government policy of regulation, subsidy, and support for the ACTF was a unique example of effective government media policy, which was noted around the world. The quality of the programs produced led to interest from the education sector. Individual teachers began to come on board, and ACTF programs were increasingly used in schools. These teachers recognised that the values and educational objectives of programs such as *Lift-Off* and *Round the Twist* were explicitly worked out before production and were not the values of cuteness, commercialisation, or aggression that they rejected as educators. These were not banal programs diverting children for little purpose, but programs that could be used effectively in the classroom curriculum. The evidence that we were producing a new form of children's television in Australia that had not been seen before came in the international awards that many of these programs garnered.

Nevertheless, the education system was very slow to accept television programming as a legitimate resource that could be used in the class room to help teach children to become better citizens; to develop their inter- and intra-personal intelligences, and their moral intelligence, and to give them a sense of meaning in their lives. But the directors of curriculum in all states finally came together to endorse the production of the early childhood series *Lift-Off*. The Curriculum Corporation put many thousands of dollars into the

development of resources to support this program. The best brains in Australia in early childhood development and in all fields working with children helped us develop the curriculum content around which the stories for the series were based.

Lift-Off was a revolutionary concept that exemplified the way in which the media and the education system could work together to create an outstanding resource for the education of children. In every respect the process of collaboration worked. The series was initially supported by the ABC but, with a change in administration, the public broadcasting partner ended the collaboration by taking the program off air. This was a scandal, given the amount of public money involved, the unique nature of the collaboration, and the on-air success of the program at the time it was broadcast. However, we did learn that national collaboration on a media and community project was achievable across state education systems, and could be done again.

"Lift-Off is exactly the type of enterprise ABC television should be involved in now."

Lift-Off is exactly the type of enterprise ABC television should be involved in now. They should create a modern program resource for the early childhood audience working in collaboration with educators and developing outreach programs to go along with the series. The dated *Play School* and the commercial *Bananas in Pyjamas* are simply that: it's time for the ABC to get serious about its responsibilities for children with programs of substance. Parents should speak up and demand more of their public broadcaster, as they did in the 1970s.

Children have always come to television willingly. If the education system strongly backs the cause of production of better and more children's programming and their use for education, the production industry will have to develop a much stronger culture of service to kids. Media dominate children's informal learning; media are not an enemy of literacy; they are a core resource for helping teach the transcendent narratives of our age through story.

In the past two decades, because the lobbyists who had achieved the change thought the job was done, too few voices have been raised to insist children

be catered for by television, and we have lost ground. For more than a decade with our drama programs we found our voice, and the world market seized upon Australian programs for their own schedules. But by the mid 1990s, the values that drove the establishment of Australian children's media policy were undermined. The international marketplace took advantage of our funding structures to finance overseas-originated programs; the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal succumbed to pressure and began to accept animation as drama quota; the miniseries genre was coopted by producers eager for their cash flow on the next series; the plots became formulaic and repetitive; and the ABC became commercial with its merchandised children's products.

In a move indicative of the economic values of the era and the rights of the individual above all else, the independent children's producers persuaded the Howard Government that their interests should take precedence over the needs of the audience. The government-supported ACTF was seen by these interests as an unfair competitor with private enterprise. Its role as an innovator and creative driver of new production was abandoned, and the ACTF became primarily a distributor for the independent industry. A few creditable series – notably *Mortified* – have been produced, but they follow established formats and the vitality of the Australian children's production industry has been lost as a result. The ACTF and the ABC are the publicly funded bodies that we should be able to look to for leadership in quality Australian children's programming, but they have both largely forsaken this responsibility in favour of formulaic and commercial productions.

As a result of this politicking there is less and less current production which tells the Australian stories we should be telling children in our schools; stories told in a powerful way; stories with truly moral, civil content that could overwhelm the pulp narratives of threat and rescue and the soapy plots that saturate most TV cartoons and serials.

While teachers generally have continued to be hostile to television, not noticing or discriminating between quality programs and pap, and not using the wonderful curriculum materials that have been created to reinforce the programs' human and moral messages, television has been left to the 'mad men' – the Madison Avenue hucksters and their global emissaries who have wreaked havoc on child consumers.

The case to justify regulation and subsidy of children's programming in Australia was always based around the need to serve the child audience, not producers. But the attitude that the system is there for the benefit of the producer is now so deeply embedded in the children's production and the broadcasting industry that it has contributed to the crisis of contemporary childhood that health professionals have identified, which we discussed in the previous chapter.

Producers and broadcasters should be required to reaffirm the ideals and principles we began with 30 years ago, and to get back to serving children. The regulatory system which worked successfully until the mid '90s is currently being reviewed by ACMA. It will require a radical overhaul – not a patch-up – to meet the needs of children today as they use a wide range of different media.

A new platform for stories

As ACMA's recent report demonstrates, we now have more television sets than viewers, and more mobile phones and portable video devices than televisions. Young people are absorbed, leading the technological revolution in ways no one predicted, yet the content we provide them is banal, exploitative, and potentially damaging to their wellbeing. Today's children have a vastly expanded range of interests and skills, with access to media that has so much potential for their benefit. As part of the education revolution, we need to devise a system that plugs into media, in their interest.

Broadcast television, with its declining audience share, ageing management, and 'push' technology, will not become the engine for renewal of the creative children's sector. We can see no examples of genuinely new approaches to children's television produced in Australia or shown on the ABC or anywhere else on television, and it is most unlikely we will see them again without regulatory intervention. The new media technologies present the way forward.

In the new media world, 90 per cent of Australian families have internet access and many kids prefer to engage with interactive technology, gaming, chat rooms, instant messaging, and the joys of online content they create themselves rather than simply watch television. They are consumed by their mobile phones, iPods

and the internet. For children in the middle years television is still important, but it is often background noise while they play on their Nintendo DS or with other electronic gadgets which they reach for in the morning and take to bed at night.

A revolution in media programming relevant to the needs and interests of Australian children should be an essential part of government's plans for the education of children. We need to rethink literacy and learning, and to create new television and online programs that demonstrably support children's social, emotional, intellectual, and physical wellbeing. They can still be fun and entertaining.

"Kids all around the world should become active producers of online content."

In our vision, kids all around the world should become active producers of online content – guided by responsible adults.

Building beyond the Kahootz model, Australia could once again lead the international production industry by example, with an innovative multi-platform service to deliver children's programs; a values-driven service whose mission to inspire learning is as great as its mission to entertain. Delivered via broadband, this service could empower children with opportunities to access, manipulate, create, and share multimedia content that meets their needs and reflects their interests. Children should become producers and partners of this service, not just its consumers.

Through a mixed economy model which blends public and private support, the service should protect children from purely commercial interests and the values that come with them. Rather than relying on old advertising models pushing product to children, ethical advertisers could be invited to be partners.

as story-telling remains an essential part of children's cultural life, there will still need to be a subsidised, contestable fund (as we already have in place) for Australian dramas and programs produced by professionals. Commercial broadcasters who've never accepted responsibility for children's programming could relinquish their programming role, but only if they are levied to support a well-financed development and production fund which

would fulfil their responsibilities to the child audience as holders of licences in public trust.

Any consideration of this new service, whatever it is and however it is funded, will need real input from the whole children's sector, from educationists and teachers, and from parents and the children themselves. The media industry will try to channel reform into a new way of protecting old interests to do old things. A new service should have a global reach and extend to partnerships in different countries. There are opportunities here to reach children; to teach; to inspire, to lead, and for them to participate. Kids should be encouraged to 'power up' for school and to show their teachers what they are learning instinctively outside the classroom, rather than hiding it, as the boys Patricia met at a school open day did. No education revolution can ultimately succeed unless it encompasses all the media that dominate children's lives in its plan.

In the UK, a coalition of producers, parents, artists, educators, and others concerned about screen-based media for children has formed an organisation called Save Kids' TV to lobby for the protection of children's programs, and for a new multi-platform destination for children. The British media regulator, Ofcom, is interested in that idea; under an Australian plan to reform children's media, the ABC should also be funded to produce programs for children relevant to the education revolution, not for a digital channel which inevitably will recycle programs.

In October, 2007, Ofcom published the most detailed analysis of British children's television ever undertaken. It found that while there is more children's programming than ever before, due to the explosion in digital channels, a decreasing proportion of programs were made in the UK. From fewer than 1000 hours per year in the 1960s, the total volume of children's programming grew to 113,000 hours in 2006. But only 17 per cent of these programs originated in the UK, and first-release British programming counted for only one per cent of total hours. More than 60 per cent of content was cartoons, and American material constituted 46 per cent.

We are happy to report, however, that the BBC is striking back. The broadcaster has decided to place their entire schedule online. They have chosen iPlayer, a free application offered via the BBC's website and Apple's iPhone. The BBC

iPlayer is a great piece of technology that enables users to watch certain BBC programs when and where they like, on the technology of their choice. You can watch programs as streamed media, or download them to your own computer for a fixed time period. This technology is not yet available outside the UK.

In a submission to ACMA, the Australian Children's Television Foundation proposed that it should be empowered to join with the ABC to create a specialised public broadcaster for children. This is an outmoded distribution model for children's media delivery today. The ABC would do well to pursue the iPlayer technology to enable children to watch programs as they wish. That way children can also avoid the sort of 'commercialisation by stealth' that we have witnessed on the ABC, with programming that encourages merchandising of children's products, excessive ABC Shop promotions, and an emphasis on television productions that lend themselves to overseas sales (for example, animations and stuffed-toy characters). Given the popularity among young people of ABC's radio podcasting service, and of TripleJ's vodcasts and its interactive music sites such as Unearthed, there is no doubt that iPlayer technology would be welcomed in Australia. From such a system of online distribution, there is great potential to view more of our own stories.

Children's digital stories

The Ofcom report also showed that parents overwhelmingly believe that children's programming should help children to learn and develop, should increase a child's awareness of different types of people and alternative viewpoints, and represent different cultures and opinions. That is our view as well, but the current system will not do this without significant reform.

An appropriate media service for today's children should include programming generated by the kids themselves. They have discovered the joys of creating their own simple digital stories and uploading them to YouTube. Young people have taken ownership of the media and see this technology very much as their own. They no longer simply want to see stories told for them, shown when broadcasters schedule them, at inconvenient times.

Young people want to see themselves, their real lives, reflected in the media. They want to participate and make their own media programs, in their own

ways, albeit for their own entertainment. But their interest in digital stories is also about finding meaning in their lives, seeking relationships and sharing with peers, and through this means they will be able to play their part in influencing political and social decision-making.

During the federal election in 2007, politicians turned their attention to YouTube for the first time, and young viewers – for their own amusement – doctored the faces of the politicians who appeared, reflecting their views. Thousands of Australians said 'Sorry' on their Facebook sites in apology to the stolen generation in February, 2008. This small virtual gesture made a powerful contribution to the national debate highlighting the growing clout of online political activism. From the internet's inception as an elite research and communication tool, it had a culture of sharing and free expression. Since the advent of the World Wide Web made the internet user-friendly and more accessible, social networking sites have provided a location that fosters renewed interest in the political sphere among young Australians.

With new technology there is an opportunity to create a digital sandpit or cultural commons for children to express themselves creatively, culturally and politically – to participate as citizens in the life of their country. With the structures we have in place for children's production, Australia could lead in a project to develop World Youth Digital Story-telling Exchange Productions. (WYDSTEP). This is an initiative under discussion through the World Summit movement, which organises international triennial discussions on issues in media for children. Such an exchange would create an archive that would give young people a voice in expressing their own perspectives, would develop their information skills, and use digital technology to promote cultural understanding and international youth partnerships.

One powerful way of engaging children in their education and in social issues is to help them tell their own stories. Digital technologies are not only widely accessible and highly interactive, they are becoming cheaper and easier to use than conventional film and television, and are the future basis of the global communication business. Children can and should be active producers and distributors in a global marketplace, a market of cultural exchange. They will need training, both technically and in structuring and constructing their stories, and this is where educators come in. The distribution platform for the exchange

of these resources would need to be built, or adapted from existing platforms, but this would be a valuable investment in the future of the New Child.

What sort of stories will they tell?

Kids are highly entertained by the incongruous, the unexpected, slap stick, people having bizarre accidents like the *Funniest Home Videos* shows depict. Word is passed around quickly when something amusing appears online. They are also captured by the latest fads, satire, and weird behaviour. They sometimes have no idea about the appropriateness of material they put online. Witness the group of boys at Werribee who assaulted a teenage girl, burned her hair and urinated on her. They were proud of their behaviour, sold copies of the video, and put it online for others to see. Later charged in court, they needed counselling as well as a lecture on the ethics of what they did.

"There has been a growing void in the values we teach kids."

We aren't surprised any more about anything we see on current affairs programs. News is all about the journalism of exception. You don't report that everything is fine in Pakistan today, you report the unusual, the sensational, the shocking, and if you've got the images as well, then anything goes. No wonder that kids are confused about acceptable behaviour and appropriate material for distribution. The media push the boundaries. Some will produce subject matter without restriction or restraint; kids are exposed to the amoral content we produce. Small 'l' liberals are confused about where we should draw the line in censoring such material, but while we debate matters of taste and freedom of expression, there has been a growing void in the values we teach kids.

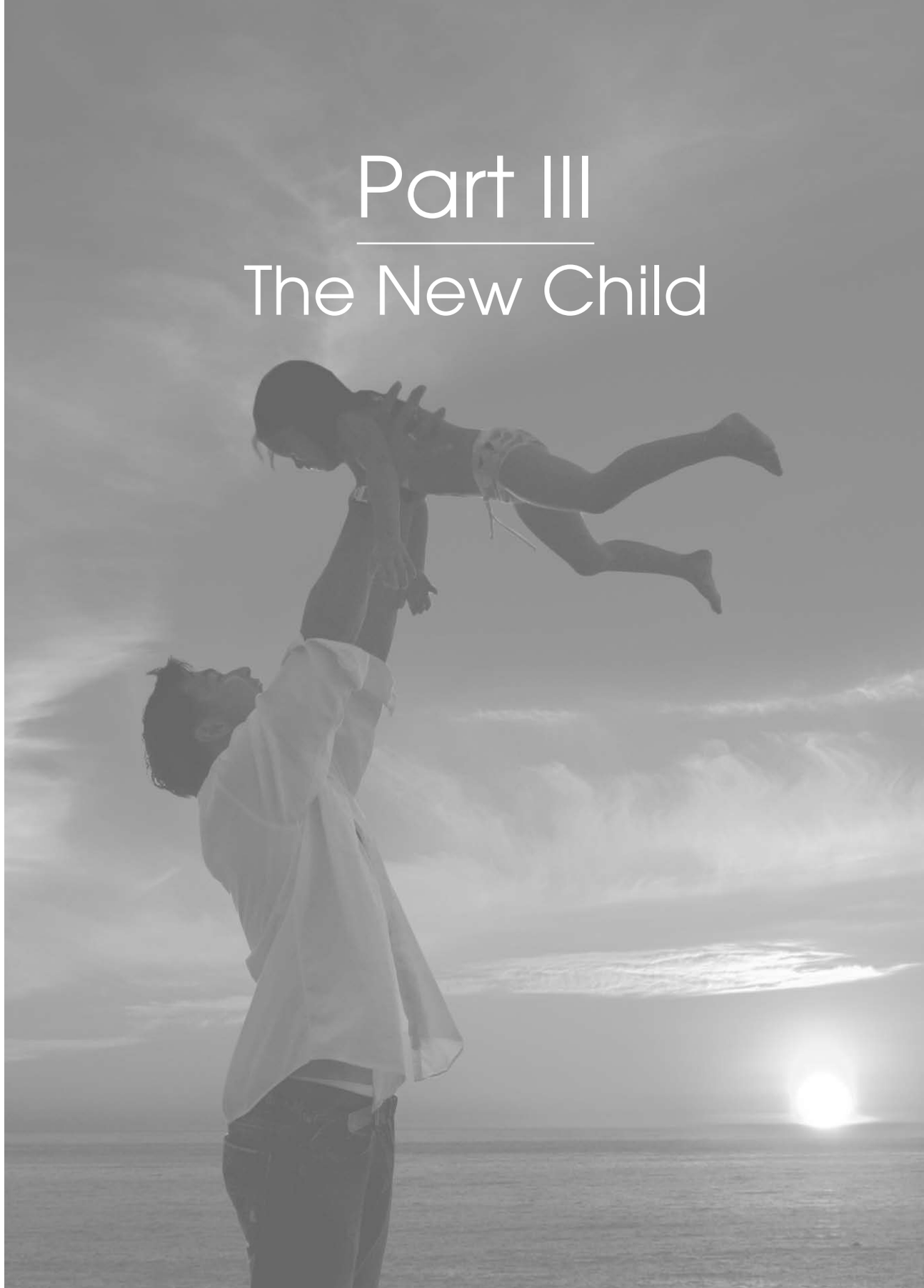
This is an important issue for schools – teaching ethics – which we discuss later in the book. Following the success of the Premier's Reading Challenge as an example, a Prime Minister's Digital Story-Telling Challenge would make excellent sense; kids across the country could develop their computing and story-telling skills to submit their stories to a digital platform shared by all Australian children.

A couple of youth film festivals already demonstrate the interest of young people in film-making, given a chance. Junior Tropfest, founded by actor John Polson and supported by the ACTF, is 'the world's largest short film festival for kids by kids', open to children 15 years and younger who can enter the competition individually or as a group. The aim is to encourage aspiring film-makers of all ages and backgrounds and introduce audiences to the next generation of Australian film-making talent. Crocfest is a successful educational festival for children in remote indigenous communities. Similarly, ABC Online, which is more experimental than ABC children's television, has developed a site, Rollermâché, where children can learn basic animation techniques and upload their short animated films for selected viewing.

Australian children lag behind kids of many other countries who already have better access to powerful broadband. They should catch up in the next five years if the federal government's plan – to build the broadband technology we require to compete in the digital age – comes to fruition. We need to be ready when that day arrives.

Part III

The New Child



CHAPTER 9

Every child is a brainy child

Every child deserves the best chance to develop her full potential. The measure of a true education revolution would be its success in reaching that goal. To that end, every parent and teacher needs to understand the new research about early brain development and the complex nature of intelligence, so that every effort can be made to develop the unique brainpower of our children. However, expectations of children have been ratcheted up unrealistically; some parents believe they can accelerate intelligence and 'sculpt' the brain if they actively teach babies from an early age, even while the infant is still in the womb. It doesn't work that way.

Most of the child's early brain development happens spontaneously as a result of playing with things and exploring their world, and we should not get too uptight about whether we're doing the right things as parents to make them clever. Kids can be smart at all sorts of different things. They're not 'smart' in a general sense, nor are most kids smart at everything, even though many parents would like to think so. While it is true that an individual child can be born with more brain capacity than others, modern brain research clarifies that it is the variety and strength of synaptic connections the child makes in early life that makes the difference.

We hear parents say: 'He's not too good at maths, but he's very good with his hands'; 'Joanne has a wonderful musical gift'; 'Brendan can learn any sport and excel at it'; 'Bill is a klutz, he'll fall over anything, but he reads all the time, and has a great vocabulary.' These comments illustrate that there are many ways to be 'smart' or 'brainy' in this world. They also reveal the common mistake of parents labelling their kids prematurely.

When we talk about intelligence, we usually refer to an ability to do something, not just the intellect that sits in the brain waiting to be measured. Yet that's what most intelligence tests do; they try to measure some innate capacity and give it a label – IQ, the Intelligence Quotient – which sorts people out into the brightest and dullest. IQ tests used to be treated as holy writ, and children were labelled by a number for their educational life. Above a norm of 100 IQ points, you were promising; below 80 you were considered truly 'dumb'. Such labels damage a child's chances of learning and close off opportunities. There was no understanding that the so-called IQ could change over time, with good teaching. Worse than that, most IQ tests have been built around words, numbers, and logical reasoning, the verbal and mathematical skills that at school seem most important, with no recognition of other forms of intelligence in which different children might excel.

"If children are not encouraged to use a skill, they'll lose it no matter where their natural talents lie."

We now know we have multiple 'intelligences' that are not just innate. Professor Howard Gardner believes they all need to be nurtured, and will flourish depending on the right opportunities and circumstances – a supportive family and community, a rich and stimulating environment, the interest and motivation to learn, and – above all – room to explore and play with the world around them. Gardner is a research psychologist at Boston University Medical Center, Professor of Education at Harvard University, and Adjunct Professor of Neurology at Boston University. He has gained an international reputation for his work on multiple intelligences, through books such as *The Quest for Mind, Frames of Mind,* and, most recently, *Five Minds for the Future.* His work challenges the view that IQ tests measure 'general intelligence', and gives support for non-verbal forms of intelligence such as those used by people who work in visual, aural, and kinaesthetic modes.

Gardner believes that children have powerful minds, strong views, and theories about the world of physical objects, of living things, of other human beings, of themselves. His breakthrough was to show that there is ample evidence that children enjoy thinking, using their minds, engaging in controversy, and being miniature theoreticians. They sense no division between thinking and feeling.

Thanks to his findings, parents and teachers can and should direct their attention to the full range of human intelligences.

As part of a broader understanding of the nature of intelligence, we also know that varied stimuli build a set of brain connections or patterns of responding that form clusters of abilities that we call intelligences – types of know-how, or skills we can draw on when needed. Each area of intelligence is characterised by an area of brain activity peculiar to it; an identifiable set of information-processing operations or mechanisms; a distinctive developmental history (that is, they do not develop in one set of fixed 'stages'). Each area has support from experimental psychological tasks and testing; and each is defined by its potential for encoding in a symbol system (such as language, painting and mathematics).

These several ways of knowing or ways of making sense of the world derive also from the varied stimulation of some parts of the brain, the presence or absence of stimuli triggering the child's capacity in a certain domain of intelligence, and the special emphases of a particular culture on skills that are valued or devalued. An individual may have the propensity to develop special gifts in certain areas, but without appropriate materials and the opportunities to use them, the 'trigger' to explore and develop those latent talents will be missing. We've all heard of the special skills of Eskimos and their ability to identify subtle differences in snow (they even have different words to symbolise these different qualities of snow). And of Australian Aborigines in their traditional habitat, with the ability to notice, name, and track unique land forms, animal prints, and water sources.

One might well ask what are today's culturally important skills, or forms of intelligence? Are they reading, writing, and mathematical reasoning? Administrative, or organisational skills? Interpersonal, political, communication skills – think of the prime minister's expertise in Mandarin. Visual acuity in reading a computer screen, manual-texting, thumbing a mobile phone or Game Boy, locating 'facts' on the internet? Physical, sporting skills? All of these perhaps, but in what forms and what combinations? If children are not encouraged to use a skill, they'll lose it no matter where their natural talents may lie. It's highly likely that the New Child's experience and facility with computers and other forms of digital technology are creating new brain connections, forging synapses and linkages that older adults have never had the opportunity to forge. So the way they see the world, and the skills they have to deal with it, to operate in and on

the world around them, may be markedly different from anything we have seen before.

In terms of applying new media to educational opportunities, Gardner believes that the plasticity of the young mind permits 'significant improvements' for those less talented, as well as an 'acceleration in pace for those who thrive'. That is, the brain is so malleable that kids with not much 'natural' talent in a particular area such as music or sports can develop such skills, while those who are truly 'gifted' can be moved along more quickly, given the right stimuli.

Developing many intelligences

It is in the early years that the introduction to new skills meets with least resistance, so parents and schools should aim at stimulating and developing multiple forms of intelligence (while not expecting every child to be a genius at music or sport or maths), so that they can identify special gifts as well as enrich all areas of capacity and control over life that every child has the potential to develop. We can describe these multiple intelligences as being:

1. word smart (linguistic know-how);
2. number smart and reasoning smart (mathematical and logical know-how);
3. picture smart (visual, spatial know-how);
4. body smart (bodily/kinaesthetic/movement know-how);
5. music smart (musical/rhythmic know-how);
6. self smart (knowing your own feelings and being able to control them);
7. people smart (knowing how to understand, empathise and negotiate with others); and
8. nature smart (knowing how nature works – the little naturalist).

As well, children require other abilities. They need to be:

9. street smart;
10. food smart;
11. health smart;
12. media smart.

These last four are not like Gardner's areas of intelligence, but we identify them as areas of learning that help children cope with the demands of life around them.

Think of intelligences as abilities to act in and on the world capably, not as a set of nerve cells or synaptic connections floating somewhere in the brain. Brain connections develop from doing things, repeating things, practising, reinforcing the links in applied ways. Hearing words repeated, hearing the pattern and structure of a language through the conversations and instructions of others, having mistakes corrected and being encouraged to build more complex language skills will strengthen what we call literacy. A child who is kept confined to a cot or chair (the worst historical example is swaddling, where the child was wrapped tightly in bandages so it could not move at all) is unlikely to make the synaptic connections for a variety of physical skills. If a dad or mum never plays football or cricket with a child, potential ball skills will not be used or reinforced, and a child will lose an area of competence. The odds are that the young Mozart had a musical genius that would not have been totally suppressed, but the fact that he was born into a musical family, heard music from birth, and was encouraged to play musical instruments from an early age, very likely explains why his innate musical talents became manifest: the synaptic connections were extended and strengthened.

The usual subject matter of school tests – words, numbers, and logical thought – cover an essential range of skills. Of course children need to learn how to listen and read with understanding, how to assess the logic and value of what other people put to them; they must have basic number and calculation skills if they are to manage a budget, group objects, and make inferences from their many observations. But equally, they need emotional intelligence; they have to learn to recognise their own feelings and the feelings of others, to have empathy when someone is upset or sad, to deal with emotions and have self-control that enables them to keep calm, negotiate conflicts in the playground, make friends, be part of a social group. Emotional intelligence is fundamental to participate as a member of the human race. Without social skills, we cannot interact with others, be a team member or play a meaningful part in the wider community.

And imagine what it would be like if our brains did not develop what is called spatial intelligence or bodily kinaesthetic intelligence. If you can't picture the

shape of a room and where things are in it, or don't see that the tree you want to climb has flimsy branches, accidents will happen. If you want to play ball but have not developed muscular coordination, gross and fine motor skills and a sense of distance between you and the goal post, you're not likely to get picked for the team. And if you have no ear for different sounds, no musical understanding of rhythm, volume, pitch, or tune you will miss out on one of the most communal and emotionally uplifting of experiences, singing songs, making music with others, marching in a band.

All these intelligences are inter-linked

All the forms of intelligence that Howard Gardner identified are interdependent in some way. And though infants may show signs of 'raw intelligence' (say in language or music) they become quickly wrapped in the meanings and emotional inputs of their particular culture. Intelligence is culture-dependent – a child's special talents have to become intermeshed with the agenda of the society they live in – or they will not flourish.

The child's exposure to a rich or restricted world of physical objects, of language, a broad or narrow world of people, relationships, and cultural experiences, will affect each potential area of intelligence. Bodily-kinaesthetic control and language skills will affect a child's sense of self. Narrowing their activities along gender lines limits their exposure to art, music, maths, or dance as alternative ways of expressing emotions, and will feed back into their capacity to think about the world and their place in it.

We both grew up in country towns, open to exploration of the natural environment, but also exposed to sports and music, and with parents who encouraged us to learn. Don had no father to play footy with, but he had an uncle who loved athletics, and helped him become a school competition athlete. Patricia learned to swim in the dangerous Murray River, and to play tennis and hockey through school sports. We both had teachers who inspired us to enjoy literature, and pushed us to think clearly. We participated in school debating, and both played violin in local orchestras. We were thus able to develop multiple intelligences (insofar as we were capable) without anyone knowing the theory. That's what every child of today deserves.

Each type of intelligence is an ability to interpret, understand, and control life's experiences. Each one involves a set of symbols by which meaning is attached to behaviour. Every culture values some skills and capacities at the expense of others, but if too great an imbalance is struck, development is distorted, and much human potential remains untapped. Not everyone will be able to, or want to, become an expert musician or sportsman (the odds are higher if your parents have those skills and encourage you to specialise, like tennis player Leyton Hewitt), but every child has some capacity to develop all these abilities and should be given a chance to do so.

It's not a matter of formal teaching or curriculum plans for every type of intelligence, not a matter of pushing every child to learn everything. In fact, kids learn naturally, just by playing around with things, exploring things to touch, bang, and throw out of the cot, ripping up newspapers, or making a cubby house out of cushions and boxes. Play, curiosity, and gradual exploration, are vital tools, and parents should see them as the building blocks of intelligence, not as a waste of time.

> ***"… every child has some capacity to develop all these abilities and should be given a chance to do so."***

Crucial too for learning and growing is the process of being exposed to others in their world, and seeing how they respond. Mothers' babbling gives them a basis for language; crying loudly and reaching for toys dangling from a cot starts the process of body awareness and interacting with others. If no one responds, the message is that you, yourself, don't matter much; if they come and soothe you then you have good feelings about yourself and about other people. In today's smaller families, the range and reactions of others is more limited, but stories can help; there's a lot to be learned from stories about other people. Reading stories is not just good for language; it's the essence of social understanding.

The new research on brain development can inform the way we raise children. But we need to be careful how we apply it to our parenting and teaching. Developing the child's brain and its many potential forms of intelligence is not an end in itself; our ideal goals should be practical, applied know-how and the capacity to live a fulfilling life as an ethical citizen in a rapidly changing world.

Early brain development

The general point about brain development is that one thing builds on another; skill begets skill, and early skills make later skill acquisition easier. We now know that a child's brain cells make connections at an astonishing rate, and the strength of those connections depends on what they are exposed to, how frequently they are used and reinforced, and how others respond to and guide their efforts to understand.

By the 17th week of pregnancy, the foetus already has one billion brain cells (neurons), more than the adult brain, and the cells proliferate at a rate of 50,000 per second. The brain 'prunes' itself as cells connect with one another through synapses, the links between cells that influence everything, from the ability to recognise sounds and letters to the ability to form relationships with other people. Losing brain cells is natural, not a problem, it's the level of complexity and interconnectivity that count. In fact, new research from the Brain Mind Institute in France suggests that every strong new experience accelerates the brain rewiring process, and that new links are made all the time, even in later life.

If a young child repeats sounds or movements, or connects a name like 'Mum' to the face looking at him over and over again, the synaptic connections get stronger; if there is little stimulation or repetition, they weaken and fade away. A child whose eyes are kept covered or are impaired in the first year of life has little chance of ever seeing. In other words, only those connections and pathways that are frequently used are retained. So the child's early experiences, their predictability and repetition are important. Touch, sounds, smells, sights, colours, movements all build new connections if introduced in a warm, consistent manner. Lack of stimuli, lack of loving attention, neglect and abuse, shut off the growth of brain connections as the child concentrates fearfully on merely surviving. Their brains seem stuck on high alert.

As an example of the 'use it or lose it' principle, think of language: from birth, the child is surrounded by the sounds of parents and others speaking a particular language. By the age of three months, the brain has the potential to distinguish between several hundred spoken words. Over the next few months the brain organises itself to recognise only the sounds it hears, but those it discards are

like the 'trash' on your computer – still able to be retrieved if needed. That is why young children can easily learn foreign languages, or become bilingual readily, accent-free. After age 10, this plasticity is lost, so although you can still learn a foreign language it takes a lot more effort, especially to get the accent right.

The first four years – from conception to about age three – are the most critical period of human development. The brain is at its most 'absorbent' and every child can learn to walk, to talk, and to work out how to fit in to the family and the wider society if it is given experiences that help master those important skills. In those early years the brain is bombarded with experiences when it is at its most flexible.

The stress hormone cortisol is known to affect the heart rate, the digestive system, and the ability to think. In particular fear, which arises in that primitive part of the brain called the amygdala, produces a chemical called cortisol, and overproduction of cortisol (as in a child who is abused, neglected, traumatised by events such as war or natural disasters) can lead to impaired learning, depression, memory loss, malnutrition, a poor immune system, even later alcohol and drug addiction. Underproduction of cortisol in the child's brain can also impair the auto-immune system, cause chronic fatigue syndrome, allergies, asthma, and rheumatoid arthritis. Animals born in zoos have half the brainpower of animals raised in the wild.

The child's whole environment is significant

Our understanding of brain development means we need to think not just of the mother, or even the family a child is born into, but the whole environment, the quality of the neighbourhood, and the range of community services that might support the child's development. It's too easy to blame the parents for neglect, when circumstances influenced by the wider society could be at fault in producing a 'toxic community' and damaging children's life chances. Think of the problems encountered in some Aboriginal communities, in refugee camps, or poverty-stricken slums, and you get the picture.

We depend on the brain's connections to interpret what we see, hear, smell, touch, and taste, and to form social perceptions of others. Cochlear defects at

birth impair hearing development. Monkeys reared by their peers instead of their mothers suffer slower development, probably because their peers are more competitive and less focused on nurturing. Mother rats stimulate the brain cells of baby rats to grow by licking. The human child benefits from consistent interaction with its mother; premature babies often miss out on these early forms of stimulation. And if the infant is not stimulated, not exposed fully to the complex world around, too much of that circuitry becomes inactive, making it harder to process new ideas and make new connections.

But early childhood is not the only critical period for brain development. Nor is it true that early stimulation somehow magically makes the child immune from later intellectual and social problems. Pathways to school failure, delinquency, drug-taking can start later, and later interventions can also be quite effective. While modifications in the brain in response to maternal care early after birth do seem to be critical (the effects are stable and persist into adulthood), the child's brain is infinitely plastic and there are other critical and sensitive periods for brain development:

- in utero before birth (alcohol and drug foetal syndrome effects, for example);
- during infancy;
- in young children; and
- in early puberty as hormonal changes kick in.

So you do not need to feel all your effort has to go into those early years: it's never too late to learn, and it's rarely too late to change.

The new research on brain development and the profile given to it by the Clinton presidency in the late 1990s has had mixed results. At one level it alerted economists to the value of investing public funds in the early years; at another it made many parents worry about how much time they spend with their children and the quality of their interaction with the new child. If what I do as a parent in the early years is so crucial, it must be my fault if my child doesn't succeed? Not necessarily, as history shows.

After the industrial revolution, there were major improvements in child health and education, mainly because of better nutrition and better public health,

not because of the degree of attachment between mother and child, or the stimulation of children's brain cells by playing Mozart to the womb during pregnancy. Improved sanitation, medical care, and cleaner, better food – advances that society was responsible for – made a huge difference.

There is a direct correlation too between infant mortality, the premature deaths of children, and the education level of their parents. Health risks for children decrease with the increased wealth of their parents. Decreased risk is also related to parental occupation – the children of UK civil service administrative workers have lower mortality than professional/executive or clerical staff and the highest mortality rate is for the children of clerical and other staff. So other social and economic factors affect child development, not just what parents do to stimulate the child's brain cells.

"If what I do as a parent in the early years is so crucial, it must be my fault if my child doesn't succeed? Not necessarily."

Nevertheless, the early years of life are of critical importance to later mental and physical health and to later learning abilities and achievements. There is clear evidence that anti-social behaviours in later life appear in children before school entry; that chronic levels of aggression in early childhood dramatically reduce a child's chances of gaining a high school diploma; that maltreatment at an early age can have enduring effects on a child's brain development and ability to function. Exposure to child abuse is correlated to later drug and alcohol abuse, even later criminal behaviour. In sum, 'The aftermath of poor early child development can appear as depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts or post-traumatic stress – or as aggression, impulsiveness, delinquency, hyperactivity or substance abuse.'

No government, no education system, no community can afford to neglect early childhood support for parents as the child's first educators. There is no doubt that adverse family environments promote adult failure. So we should act to ensure no child is brought up in conditions where there is inadequate family income, housing, health and nutrition, with parents who have poor education levels and don't understand the processes of healthy child development, or where neglect and abuse harm the child's potential development. That means

special efforts must be made in disadvantaged communities such as Aboriginal communities as the federal government is attempting to do.

The argument for investment in the early years – the later costs of ill health, remedial education, unemployment, and the nation's future economic development – can be put in terms of community cost-benefits. Clearly, the best pathway to reducing poverty and inequity is to improve the health and capabilities of every child, not just the few who enjoy a privileged family background. But our focus is broader: on the capacity, and the right, of every child to lead an optimal life using their innate capacities developed to their full potential.

Synapses for what?

The new brain research talks of strengthening brain synapses as an abstract process. Howard Gardner's research on multiple intelligences takes us further, by asking 'Synapses for what?' Is the child being helped to use the brain connections that make for self-understanding, for interpersonal intelligence, as well as for musical, naturalistic, spatial, and bodily kinaesthetic intelligence? Is the child's mind being encouraged to be disciplined, to synthesise what it learns across different areas, to be creative, to be ethical, respectful, and accepting of a responsibility for the wellbeing of others? Is the school curriculum narrowly focused on mathematics and language skills to the neglect of social skills, of physical self-control and healthy growth?

When we say the New Child is 'a brainy child', we mean that she has the potential to be a brainy child not just in terms of literacy and numeracy, not just in terms of standard tests and examination certificates, but in terms of the whole spectrum of human intelligences. Will having a computer on every child's desk change brain connections in the New Child: in particular, will the remarkably fine motor skills and visual spatial perception skills involved in playing video games, change them? Anyone who doubts the brain's wiring is affected by children's use of new technologies should think about the way their children communicate differently – sometimes very differently – from previous generations. Recently, Patricia found herself sitting beside a friend's 10-year-old son Michael while they waited in an airport lounge. Michael was playing with his Nintendo DS, a

handheld gaming console featuring two LCD screens. He got quite excited as he successfully made contact with a boy of similar age he had spotted across the room playing with his own DS; they immediately fell into text conversation. They exchanged names – the other boy was Jake – and chatted about what food they liked. Pizza was popular. The chat was very conventional; Patricia tried to inject some jokes, but Michael would have none of it. He followed his own approach, which was very formal; but as he typed, he was also able to hold a conversation with Patricia, answering her questions about the etiquette of such an encounter.

The flight was called, and Patricia suggested Michael go and say hello to Jake. He was quite appalled by the idea. That was not the way it worked, he said, and he ambled past Jake as he went out the door without a glance sideways. Jake also ignored Michael, although it was obvious they had physically sighted each other.

The encounter was fascinating. Michael got such a kick out of the simple exchange. The way of doing things was clear to both. He could talk happily and freely to Jake via the DS as two strangers who would never meet again, but were inhibited by the idea of speaking face to face.

The sociologist Georg Simmel observed nearly 100 years ago that people are often more comfortable confiding in strangers, than in friends, colleagues, or neighbours. Kids of our generation would never have confronted such a situation as Michael and Jake. But in many ways the internet is a technological manifestation of the old phenomenon of the stranger. It requires rules to navigate socially, and kids invent these rules for themselves as they go, shaping their technical, emotional, and social intelligences in ways we might not have foreseen.

It's similar with mobile telephony. Have you ever gathered around the dining table for a multigenerational family celebration, and watched in amazement as young teenagers SMS their friends under the table, at the same time attending, more or less, to grandpa's discussion of the 1957 grand final? It's a safe bet that the New Child's brain is being 'rewired' in a new way, that even social skills and self-insights are being formed in new ways. Although research in this area is in its infancy, one study at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, suggested

that teens who used a mobile phone constantly and spent hours online each day were rewiring their brains to handle multi-tasking, while playing video games could lead to being less cooperative with peers. What new opportunities for experience are being opened up?

The advertising industry is not letting any grass grow under its feet, combining with neuroscientists to pioneer a technique called neuromarketing. It uses medical research technology to see what goes on inside our minds when we shop. Teams of academic and corporate neuromarketers are hooking people up to functional magnetic resonance imaging machines, to map how their neurons respond to products and pitches. In one study, by watching how different neural circuits lit up or went dark as the subject shopped, the researchers found they could predict whether a person would end up purchasing or rejecting a product.

"… education is lagging way behind in devising attractive ways to teach our children."

Irving Biederman, a neuroscientist at the University of Southern California, is researching what he calls 'infomania'. His study in 2006 reported that when we grasp a new concept, the 'click' of comprehension triggers a cascade of brain chemicals that rewards the brain with a shot of natural heroin-like opioids. In other words, we get high when we grasp a new idea. But each time a novel experience is repeated, the opioid reward diminishes so we look for more risk, which may take the form of extreme celebrity gossip, scary news, greater sexual titillation, or stronger violence. It is against this background of an audience or market of overindulged info-junkies that Procter & Gamble, GM, Coca-Cola, and Motorola are turning to neuroscience in the hope that it will offer new ways to tap into our subconscious and discover how we may respond to their products.

There is so much at stake for commercial companies in the highly competitive business environment we have created that we can no longer be surprised by the techniques used to grab our attention, but we can predict that education is lagging way behind in devising attractive ways to teach our children. We cannot wait for all the evidence to come in; today's children need guidance now towards developing the new skills that digital technology requires and an understanding of the new forms of online social interaction.

Children are changing their way of learning anyway. Playing computer games, making their own little films, manipulating multiple media simultaneously, are all new forms of play that occupy hours of their time. They clearly develop fine motor skills, visual and spatial skills, and probably also new forms of interpersonal skills and a different form of self-awareness. These changes should not be denied or decried. The schools, teachers, and parents who fail to understand and build on them will have little chance of influencing children for their own good and for the good of society.

CHAPTER 10

Playing for keeps

Each form of intelligence provides a means for coping with life's many challenges. Both the mind and the body need care and attention if a child is to reach full potential, and the New Child needs to be encouraged to test the limits of his physical and mental capacities. In the early years, play is children's work. Through play they learn about the physical objects and people around them; they test their limits, gain confidence, work out how to get along with others, and resolve problems they are facing.

Kids need time to play both in the physical world and in their imaginations: time left alone to be quiet, to think and dream, is well spent. Too many parents believe that their child needs to be organised all the time. They create a burden for themselves as they constantly think up things to entertain their kids, drive them somewhere, invite friends over to play, buy more stuff to play with, and respond too quickly when a child says they are bored. There's always something to do – read a book, draw a picture, go outside and sit under a tree, dig around in that bottom drawer. There doesn't have to be a purpose – they don't have to be overtly 'learning' something all the time; that defeats the creative purpose of play. There is value in just letting the mind wander, playing with thoughts, things, possibilities, without having to produce an 'outcome.'

On the beach recently, we saw a group of kids, aged about six or seven, happily digging in the sand. One of their dads came along and said, cheerily, 'Here, that's not going anywhere. We need some serious digging. You need to build it up higher in the middle.' He fell to and set about digging deep furrows, throwing the sand up in scads to pile high in the middle of their circle. The kids just sat back and watched, bemused. He had taken over and was obviously enjoying

himself; he no doubt thought he was doing his bit for the kids. But they were no longer in charge of their activity. Once he'd had enough, they continued with what they wanted to do – their 'castle' was not very high, did not have perfect walls, and did not look very 'professional', but they were happy.

When kids play make-believe – pretend they are someone else, dress up in mum or dad's clothes, invent an imaginary story, city, jungle, or train track, play with dolls, work out with other kids how an adventure will be organised, who will be the goodies and the baddies – they are gaining important social skills. They have to communicate, take turns, persuade, negotiate, compromise, and cooperate, all quite complicated skills needed in adult life. Playing at being someone else is the essence of learning empathy, ethics, and social responsibility; children 'act out' their feelings and put themselves in the minds of others – both essential elements of what Gardner calls intra- and inter-personal intelligence.

Ever since he was old enough to crawl, our youngest grandson has loved to spend time alone playing with anything he can lay hands on. He has collections of toys – cars, dinosaurs, creatures – and he plays for hours, placing them among rocks and sticks, in secret holes and branches, in the garden or in the house, inventing new worlds of his own. The interesting thing is how the other older kids will come along and watch, then get absorbed in his little world, accepting his delineation of what is going on, which creature can do what and go where, evolving stories and creating battles as they go along. None of this play requires adult help, or comment, or approval.

"When kids play make-believe … they are gaining important social skills."

Making up a story is a way of rehearsing life, getting scared without being in real danger, pretending to be something you cannot yet be, trying out feelings you don't quite understand. Moreover, through play kids learn about one another, who's the joker, who's the scaredy cat, who has the most fun ideas, who's a leader and who a follower, and they exchange roles with their mates, learn that bigger kids can perhaps do more than they can, certainly that some people like to boss others around. They experience a range of skills and life lessons, and their confidence and self-awareness grows if they are given time to try things out in their own unique ways.

Older children can learn in all kinds of ways when they are able to play with things that truly interest them: no wonder that technology is featuring more in their play. Children's ingenuity cannot be underestimated. If encouraged they will come up with much more engaging processes than if they wait for their parents to organise something for them to do. Kids whose imaginations are stimulated and encouraged have the capacity to use play for learning and developing their skills.

Imaginative play can also be therapeutic, especially for children experiencing conflict. When we returned to Melbourne from the US in 1969, our daughters found themselves in unfamiliar territory. The Bing Nursery School at Stanford University and the John Dewey Laboratory School at the University of Chicago had been flexible learning environments where the kids were encouraged to express themselves orally without inhibition, but they had not been taught in a formal setting and skills such as spelling had not been introduced. Our daughter Lesley, then six, would come home from Greensborough Primary School and set up a schoolroom where she played the teacher. She would sit at her little desk 'playing school' and lecture in a curt, bossy voice to the invisible children in front of her. She had a bell she would ring, 'Ding ding', and would repeat, 'Sit up straight! Stop talking! Go to the office. And you go with her to see that she gets there! Stop talking, do your work!' Ding ding, went the little bell. Patricia would keep out of sight but observe and listen as Lesley worked through her feelings about the new, more rigid school regime she was experiencing.

Play can help children work through anger, sadness, guilt and blame. The McMaster Family Assessment Device assesses unhealthy family functioning, often reflecting misuse of alcohol and drugs, family violence, and poor mental health. Some 15.5 per cent of children live in such families; this includes 24 per cent of children in sole parent households and 21 per cent of children with special needs. Play can be a useful means of helping the children of such families sort through serious issues.

Physical outdoors play

A healthy mind in a healthy body can't happen by chance – kids need time and the opportunity to roam, explore, and test their physical limits in the physical

environment. Adults are not building a healthy enough environment for the New Child.

Natural landscapes offer the chance for getting dirty, for physical challenge and risk-taking: am I too scared to jump off that log? They offer rough, uneven surfaces that test balance, strength, coordination; adventure, as they make up their own stories and games; and an emotional appreciation of the limits of one's own physical and social world. The best playgrounds – in some approximation of this – will include a variety of materials and possibilities for play – sandboxes, climbing frames, piles of wood or rubber tyres to build with, running and jumping areas, metal tubes that make musical sounds when banged, mazes to explore, soil for communal gardens.

We grew up with outdoor spaces close to home, but nowadays we may have to fit them into busy urban neighbourhoods. The wide nature strips in the middle of Barcelona's city boulevards are good examples of urban space designed for children's play, for parents to sit and watch from a distance, unafraid for their children's safety, despite the proximity of high-density housing, and busy traffic passing by. Australian town planners should be required to ensure there are spaces for safe parks, pathways and road crossings for children when designing communities. We need more streets cut off from traffic, strict speed limits where kids are likely to play, plenty of pedestrian crossings, more park strips along the backs of houses and apartments, vacant lots preserved as little playgrounds, a more imaginative, child-oriented approach to city planning. With proper planning, play can be accommodated even in dense environments.

The best of the new suburban developments do this, but even outstanding planning can't change the fact that the car has become ubiquitous. In Victoria, a large proportion of children who live within two kilometres of school get driven there some days (39 per cent) or all of the time (37 per cent).

There are conflicting reports about the extent of children's physical activity and whether this has declined over the past decade. In this media age, the attractions of a sedentary life start early. Schools have cut back on physical education and opportunities to just 'muck around' in a natural setting are fewer for today's urbanised kids. Outdoor play today is often constrained as yards get smaller and houses get bigger, though Australia, with its suburban backyards, good

climate, parks and gardens, beaches and rural bushland, has an advantage over many countries where urban crowding, traffic and high-rise living are more common.

Nevertheless, Australia has always been a country where sport is a popular activity, and levels of participation in organised sports and physical activities for Australian children are still quite high. Most kids aged five to14 participate in school or club sports (65 per cent of boys and 58 per cent of girls), and the most popular choices are swimming, basketball, netball, and soccer. Kids over 15 particularly enjoy aerobics, golf, tennis, and netball. Not surprisingly, learning to swim is the biggest organised sporting activity, involving 17 per cent of all children. Children aged five to 14 almost all spend leisure time watching TV or videos, but many of them are also riding their bikes, playing computer games, and making things:

How Australian children use their leisure time

	Boys	Girls	Av. hours/fortnight
	%	%	hrs
TV/videos	99	98%	22
Computer games	82	59	8
Riding bikes	70	52	5
Skateboarding/rollerblading	28	17	5
Reading for pleasure	68	82	8
Arts & crafts activities	39	61	6

Source: ABS Year Book, 2005, Cat. 1301.0.

These figures might suggest that children spend a disproportionate amount of their leisure time watching television. The picture is not that definitive. The ACMA report on children's use of media shows that, although they spend on average 3.5 hours a day on computers and other media, they also spend 3.5 hours a day in physical activity, general play, going out and 'hanging out' with friends. A similar report in the United States, by the Kaiser Family Foundation, found 6.5 hours spent on various media, and 1.25 hours a day in physical activity.

More than two hours was spent 'hanging out with friends' each day, and for one hour a week they pursued hobbies (for example, music, dance, and skating lessons). That report was used by the American College of Pediatrics to call for a ban on all television viewing for children aged under four, which seems to us an over-reaction. Our concern is not that pre-schoolers watch TV, it is what they watch that matters.

Some commentators in America are in a kind of moral panic about what Richard Louv calls the *Last Child in the Woods.* His book, subtitled *Saving our children from nature-deficit disorder,* is a beautifully written plea for a return to innocence, a time when children could go fishing in the local stream, wander in the woods, explore nature in ways not possible today because of their urban lifestyle. The author points to parental fear of traffic, strangers in parks, creeping suburbia eating up the last remnants of natural woodlands. Above all, he blames the decline in time spent outdoors on America's culture of litigation – bans on using playground equipment, climbing trees, building tree houses in local parks, and riding bikes along footpaths, because authorities fear being sued. He details the decline in attendance at America's marvellous national parks, a shift from real-world experience to virtual nature via television.

There is no question that the natural world is a wonderland for kids who have the opportunity to explore it. We were reminded of this when two of our grandsons went to California with their parents last year, mainly to visit Disneyland. They loved every minute of it, the artifice, the consumer focus, and manufactured fun. Then they went to Yosemite National Park, where their parents wondered if they might be bored, but nature really spoke. Here in the meadow valley they found squirrels and deer, natural streams and rocks they could clamber over, secret places and hidden openings in the woods that they claimed as their own. There were hundreds of other tourists at Yosemite, of course, but the valley is vast and visually uncrowded. The kids were excited by the beauty of the place, the easy access to animals in their natural habitat, the Park Ranger's explanation of how glaciers had carved the valley and the sheer rock walls of the park. And they saw massive redwood trees, sequoias hundreds of years old, nature in a form they'd never before experienced.

Not every child can travel for holidays overseas, or even within Australia. In fact, it's remarkable how many of today's adults grew up in families that were

too poor or dysfunctional to enable them to spend time in nature. For them, cold, uncomfortable school camps where they were bullied by bigger kids may be their only memories of the beach or countryside. Today, with both parents working, the main impediment may simply be how to find the time for parents and children to get away together. Nevertheless, remembering Howard Gardner's advice on developing multiple intelligences, weekend camping or fishing trips, or day trips to national parks, should be part of every young child's experience. The experience of nature cannot be matched by an urban or online adventure.

Overall child health

While there are several aspects of children's health that give cause for alarm, overall their health has improved markedly over time. For example, over the past half century death rates in Australia have continued to fall, and child death and disability arising from infectious diseases is much rarer. The picture of children's health painted by the State of Victoria's Children Report (2006) is also fairly positive. Close to two-thirds (63.7 per cent) of parents rate their children's health as excellent, and 25 per cent as very good; only two per cent answered that it was fair to poor. Nearly six in 10 children had been fully breastfed up to three months, and half that up to six months.

The obvious exception to this encouraging picture is the health of indigenous children, who have higher rates of low birth weight and infant mortality and overall substantial health inequalities throughout life:

	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous
Low/very low birthweight	15.3%	6.8%
Infant mortality	15.6 per '000	4.7 per '000

Source: *The Age*

The Victorian government report stressed the need to improve the environment in which children live and go to school, as well as to develop private health-related awareness and action. Just as Jamie Oliver stimulated improved canteen food in the UK, through his innovative attempts to upskill school caterers, so

Melbourne chef Stephanie Alexander has initiated a school garden program to heighten children's awareness of healthy food and cooking options, now reaching dozens of schools. A 'Free Fruit Friday' has been funded for the early primary grades, and a range of videos, healthy lifestyle kits, and a 'Premier's Fitness Challenge' for kids and parents to exercise together for 30 minutes a day, are all welcome initiatives.

Yet in some areas of child health, adults have a lot to answer for. Former Australian of the Year Fiona Stanley and her colleagues have strongly advocated for children's health and wellbeing, bringing government attention to inequality, obesity, disability, and abuse, raising public awareness of these issues, and arguing for a more child-friendly society.

"Their lives are so organised … they have little time for spontaneous, unstructured play in a natural setting."

The health behaviour of pregnant women is vital in determining health outcomes for their children, for example through smoking and drinking. Some 22 per cent of Victorian mothers reported that they smoked in the early stages of pregnancy; nine per cent continued throughout the pregnancy. Even passive smoking is known to affect children's respiratory functions, colds, eye and nose irritation and infections. Asthma is the most common reason for children's visits to a doctor: 13.2 per cent have asthma and 23.3 per cent have experienced wheezing in the past 12 months.

Alcohol is a risk factor for low birth weight, yet 61 per cent of mothers had drunk alcohol before realising they were pregnant, 21 per cent of children had mothers who binge drank at least once during pregnancy (eight per cent at least once a week), and a third had continued to have some alcohol throughout their pregnancy. Post-natal depression affects some 15 per cent of mothers in the three to nine months after birth and some three per cent of children have a carer at high risk of psychological distress. Still the biggest factor influencing child health is the socio-economic status of children's parents. The poor cannot afford healthy foods, their health education is lower, and they live in more disadvantaged areas where health services are less accessible.

Why are our children becoming so fat?

In Australia, the land of beaches, cricket, footy, and tennis, the goal of physical fitness should be easy to reach, but we are becoming fatter and more and more children are being put at risk. We can't simply blame parents for their overweight children when the market is unfettered, and able to promote hazardous food products which are saturated in fat and loaded with sugar and salt. The manufacturers create the problem in the first place, and the lack of government regulation (on behalf of the public) makes it even worse.

Louv raises the crucial question in the debate about children and physical activity: why has the obesity epidemic coincided with the greatest increase in organised sports for kids in history – up 27 per cent in the US from 1981 to 1997? His guess is that 'generalised, hour-to-hour physical activity is the likely absent ingredient'. The kids are driven to organised sport, while in contrast, 'the physical and emotional exercise that children enjoy when they play in nature is more varied and less time-bound than organised sports.' Their lives are so organised, being driven to school, and to music and dance lessons as well, that they have little time for spontaneous, unstructured play in a natural setting. Combined with a diet that tends to make them fat, it's a toxic mix. Louv compares the trend in US schools to shorter recess times with the extended playtime in Finnish schools, and with Canada's Learning Grounds program (sponsored by the car maker Toyota!), which has created 'outdoor classrooms' aimed at providing places to 'play, learn, and develop respect for nature'.

Is it too simplistic to say, 'Eat less, and walk and play more', in a society built around cars, a sedentary lifestyle, and a focus on achievement rather than a balanced life? Indeed, some recent studies suggest that those who get up from the computer and take a break, walking over to a colleague instead of emailing him, are less likely to be obese than those who do half an hour's more intensive exercise a day. Rob Moodie, formerly head of VicHealth, claims that if 80 per cent of children walked to school every day there would be a million less car journeys each day. In this age of cyber communication, it is as well to remind children that social interaction also means face-to-face talk, that going up the stairs is better than taking a lift, and walking to school with friends is better than being driven by mum or dad.

The National Reform Agenda developed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in 2006, focused on the close link between health and human capital – the fact that unhealthy workers won't be productive, can't participate fully in society, and cost the national economy billions. It focused on what are called 'lifestyle-related diseases' such as depression and Type 2 diabetes, arguing that an ageing population will exacerbate the trend for such diseases to increase. It went on to list early childhood development and child care as important base-line areas of action to prevent later problems such as obesity and diabetes. There has been a marked increase in overweight children since 1985, and obesity is now seen as the biggest threat to the health of Australia's children. A quarter of children aged seven to 15 are overweight or obese, a figure that doubled between 1985 and 1995. The most accurate figures are those prepared for the Obesity Summit, which show that adults are leading by example – 67 per cent of Australian men and 52 per cent of women are either overweight or obese.

Obesity and overweight for children, 1995

(by percentage)

	Overweight	Obese
Boys aged 7–11	11.6	3.7
Boys ages 12–15	20	6.1
Girls aged 7–11	17.2	6.3
Girls aged 12–15	14.5	4.4

Source: Obesity Summit, NSW background paper.

Data vary from state to state, with lower socio-economic areas and indigenous children having higher levels. For 2003, Victoria had 7.9 per cent of children aged seven to 11 who were obese, and 26.7 per cent overweight. The figures were marginally higher in New South Wales.

In South Australia, the 1995 figures of 3.5 per cent of pre-school girls and 3.2 per cent of pre-school boys being obese rose to 5.8 per cent of girls and 4.1 per cent of boys by 2002, a sign that the problem is starting earlier. Pediatricians from Harvard Medical School have recently reported a link between sleep and obesity in infants: babies and toddlers who sleep less than 12 hours a day are

twice as likely to be overweight than others. As we pointed out in chapter 7, about a third of young children in the US have a television set in their rooms. The Harvard researchers recommended that parents remove TVs and other media from young children's bedrooms.

The combination of overweight, low physical activity, and low consumption of fruit and vegetables makes up 15.4 per cent of the 'risk factor burden' of disease. We know that obesity leads to adult problems such as diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and musculoskeletal problems such as arthritis and chronic back pain. Yet the data show a one per cent increase in obesity every year – that's 10,000 Victorian children alone entering the overweight or obese categories every year.

The premier of Victoria has declared war on obesity after receiving startling new data showing that more than three quarters of adults and one-third of children in Victoria could be overweight or obese by 2025. The dramatic effects from obesity mean that health spending in Australia is expected to more than double over a 30 year period from $71 billion to $162 billion. The economy will not be able to sustain the cost of such preventable diseases. The effects impose a triple economic burden; they hit the family budget, the states' and federal health budgets, and the workplace through absenteeism.

How did this happen?

Abundance, too much of a good thing, comes at a cost. Some research scientists are trying to explain obesity in terms of genetic factors, arguing that diets (and even educational efforts to encourage exercise and good eating habits) will not work. What they ignore is the coincidence of the obesity epidemic with the American take-away food market's expansion throughout the Western world, and the discovery that 'super-sizing' sells more.

The major change to our diet came in the 1970s when food scientists found a way to produce a cheap sweetener from corn syrup. It was six times sweeter than sugar, and it kept the product fresh-tasting, giving it a longer shelf life. Products looked more natural. At the same time, palm oil, a highly saturated fat, became a substitute for other fats. It was cheaper and lasted forever on the supermarket shelves. Between 1985 and 1995, there was no increase in food intake, but food energy density rose by 13 per cent.

Having brought the price down, and the calories up, the food marketing guys got to work and found that people generally would not buy two servings of French fries or two burgers, but they would buy the super size, the 'value-added' meal. Super-sizing led to a revolution in eating. By 1996, in the US 25 per cent of the $97 billion spent on fast food came from larger-size portions. A serving of McDonald's French fries ballooned from 200 calories in 1960 to the present 610 calories. What was once a 590-calorie McDonald's meal was now 1550 calories.

"…by the mid '90s families were eating up to one-third of their food away from home."

By 1999, heavy users – people who eat fast food more than 20 times a month – accounted for $66 billion of the $110 billion spent on fast food.

The shift of women into the workforce meant that by the mid '90s families were eating up to one-third of their food away from home. The fast food outlets targeted poorer areas where the families are larger, and then targeted tweens or pre-teens. They began youth advertising campaigns. Free toys and cartoon characters were used to market Burger King, Mars, Cadbury, Nestle, Coca-Cola, Pepsi – and they all went giant size. The US led the way and Australia and Europe followed.

The Victorian government's 2006 report on the state of its children found a mix of responses, some fairly encouraging, but others more worrying, to questions about children's eating habits:

Victoria's children in 2003
90% of children meet recommended intake for fruit
Only 38.6% meet recommended intake for vegetables
23% drink more soft drink each day than water
10% eat takeaway meals more than 5 times a month
71% meet recommended activity level of 1 hour a day
37% who live within 2 km of school get driven there every day, 39% some days

Source: State of Victoria's Children Report, 2006.

The report found that children today live surrounded by foods that encourage obesity. Of particular concern are foods high in simple sugars (particularly sucrose and fructose), processed starch (particularly white flour), and fats (particularly saturated and trans fats). Tooth decay in baby teeth (age 2–5) is on the rise, a result of pre-schoolers eating too much sugar. Instead of fresh fruit for snacks, parents are giving them processed snack foods, sweetened juices, and sodas.

Water is the most important 'brain food', helping children avoid dehydration, lassitude, headaches. In Victoria, 76.7 per cent of children drink more plain water than soft drinks, and 69.4 per cent of 1–4 year olds; even 55 per cent of 12-year-olds drink more milk than soft drinks. So the picture is not all bad, but the problem lies with the other third who don't drink water, and whose parents are not providing them with a healthy diet.

Coca-Cola is Australia's biggest grocery shopping item. It's mums and dads who buy their kids Coca-Cola, fatty hamburgers, and chips. But it's the companies who make and sell those products and promote them directly to children who must take responsibility. Health information too often fails to get across the damage such foods can cause. The following figures on children's breakfast food suggest that most of them are getting a reasonable start to the day, but the presence of crackers, sugar drinks, hot chips and chocolate bars is not a good sign.

What children eat for breakfast	
Breakfast item	Percentage eating item once weekly
Cereal	76
Toast	76
Fruit	52
Full cooked breakfast	33
Soft drink/energy drink	32
Yoghurt	22
Biscuits/crackers	13
Instant noodles	12
Chocolate bar	11
Burgers/bacon/egg rolls	11
Hot chips/hash browns	10
Sausage roll/meat pie	7

Source: Newspoll commissioned by Sanitarium Health Foods, 2008.

Poor adult health models

Clearly, the behaviour of parents and other adults influences the health behaviour of children. The culture of super-sizing seems to have led to a situation where mothers are not aware of what is an adequate serving of food, and tend to overfeed their infants. Eight out of 10 mothers worry whether they have met the child's nutritional needs: they have not, providing too much sodium, and not enough fibre, iron and Vitamin C. Unwisely, 44 per cent use dessert as a bribe to eat more, instead of leaving dinner on the plate for the child to come back and finish when ready. As a result 40 per cent of toddlers are now too heavy (although the right height) to use booster seats in cars.

The problem is endemic. While advertising and labelling of foods is misleading and regulation is lax, the Australian lifestyle – where hamburgers, sausages, and the Aussie barbecue are ubiquitous, dads refuse to eat salads, and adults go heavy on the alcohol – is part of everyone's culture. More often than not, alcohol is present at social occasions, and in some families, on the dinner table at every meal. Binge drinking is becoming common and more and more young people are indulging. As an *Age* editorial put it: 'Binge drinking can be inherited by teenagers as a family tradition resembling a rite of passage on the way to adulthood. Certainly, the undesirable nexus between sport and booze is a culture in itself that inspires for all the wrong reasons.'

In February, 2008, the Australian National Council on Drugs declared earlier estimates of alcohol and drug abuse were far too low – there is now an epidemic, leaving children vulnerable not just to ill-health, but also to violence and abuse within their own homes because of parental misuse.

Alcohol use among young people

(by percentage)

Age	**12**	**13**	**14**	**15**	**16**	**17**
Never consumed alcohol	27	20	14	9	6	4
Consumed alcohol in past year	39	52	68	80	86	89
Consumed alcohol in past month	17	26	41	54	67	70
Consumed alcohol in past week	10	16	27	35	46	49

Amount consumed

(by percentage)

Age	**12**	**13**	**14**	**15**	**16**	**17**
Drank on one occasion in past week						
(Males 7+ drinks; females 5+ drinks)	0.5	2	6	11	19	21
Total amount consumed in one week						
(Males 29+ drinks; females 15+ drinks)	0.5	0.5	2	2	3	4

These figures are staggering, rising with a child's age, and are indicative of a culture in which alcohol consumption has become a mark of 'maturity' without any understanding of responsible usage or of its harmful effects.

One in every 10 kids aged 12 to 17 admits to binge-drinking at least once a week – that's 168,000 children. For older children and indigenous Australians the figures are even higher. Until parents are better role models, there is little hope of change. More than 451,000 children are at risk of exposure to an adult binge drinker, and over 40,000 live in a home where an adult uses cannabis daily. Some of these children use alcohol and drugs as an escape from bullying or from violent and abusive families, but in the main such figures reflect a culture of indulgence where 'drug and alcohol use by young people has become normalised and is often seen as a rite of passage to adulthood'. Headlines such as 'Drink and be merry' (*The Australian,* 16 March, 2008) give the wrong impression of research which actually says parents who have strong social networks, volunteer, and are sociable, cheerful, upbeat, and talk to their children more, have children who do better at school.

On top of that, 13 per cent of young people admit to drink driving, 16 per cent report going to work or school while still under the influence, and there is a shortage of advisory services to deal with the problem. Not surprisingly, the experts recommend parents should take responsibility, keep their children away from alcohol, and delay their introduction to its use. We now have a growing number of rampaging young people emulating an adult culture of drunkenness and drug use that is fostered by slick marketing and permissive liquor licensing laws. In Melbourne's CBD alone there are 1600 bars.

The Rudd government has clearly signalled that it wants to ameliorate the culture of binge-drinking. We will have to wait to see if its public education campaign works. Previous ad campaigns against smoking and AIDS have been effective through their shock-value advertisements, but $19 million spent on education and early intervention programs for teenagers may not be as effective as the prime minister's throwaway line threatening to stop grants to sports clubs that allow or encourage drinking. Just weeks after Rudd declared war on Australia's youth binge-drinking epidemic, three companies – Fosters, Lion Nathan, and Diageo – announced that they would phase out products containing more than two standard drinks or seven per cent alcohol, as well as drinks containing energy additives such as caffeine and taurine. This was an admission that these drinks were not suitable for the youth market, but it was also seen as a pre-emptive move before the government decided to regulate more strongly. The prime minister obviously did not trust such 'self-regulation', announcing an increased excise tax on 'alcopops' of up to 70 per cent, at once getting rid of the GST anomaly between the tax on pre-mixed drinks and those served by bartenders, and making the higher cost of pre-mixed drinks a driving force in reducing teen alcohol consumption.

The alcohol industry and other critics claim these measures won't work, because real culture change can only come through long-term education. They may well be right, but pragmatic action is necessary, and its results can be readily measured. Binge-drinking is a problem so strongly embedded in our culture that a concerted effort will be required on many fronts. We have to start somewhere.

Mental health

There are conflicting reports about the extent of mental illness among children and definitions of a mental health disorder are notoriously difficult. The term 'mental health problems' is generally used to indicate issues of concern to practitioners, yet not diagnosable as a mental disorder, such as anorexia or depression. The 1997 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing found as many as one in seven Australian children have some form of mental health problem, although the definition covers an extraordinarily wide range of symptoms – from delinquent behaviour to psychosomatic physical disorders

such as stomach pains or blushing. Some nine per cent of parents report concerns about their children's behavioural and emotional wellbeing, with boys and rural children more likely to have behavioural problems 'of concern'. One-fifth said that their child was bullied, but only 10 per cent admitted that their own child bullied others.

According to some teachers, anxiety seems to be on the rise, perhaps a symptom of parents doing too much for them, the hovering parent whose child is then at a loss when left to their own devices. About one in 12 adolescents is estimated to have ADHD, and three times more boys than girls, but this 'disease' is ill-defined and often overdiagnosed. Depression and anxiety are much more common than ADHD, with eating disorders in girls and psychotic disorders increasing after puberty. Self-harm was the second highest form of injury for young people aged 15 to 18 in 2003.

Nevertheless, the Australian Institute of Family Studies' longitudinal study of young children found less anxiety among its sample than in an earlier study of temperament. These findings tend to allay concerns that today's children are having difficulty coping with new family contexts, such as the trend for more mothers of young children to return to work, the greater use of child care, and the higher levels of hardship, stress, and isolation reportedly experienced by young families.

Poverty, violence, and abuse affect children's health

Poverty is more of an issue in Australia than many of us realise. Although estimates vary, and can be challenged on grounds of 'relative' poverty versus absolute poverty, it's confronting that the OECD ranks Australia tenth on a scale of poverty among 25 nations, with 11.2 per cent of children living in relative poverty in 2000.

One reputable survey suggests that 28 per cent of Australian children experience at least one episode of poverty, with 14 per cent in poverty at least two years of the three years surveyed, and five per cent for the whole three years. The Victorian Health and Wellbeing Survey found nearly six per cent of children lived in a household that, on at least one occasion in the previous year, had run

out of food and could not afford to buy more. Nearly 17 per cent of children live with a parent in casual work, 53 per cent have both parents employed and 6.5 per cent of children have neither parent employed. In Australia, more than 36,000 people are homeless aged under 18.

While it's certainly not true that only low-income families abuse their children, or suffer from witnessing domestic violence, the odds are that children are at greater risk of abuse if they live in low-income families, or those affected by substance abuse, mental health problems, intellectual disability and domestic violence. Low income means more stress and conflict within families, poorer housing and living in less well-serviced neighbourhoods. Children in state care are more likely to be victims of abuse. The number of child protection notifications more than doubled in Australia from 1999–2005, partly as a result of mandatory reporting in some states and greater public awareness, but the number of substantiations also increased. Efforts have been made to intervene earlier and provide help to vulnerable children and their families.

The point we wish to emphasise is that family violence sits within the wider context of social inequality and dysfunction. There has always been debate about the contribution that the media makes to violence and abuse in society. The contribution of a market-driven obsession with violence in the media is difficult for researchers to tease out from the mix of factors.

Two large studies in the early 1960s, one in the US by Wilbur Schramm and his colleagues, and one by Hilde Himmelweit in the UK, concluded: 'For *some* children, under *some* conditions, *some* television is harmful. For *other* children under the *same* conditions, or for the *same* children under *other* conditions, it may be beneficial. For *most* children, under *most* conditions, *most* television is probably neither particularly harmful nor particularly beneficial.' Nearly 50 years later, we know little more than this with certainty.

Some British researchers, notably David Buckingham in the UK, pointed out that effects studies were missing the social and narrative context. Researchers judged cartoons as excessively violent, when children actually understood the animation genre and the conventions of other genres and were not affected adversely. Children were not passive observers of violence and a researcher cannot assume the experience is negative simply by analysing the content. The

context of the violence is what makes it acceptable or unacceptable, and some depiction of violence in drama is essential for children to understand the world in which they are growing up. But gratuitous violence permeates the media and children's attitudes are inevitably affected.

The factors that have been identified as risk factors for children watching television violence are the same as those risk factors for child maltreatment: they are child abuse, family breakdown, unemployment and poverty, isolation, lack of social success, peer group pressure. The media are not high on the list of influences when other risk factors are absent. But while media violence may not be a major factor in explaining individual acts of violence, it may be a very important factor at the societal level.

> ***"The context of the violence is what makes it acceptable or unacceptable … But gratuitous violence permeates the media and children's attitudes are inevitably affected."***

The media depict a very violent world, and the media exploit violence in news programs as well as in sport and fictional drama. In the world we see on television, there are high levels of aggression, and there is wide acceptance of anti-social behaviour. Perpetrators learn that aggressive attitudes and behaviours are often acceptable. As well there is a heightened sense of threat and insecurity. As a result of viewing this type of programming, day after day, viewers perceive the world to be a much more dangerous place than it actually is and fear they will be the victims of violence. This is particularly true for the vulnerable – those living alone, women, older people, and children with low self-esteem who are heavy media consumers.

Further evidence of the impact of the environment on social context for criminal behaviour comes from the epidemic theory of crime, which Malcolm Gladwell describes in his book *The Tipping Point.* He argues that crime is contagious. It can start with a broken window and spread to an entire community. The tipping point is not a person, but something physical, like graffiti, throwing broken bottles, public drunkenness, public urination.

Minor, seemingly insignificant, quality-of-life crimes, can be tipping points for violent crimes. What this theory suggests is that the urban criminal and

the lout, far from being someone who acts for fundamental, intrinsic reasons and who lives in his own world, is actually someone who is alert to all kinds of cues, and who is prompted to commit crimes based on his perception of the world around him. Behaviour, it is argued, especially for impressionable children and youth, is a function of social context. And no issue is too small to have an effect. Cleaning up the street can have more important consequences than one might think.

If we apply such thinking to the media environment for kids, we can see that we have a long way to go. We need to clean up both the streets and our programming, the way we present news, sport, lifestyle programs, and television drama, as well as the advertising that blends them all together, if we aspire to changing social values and to living in civilised communities.

Change for the future

Some researchers have argued that, as with the violence debate, concerns about consumerism and advertising to children are conservative and paternalistic, and neglect the diverse and complex ways in which children use and relate to cultural commodities. But mounting evidence shows that such views are dangerously naive. Our children are the generation that must end the poverty divide, reverse climate change, and halt the extinction of other species. Theirs is the generation that must resolve how to coexist on a sustainable planet. They will need science, technology, realism, idealism and optimism in good measure. Yet we continue to create a social context permeated by messages to children that legitimise a corrupt and damaging lifestyle.

If they are bombarded with ads pushing fast foods, cigarettes, and anorexic little fashion models; if they see adults – parents – getting drunk, using drugs, and consuming to excess; if street design is such that they can't walk or ride their bikes safely to school; if natural playgrounds are missing from their neighbourhood, and competitive sports favour the gifted few; then how can our children ever develop healthy minds in healthy bodies?

There are some hopeful signs that governments, parents, and teachers are waking up to the long-term costs of such neglectful laissez-faire attitudes to the healthy

development of our children. But we believe that parents have to become more active advocates for a healthier community, a healthier media environment, and a revival of the 1970s 'Life. Be In It' message of learning through play and playing for life. The time needed for change is running out fast.

CHAPTER 11

Becoming an individual in a social world

Both the post-war generation and the young adults of the 1960s were optimistic and active in the cause of progressive change. The generation that followed grew up in affluent times which encouraged us all to be more self-absorbed, less community-oriented, and less understanding of the wider social factors affecting our life chances. Freedom of choice, the flexibility of personal identity that was part of postmodernism's appeal, and the pursuit of individual happiness, have all obscured the economic and structural foundations that make them possible. It seems to us that this is a challenge the New Child will inevitably face: to recapture an understanding that they can influence things, a sense of common purpose, and optimism in the possibility of change.

Many in the West are once again questioning the individualism, materialism, and consumerism – the unsustainable development – that we have allowed to dominate our way of life, and the media which play an integral role in selling and endorsing these values. And some young people are reshaping their individualism towards a community goal.

Arron Wood, an environmentalist and former Young Australian of the Year, is taking his green education program from the banks of the Murray River to the world via the United Nations. Since his 'kids teaching kids' program began in 1999, more than 10,000 Australian students have been involved in regional, state, national, and international river health events. Through his program, each school chooses a local research topic such as water recycling, the Murray or climate change; they spend the year researching a topic, presenting their findings to each other and the community.

Through Wood's work and others, the national water crisis has been instrumental in reshaping the way Australian children learn about our natural resources and the fact that they are finite. For too long, governments and education systems have been dominated by an ethos of individual competition. They have neglected cooperation, partnership, respect for differences and the skills of negotiation. In today's world, that will not do. The common good now extends beyond the local community, beyond one nation, it has to embrace the world.

Every person has to come to an understanding of their own potential, their own values, their place in the world. Indeed this is one of the great achievements of Western society – an end to rigid class labels and social constraints, an emphasis on individual effort and mobility, an opening up to diversity, choice among many opportunities, the encouragement of innovation and creativity. But we have distorted the process of individual growth into a narcissistic focus on self, forgetting that each of us is part of a social whole, that we only become ourselves in and through our relationships with other people. Children have to learn that we are never alone, never free to pursue our own ends without considering others.

Parents and educators have to keep this fact in mind in guiding the child towards self-understanding and reaching their full potential. We cannot afford to be a society of self-absorbed individuals unconcerned for the wellbeing of others.

What is the best way to make this happen?

Ages and stages

Although children are not uniform in the way they grow and develop, there are some universal processes in becoming an autonomous individual.

It was French psychologist Jean Piaget who insisted children should be treated according to their appropriate stage of development, not as if they were capable of understanding what adults wanted precisely when adults wanted it. He argued that children develop in various 'stages', each step building on the previous capacities towards mastery over the child's world.

For a baby, the world emerged through the senses – touch, sight, hearing, and the effect of its physical actions on the world around. By age two they gained a practical understanding of the world, and understood that things (like mum or a toy) continued to exist even when out of view. Next, they developed a capacity for what Piaget called 'interiorised actions' or 'mental operations'; that is, they could use words or drawings to stand for 'real life' objects and could perform actions in thought.

This development peaked at around age seven or eight in a stage of 'concrete operations' – they could now reason systematically about the world and the links between objects and actions. They understood that the shape of something can change but have the same mass (like playdough), that rearranged objects still number the same, that you can view one scene from different perspectives without losing the central elements. And finally, around adolescence, the child could reason logically about relationships, testing hypotheses, revising them in light of results, thinking scientifically, and able to change the world of meaning to suit his/her own needs.

"Children have to learn that we are never alone, never free to pursue our own ends without considering others."

More recent research called this stage theory into serious doubt, and our own experience as parents and grandparents convinces us there is merit in the argument that Piaget's stages are too fixed, too arbitrary. Many children reach Piaget's stages earlier and in different ways from other children. And his 'stages' were only the cognitive, thinking side of making sense of the world, too focused on the scientific side, ignoring other ways such as music, emotions, physical movement, and neglecting creativity.

One child will be born with a happy temperament – she smiles at everyone, gurgles agreeably, responds to every word. Parents and others feel rewarded, continue to interact with the child, so that child is likely to learn rapidly. Another child will have a quiet, passive temperament, or may be timid, frightened by loud noises, and cry easily. He will not respond, will look passive and uninterested. Unfortunately, adults may interpret that as a signal to give up, to not bother to entertain or teach the child new things. So the range of such a child's interactions

will be more limited. He or she may, of course, be taking in more than you think, learning all the time, and suddenly surprise us. Children develop at their own pace and the stimuli others provide may be absorbed in different ways.

Piaget was right, however, in saying the starting point is always trying to make sense of the world. Every child is confronted with puzzles: what is that face looming over the cot? What are those noises? How do I make sure that someone feeds me? How can I reach that stupid rattle? What sense does that string of words make? Infants constantly make guesses, try things out, and see what 'works' and what doesn't work.

It's only by making guesses (hypotheses about cause and effect, in grown-up terms) that a child can generate knowledge – she has to figure out the nature of material objects in the world (hard or soft, wet or dry, reactive like a plastic rattle or impassive like a wooden block) and how they interact with one another (if I hit it, it will move, or cry, or hurt my hand).

They also have to figure out the nature of other people in the world, what motivates them and their behaviour (Mum cuddles and feeds me, big brother pokes and teases me, screaming gets me nowhere).

Gradually, the child has to piece it all together into a sensible story, a coherent account of the physical and social worlds. As they learn that objects exist even when they can't be seen, children also gradually learn that they are both an 'object' to other people and a 'subject' to themselves, with their own thoughts and feelings about the world outside. A sense of self emerges. Eventually each child will be able to construct a 'story' about life and its meaning that makes sense to them.

Kids soon start to find out who they are – one is good with ball games, another not, one is fearful, another brave, one is a leader, another shy, one is a clown, another the serious thinker. Play group, child care, school all start to reveal to the child what is possible, what's a challenge, who they are and what they might become. And we develop multiple selves, capable of playing slightly different roles in different contexts.

If teachers and parents don't encourage a kid to try out every new experience, or tell them, 'It doesn't matter dear, you like playing inside and you're better

with board games anyway', they'll soon settle on an image of themselves that is limited, not open to other possibilities.

Authoritative parenting: setting limits for children

We also know from a consistent body of research that children learn best from having some limits set for their behaviour. The modern tendency to let children do what they like, to act as if they know as much as their parents, to disrespect their elders, is no way to bring up socially responsible children. Adults should behave as adults, not deny their own experience and responsibility to guide children well.

Don't get us wrong: we are not advocating a return to the dictum 'spare the rod and spoil the child'. On the contrary, in good parenting, there seems to be an optimum balance between emotional involvement (usually warmth and concern, but even anger or disapproval is better than indifference) and setting consistent rules or limits on a child's behaviour.

If a parent is cold, authoritarian, and overly controlling, the child never gets to explore; she has to conform or else, and so she never knows what might be possible without the fear of disapproval. Moreover, she never learns to control her own behaviour and never internalises the rules, because control is imposed from above.

On the other hand, if you are too permissive, simply allowing them to 'do their own thing' regardless of consequences, you can bet the child will become confused. Every child is testing the limits all the time: can I throw this toy one more time out of the cot and it'll get put back in? Can I get away with screaming at Mum in the supermarket? If I bite this other kid will I get punished? Is swearing OK? Bugger, bugger, shit and bugger! What a funny little chap we have – maybe. Sooner or later, at kinder, in the playground, or at school they'll meet someone who won't tolerate that sort of behaviour. In fact they learn the limits of selfhood through the limits set and the warmth of parental reactions to them.

In both those cases – authoritarian versus permissive parenting – the child justifiably doubts that the parent gives a damn about their own feelings (he

hates me, or she doesn't care what I do) and either has no boundaries for safety or is merely constrained by fear to do what he is told. There are two other styles of parenting. One is a mixture of emotional indifference plus low limit-setting, which leaves a child totally confused about what is expected or who they are and where they fit in the family scheme of things.

The other is called 'authoritative' parenting, where there is clear emotional involvement and warmth plus clear limit-setting and consistent encouragement to stay within those limits. Such a combination tells the child firstly that he is a child and his parent has the power to control and keep him out of harm's way; secondly, that the parent loves him and is setting limits and guiding his behaviour for his own good. That parent will usually explain why, but insists that the rules be followed; they guide the child to understand gradually what is permissible, what is possible, and how to develop self-control.

Too often in today's confusing world, parents forget that they are older than their kids, more experienced in dealing with life's problems, and that they have more power than their kids. Wisdom, learning, life understanding, come from years of experience, not knowing how to program the video recorder. And children need to be taught that other people's needs are just as important as their own.

Genuine self-development versus phoney individualism

The big change seems to be that becoming an individual, having a view of one's self and one's position in relation to the world, has become more difficult. The traditional markers of class, status, ethnicity and gender have declined and the old barriers to becoming an identifiable person (a master jeweller's apprentice, a farm hand, a clerk, a seamstress, a novice priest) have come tumbling down.

Kids today can become whatever they choose (or so they are led to believe). Choices abound; the timing of decisions about adult jobs and lifestyles is extended; and adult maturity is no longer defined by events such as leaving school, getting a job, marriage, or having children of one's own. All of these can be postponed, and often they are mixed and merged in a welter of options and opportunities. We even have a 'gap year' now for students to experience something of life outside school and academe and think about alternatives, 'find' themselves in new ways.

The two key markers of maturity – economic independence and the psychological capacity to be responsible and self-directed – have become the job of the individual. Every child, every young person, has to forge their own identity, pretty much under their own steam. Youth now must undertake their own life projects to become adults in a society that demands people be psychologically self-directed and financially self-determined. They face many more life options than their parents and grandparents (who were more likely to suffer the opposite problem – a lack of opportunities), and have to negotiate the vagaries of choice on their own.

"… the notion of individualism has shifted from genuine self-development to a manufactured, phoney, 'default' individualism manipulated by a consumer-oriented mass media."

For the New Child this process can be confusing, because so much of their 'identity' is manipulated by the mass media. Every message Western kids see pushes the ideology of individualism, doing their own thing, being their own person, finding themselves. Western parents are increasingly reluctant to force their children into a mould, encouraging an open stance to explore the world. However, it takes a lot of effort and self-discipline to develop the advanced skills, aptitudes and attitudes needed in order to make the right decisions for yourself and act as a mature adult. There has to be genuine intellectual and emotional growth, both central to the role of education in a complex world, and kids need a lot of guidance if they are to get there.

The problem is that not enough children get that sort of guidance and not enough children are taught the self-discipline and intellectual skills that make for responsible adulthood. Why? Because the notion of individualism has shifted from genuine self-development to a manufactured, phoney, 'default' individualism manipulated by a consumer-oriented mass media, where being an individual means being 'cool', 'hip', wallowing in shallow impression-management through fashion, body image, lifestyle fads. A vast market has grown through pop culture and mass media for this sort of superficial, do-nothing form of individuality. And, as we saw in Part II, it starts very young. The mass market has discovered childhood is a lucrative field and what used to be the expected behaviour of adolescents and adults is now pushed down into childhood.

This is not a healthy form of individualism. Genuine self-development should be the purpose of a sound education in today's world – becoming an agent of your own welfare, able to act responsibly within the wider community. But in the world of Wikipedia and the internet, it's hard to distinguish fact and reasoned assessment from sound-grab opinion. Schools perforce choose the path of least resistance, good teachers struggle with inadequate resources to encourage real thinking, effort is not rewarded either for good teachers or good students who don't march to the tune of exam results, and the majority of children are given little guidance in making the best of themselves.

Genuine developmental individualism thus becomes the preserve of the few – those whose parents can afford to send them to the better private schools or the few public schools where academic rigour, 'values', and a sense of community appear to be inculcated, where real resources are available to give students real choice, and where genuine effort is encouraged and rewarded for all who give it a go.

The mantra of self triumphs over a sense of membership of a community of souls. The social capital that comes from shared norms, common goals, community cohesiveness, and networks of trust and reciprocity is turned into a distorted educational dogma of individual 'human capital', and we end up with a culture manipulated by the mass media to create a compliant labour force, a population of willing consumers. We think the New Child deserves better than that.

Real accomplishment is the key to self-esteem

The next thing that has to be said about individualism and self-awareness is that it grows out of actual achievements, not just assertions of self-esteem, or phoney self-images. Kids are usually better at knowing how good they are relative to others than adults; they can see that a koala stamp is not as good as a gold star, even though every kid in the class is given some sort of stamp to make sure that no one feels bad about themselves.

A child cannot develop self-esteem without having earned it. They need respect and support as an individual of worth, but self-esteem cannot sit aside from real accomplishments. You ride a bike without training wheels for the first time,

that's a real achievement – you've achieved a level of independence. You read a book through without help from an adult, you feel good about yourself. You pass an exam without cheating, likewise.

So learning about yourself, becoming an individual, means truly being capable of standing on your own two feet. Genuine individualism is acquiring skills that make you capable of managing your own life sensibly, making good decisions, becoming economically self-sufficient and not overly reliant on parents or others for your survival. It also means being psychologically mature, knowing who you are, what you are capable of, and being able to pursue your own goals with a sense of purpose and responsible action. The kid who has been bullied to conform may get a job, but is unlikely to act responsibly in his own interests. The kid who's been mollycoddled is likely to expect praise and help from others for the rest of his life, blaming life for failures or obstacles rather than his or her own failure to act with purpose to achieve their goals.

Cultivating self-esteem is not an end in itself. When teachers or other adults insist on praise as the key to self-esteem, consider the recent research by Dr Roy Baumeister that found only 200 out of a massive 18,000 academic articles on self-esteem met the standards of good psychological research. The rest were 'junk science', riddled with flawed data, and distortions that led to public misunderstandings about the nature of self-esteem and how it can be nurtured.

The New Child must be a trier

There's an old saying: 'Genius is 1 per cent inspiration, 99 per cent perspiration.' And another: 'Nothing succeeds like success.' Both these messages are supported by the latest research on the way children learn, the place of praise for effort, and the real key to building self-esteem.

What we say affects the child's approach to the tasks at hand. Things go wrong when every ball thrown, every word misspelled, every pile of blocks they put together, is lavishly praised. If we keep telling kids how smart they are, then when they fail to get something right – as they inevitably will – or when something is particularly difficult for them, and they back away in order to avoid failure, we

have lost the true learning moment. They learn to expect praise and take it for granted.

It's not that generosity, protectiveness, or praise are bad in themselves; it's rather that a consistent message to children that accomplishment is easy (or at least should be easy and does not require effort) can lead to a lack of effort on their part, an over-reliance on other people to do the hard things for them, walking away and only doing the things they are good at.

Giving up is not an inborn trait of childhood; it's something children are taught. From the moment of birth every child is a natural worker; trying hard comes naturally. They struggle to get food, to sit up, to influence the other people around them, to get their own way. They have an inbuilt drive to be competent.

"Giving up is not an inborn trait of childhood; it's something children are taught."

Right from the start, they work hard at gaining some control over life. Yes, they are naturally dependent – human beings are especially so in infancy and early childhood – and they need long-term protection and nurturing by parents and others. But the over-riding motivation for everything they do is to have some effect, some impact, on their own surroundings, to be and to feel effective.

Mothers (and some fathers) learn to recognise the difference in tone and intensity of their baby's cry. But baby also learns that crying will bring someone to check them out. It's a basic stimulus-response cycle that quickly builds into an ability to turn it on or off, to manipulate the cries, to produce effects – in other words to gain some control, some mastery over their tiny world. 'Nothing succeeds like success.' Having the desired effect reinforces the behaviour and the child learns new tricks. That's what life, what growing up, is all about.

If no one responds, if no one takes any notice of the child's attempts to be noticed, a very sad lesson is learned: life is not under my control; I am not an effective person; I may as well not bother; I am of little value to others. Psychologists call this a 'vicious circle of incompetence', the lesson that there's no point in trying, life outside cannot be influenced by what they do. And that can translate into

later social and political attitudes – my vote doesn't count, why bother to try and change things?

With our own children that's unlikely to happen. Instead, we do respond and they do get fed, picked up, talked to, noticed, and this builds into an expectation that life can be influenced, they do have some control – in other words, a 'benign circle of socialisation.'

The challenge is not to go too far in the other direction. New studies in psychology suggest that we can bend too far in trying to make children feel good about themselves – constantly praising, doing things for children, giving in to their every demand, denying them the experience of feeling competent, in control of things, or to learn from failure, not encouraging them to try it out for themselves and try, try again.

Praising your kid's effort

Praise can be a powerful motivator. But all praise is not equal; it needs to be specific. A football team is less likely to benefit from being told how well they're doing than from being praised for good ball-passing or the number of times they checked an opponent – specific skills they can control themselves.

Every parent has had the experience of kids bringing home from kindergarten or playgroup big sheets of paper splashed randomly with multi-coloured paint. We treat these works as masterpieces, because every little advance the child makes as she grows up is a delight. The first word. The first step. The first spoonful of food that reaches the mouth. The first wobbly ride on a scooter. But usually, with all these achievements, we have guided the child many times, shown them how to do it, praising them when they get some part of the process right, urging them on to do it better next time.

We should do the same with the messy painting. Give kids constructive comments on how they've done something. Make your praise very focused (such as how they've partly blended the red and yellow to make a painted flower look more interesting). That's a much more effective teaching and learning method than uncritical praise, saying, 'That's lovely dear, aren't you clever, go and do another one.'

Carol Dweck, a pyschologist at Stanford University, California, has studied smart kids and their achievement, and found that too much praise can backfire, leading to performance anxiety and sapping motivation. Smart kids have been told so often how great they are, they see all their peers as rivals, often lie about their test scores, and actually perform less well the more praise they get for being smart.

In contrast, when they are praised for the *process* – how they tackle a maths problem rather than whether or not they get it right – and for trying, for the effort put into a task, their performance improves. Don can still remember being both pleased and surprised when his grade three teacher rewarded him because he had used multiplication to short-circuit adding up a lot of numbers – he praised the process, not just the result.

"Smart kids … often lie about their test scores, and actually perform less well the more praise they get for being smart."

The studies by Dweck and her associates are deceptively simple, but they show the same effects of encouraging effort. Children given an easy test were divided into two groups. One group was praised for their intelligence: 'You must be very smart at this.' The others were praised for their effort: 'You must have worked really hard.' They were then given a choice – to do a harder set of puzzles or another easy test. Of those praised for their effort, 90 per cent chose the harder task; most of the 'smart' kids chose not to tackle it. As Dweck puts it, 'Emphasising effort gives a child a variable that they can control. They come to see themselves as in control of their success. Emphasising natural intelligence takes it out of the child's control, and it provides no good recipe for responding to a failure.'

This is a powerful lesson – for parents as well as teachers. Kids have a pretty good inbuilt crap-detector – they know when praise is false, and they know when the praise given is not warranted. So they may be smart, more intelligent than their friends, but it's pretty scary having to be best all the time. Worse, no one is guiding them to do things better. They're just told they're smart. There's little point in giving every kid a gold star, banning the school talent quest so the

ones with no talent to put on show don't feel bad, or ignoring mispronounced or misspelled words lest children be discouraged from writing. Challenging them all to have a go, guiding them to do better, asking them to think about how a word sounds and what it means, praising the fact that they keep on trying to throw a ball into the net, not just when they do get it in, will do more for both self-esteem and final achievement than praising every product as if it's the world's best.

However obvious this sounds, shifting from general praise to more specific, guided praise is not simple. We love our children and want them to feel good about themselves. So it's important to keep in mind that the researchers are not just advising us to say, 'Keep on trying. You can do it if you want to. Try, try again.' In fact, we now know that the ability to persist is more than a conscious act of will; it's actually governed by a part of the brain, a sort of switch or circuit in the orbital and medial prefrontal cortex, which acts like a chemical reward centre. Some of us are 'wired' to keep on trying in hope of a reward kick. But a child's brain can be trained and improved to give this result. Specific praise, guided effort, and the achievement of gradual success will all help turn more diffident kids who step back when they fail a few times into kids who will keep having a go until they find the things they are good at.

Carol Dweck is concerned with the overall learning/teaching process, not just in nurturing the best minds of a small elite whose job it should be to run the whole of society. We would add, we need every child, not just the elite, to have a sense of ethics, of social responsibility, and respect for others. She is saying children need to be praised for effort, for trying to work things out, not just for some general 'smartness' that's supposed to make them better at every task.

Howard Gardner also says every person needs to develop a 'disciplined' mind. He means by that both the capacity for hard work, to stick at a task until it is fully understood, but he also argues that every person needs to master at least one 'discipline' – it might be maths or pottery, or cricket, or a foreign language – but this will usually take years of consistent effort. A smart kid will very likely groan because they think they should be able to master it all in quick time, not seeing that long-term effort pays off, and that the very process of applying themselves to a discipline can be rewarding regardless of the end product.

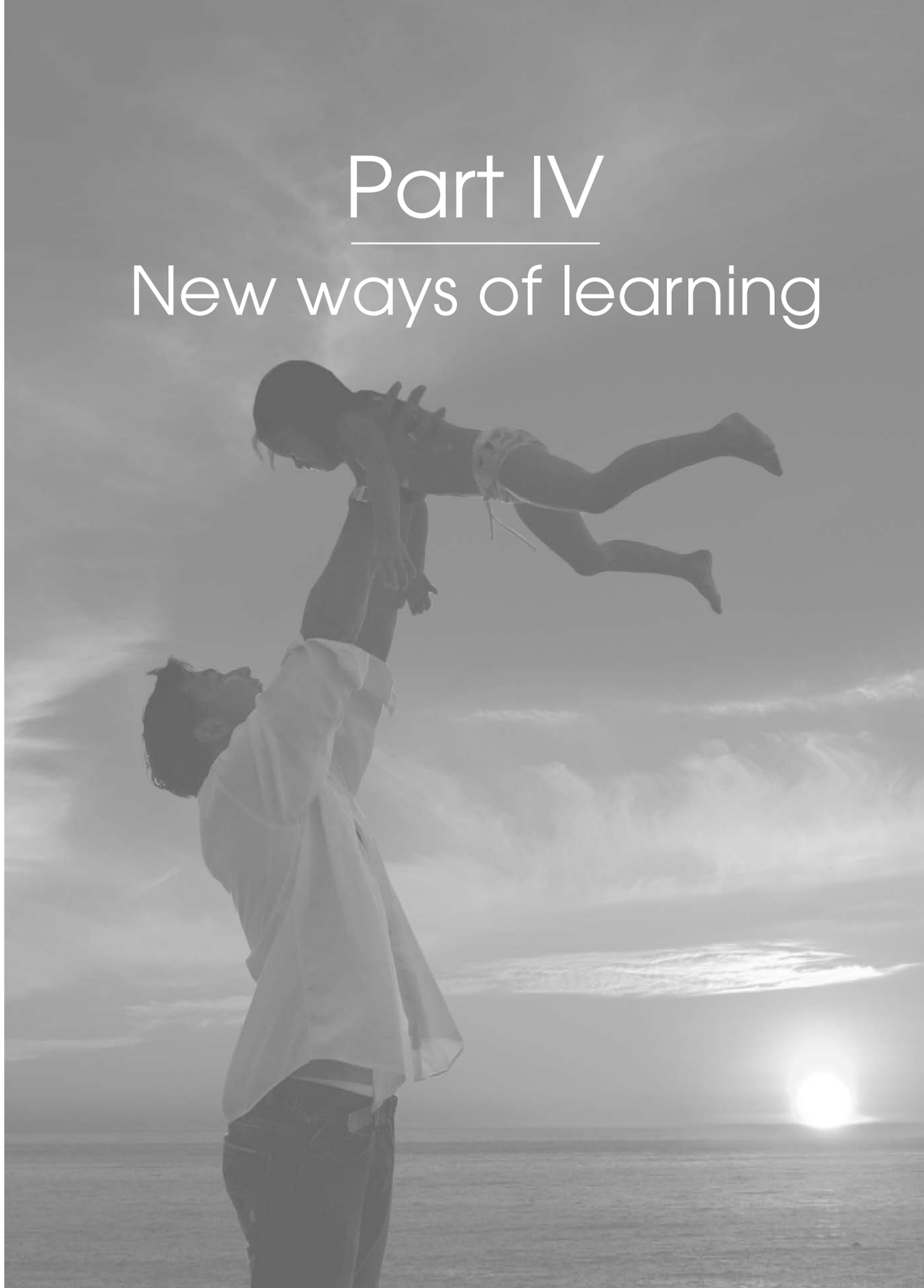
So, we should be encouraging and praising not the ‘smart’ kid, who thinks that with a bit of work, or luck, or just because of innate intelligence, they can do anything, but the kid who knows how to persist in trying to master the process, master the craft, learn the profession thoroughly: someone prepared to put in the effort, and someone who will eventually also develop the judgment to know when to walk away from a project/job/discipline that does not suit them, and how to find one that does. One of our grandsons persisted with gymnastics and balancing exercises and is now a consistent goal-scorer in basketball matches. Another one got interested in card games, then went on from there to magic card tricks, then taught himself a whole range of magic stunts, including levitation. Our granddaughter and her brother are working hard to master the recorder and modern dance. Focus and persistence paid off for each of them and mastery was the goal, not simply dilettantism.

This means telling children that hard work, effort, and persistence are the path to achievement. If we think about childhood in this way, it will lead us to rethink the way we deal with children, in the home and child-care centre and at school. It’s no longer a matter of being ‘ready’ for school, or doing well in standard school tests, getting through to college or university. It’s more a matter of cultivating minds that are (in Gardner’s terms) intelligent in all sorts of ways, capable of thinking and acting in a disciplined, creative and respectful way through sustained effort, seeing the links between and evaluating the worth of a range of information and finding new ways to work in a world where everyone’s needs are given at least some consideration.

Yes, kids need to develop a confident sense of themselves, they need to feel they can tackle any task and achieve some level of competence, but they don’t need to be told all the time how smart they are. They need to acquire real skills, to actually feel capable and know that they can learn to do things if they try. It is the experience of real success that makes them feel good about themselves.

Part IV

New ways of learning



CHAPTER 12

New learning for the New Child

Both of us have spent our lives working with children; teaching, writing, and advocating for better early childhood programs and better schooling. We began as secondary teachers, when class sizes were anything between 48 and 38, kids sat up straight and listened, and we taught all but one or two of the 40 periods in a school week. Things are very different now. But we were fortunate to teach in good schools with dedicated, well-trained colleagues, and our own energy made teaching a joy, not just a chore. We both believed in the capacity of every child to learn and to enjoy learning.

Patricia's big challenge was a class of 4D students (regarded as 'the duds'). This group of kids terrified most of the staff, who could not control them. She did a deal with them that, each day, once they finished their assigned geography class work, she would talk with them – about any topic they liked. They loved this (and learned a lot more about life and values, incidentally, than the narrow curriculum itself provided). The senior master would come into the classroom and fossick in the cupboard while she taught. It remained a mystery to him; he couldn't work out how she kept them quiet and how well she had them cooperating. When we married during the year, 4D put in together and gave us a garish red and white pottery set for olives, smokes, and drinks. It was a treasured gift.

At the same school, Don had a class of 44 year 10 kids who couldn't write or read well because they had had a succession of poor English teachers. He bought a set of learning materials that were colour-coded for level of difficulty, and the kids bloomed, delighted that every day they felt some success rather than failure.

Every kid in that class got individual attention, every assignment was read and assessed, problems discussed with each pupil so progress could be made. That same class hated reading literary novels, but Don dramatised the stories, read out key sections, and encouraged them to read the footy pages or magazines and do comprehension exercises on them. They all read their books, learned to enjoy and understand poetry and Shakespeare, and passed their fourth year exams with no concessions made.

The key was that we taught these kids at their level and according to their interests. We never assumed they were incapable of learning, and we developed their abilities beyond what they had thought possible.

"It is that faith in every child's ability to learn … that we both want to see restored to education."

Years later, in 1976, the Schools Commission set up a Country Education Project designed by the late Professor Jean Blackburn, Barry McGaw (now the head of Australia's National Curriculum Board) and Don. It was to be a seminal application of sound educational principles (and is still running today, 30 years on) – learning as a whole-of-community process, local involvement in planning and decision-making, building on strengths rather than a focus on disadvantage, and sharing resources and programs across small rural schools and across public and private systems.

We asked country area committees to identify not just what their kids lacked or needed, but also what resources they had in the area to build on with our limited funding. One area wanted music education. They found more than 1000 musical instruments hidden away in farmhouses, church halls, school cupboards; they also located three farming women who were qualified musicians. With a few extra funds to buy instruments that were missing, and to cover their transport costs, they were able to teach music to every student across the 'Mallee Tracks' area, which in turn spawned little orchestras, eisteddfods, and a genuine interest in music education in every school. Other areas located artists and craftsmen who taught children by day, and ran classes for adults by night. A Swan Hill pig farmer and his wife had astonishing backgrounds in radio, television, and the arts, and ran an inter-school radio program and role-playing classes to help

students and parents better understand one another. Another area brought reading experts up from Melbourne; within a few weeks, they had non-readers reading their first sentences. Don took a phone call during a planning committee from a mother who was crying with joy that her grade four child had finally learned to read.

Meanwhile, as discussed in Part II, Patricia went on to develop television programs for children that were educational as well as entertaining. They embodied universal human values within the context of Australian stories and reached millions of children. It is that faith in every child's ability to learn, and that sort of innovative, lateral approach to learning, that we both want to see restored to education.

If Australia wants to be an intelligent nation, a caring nation, a responsible nation, our children need smarter adults. We can't leave it up to them alone, as the next generation, to solve the problems we will face together. We must guarantee they come to that task fully equipped and aware of what the challenges are.

Today's parents are already the best educated, most highly skilled, most motivated lot we have ever had. They carefully time when they have children, are determined to give them the best chance in life they can, have mature experience of the modern workplace. Where they are being failed is in the schools – determinedly facing away from a future based on new technology and the media; in the workplace – stubbornly refusing to adapt to the dual responsibilities of working parents; and in government – until recently hell-bent on educating an elite while letting the masses slip back into 'trash' status, insisting on an outmoded view of history and values education and allowing the market to erode our children's health, putting individual consumerism ahead of any sense of the common good.

Today's children have access to an even wider set of resources for learning than we were able to draw on for the Country Education Project or for the *Lift-Off* television program, but there is convincing evidence that they are not performing to their full capability. An ANU study found 14-year-olds are about three months behind their counterparts of the 1960s in both literacy and numeracy. This is despite higher education expenditure and smaller class sizes, and is not accounted for by the increase in non-English-speakers. In productivity terms,

this represents a fall of 73 per cent since 1964, in contrast to a rise in national productivity of 64 per cent. Much money has gone into smaller class sizes; yet, as Kevin Rudd's chief education advisor, Barry McGaw, says, it may have been wiser to target the investment better and have some very small groups offset by some larger ones. This is a perfect example of what we need – more intelligent (and less ideological) thinking on the part of adults.

The Rudd government's promised 'education revolution' gives us cause for hope. It recognises that technology has changed the face of learning; it calls for new ideas from the wider community and it places skills training within the wider context of developing human capital – ensuring our citizens have 'the health, education and skills so they can better contribute to a smarter and more motivated society'. But we wonder whether the government realises that the way children learn today may already have made schools as we know them obsolete.

Certainly we know from the new brain research that children learn their most important lessons at home, before they start kinder or school, and teachers need a new awareness of how the child develops in those early years. We also know how much and how differently children learn informally from television, the internet, the new games and interactive media.

But we need to ask first: What is learning about in the new age? Why are we concerned about what and how our children learn in the first place? Part of the answer has not changed – we educate our children so they can become capable adults, mature enough psychologically and independent enough financially to survive as citizens of the world. That means we are not raising children merely to be cogs in a global economy; we are also raising them to understand themselves in relation to others, to know their own strengths and weaknesses and cooperate in the wider human enterprise.

It also means that we respect the integrity of the child as a child; we don't simply push them to learn so they can become money-earning adults, we teach them to be adequate social beings from the very start. From birth on, the child is struggling to define who he is in relation to everyone else. And the skills required to achieve that self-understanding are pretty universal and unchanging.

What has changed of course is the content of knowledge needed in a global information age and the ways a formal education system should be organised to gain optimal traction.

For today's parents – and therefore, for the national government – it's far more important to worry about what sort of person they want their children to be than whether they will get into a private school or elite university. For the education of the New Child must be an ethical enterprise, not a merely utilitarian one. Throughout the Howard years we heard much about the values schools should embody and the narrative history of their own country children should learn. We heard little about the value of education itself. The term 'human capital' was bandied about, often wrongly elided with vocational skills to grow the national economy.

Now we have a government spearheading an education revolution, and we must ensure that it's not just about improving the productive capacity of children, but about extending their capacities as human beings. Learning takes place in every setting, and the child's development involves more than just formal schooling in the cognitive skills; it includes growth in their understanding of the world through spatial perception, the emotions, music, bodily movement, and an understanding of nature. As explained earlier, children have many forms of intelligence through which they can find their way around.

And that's the task – helping children navigate their way around an increasingly complex world, so that they really possess the know-how to make sensible choices in their lives, and can thrive in a world their forebears would barely recognise.

We hear constantly that we are living in an information age, and information is everywhere available on the internet. But information is not knowledge. A major task for the New Child is to know the difference, and to be able to find their way through the welter of information and misinformation, to research critically, with judgment, to know how to learn and integrate knowledge in a meaningful way.

So what does this mean for the New Child? What does she need to know? Is the current flurry about what's wrong with education just a repeat of the 1950s

Cold War race for space, where Russia got the first Sputnik satellite into orbit and the US panicked over the poor state of its schools, agonising over why Johnny couldn't read as well as Ivan could? Should we be pushing every child into science and technology, or do children have broader needs?

We believe there are some obvious areas in which the New Child needs real knowledge rather than mere facts.

Any genuine plan for education will revolve around the core question: what does a citizen need to know? And we don't just mean a citizen of this nation, we mean a citizen of the world we all live in now, and the world that they face as adults and will need to understand and manage responsibly.

Framed in that way, we can avoid arguing for or against vocational skills because every citizen needs a vocation, they need all sorts of skills that can be applied to earning a living. Yes, education should be vocational, but the skills they learn cannot be too narrow; they have to be applicable across many jobs and situations because today's jobs are tomorrow's unemployment.

"The true citizen is one prepared to voice opinions, to act responsibly as a member of society."

We can also avoid arguing for or against a particular version of history, because no citizen can act intelligently without knowing how their society came to be the way it is. They cannot act responsibly as citizens without knowing how our laws and our political institutions developed, the way democracy as a system requires both conflict and consensus, an agreement that the majority vote prevails, but it does not silence dissent.

To be civil involves understanding differences, not necessarily agreeing, not avoiding arguments, but being civil towards others and respecting their different pathways to enlightenment. So children need to understand how Australia's people got here, in all their diversity – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, the British establishment and their convict cargo, the central battles for power and self dominion, the gold rush influx from all over the world, later waves of migrants and refugees – what their cultures have brought to the nation and why Australia's multiculturalism has been so successful. They need to learn that

uniformity is the enemy of innovation; very few new ideas emerge from a group where everyone agrees.

To be a citizen also must involve an understanding of one's economic geography, of one's natural environment, its potential and limitations, what things grow, are dug up, or are made, and where, and how they are traded within and outside the national borders. And to be a citizen in a global economy requires a clear understanding of how human activity affects the natural environment and the life chances of other citizens worldwide. The science and politics of the environment is the science of tomorrow.

The New Child cannot face the future, or deal with it sensibly, if they do not know how the human race has evolved, how survival needs drive economic, political and religious movements, how migration, wars, and social settlements reflect the physical resources (land, water, food and shelter) available to a people, as well as their beliefs and ambitions. Such lessons are not learned through a few facts and dates of Australian history, or through a curriculum which separates too early into academic subjects the essential links that drive the human endeavour. True knowledge and understanding come through seeing the links and making the connections, and our schools and teachers must be charged with helping children bring information together in ways that make sense of the world they live in.

The ultimate goal, of course, is the capacity to act and make a difference. The true citizen is one prepared to voice opinions, to act responsibly as a member of society. Alienated or merely hedonistic individualism will not suffice in tomorrow's challenging world.

Old-fashioned schooling will not do

Until the late 19th century, most children did not go to school. But industrial and economic development made it necessary for ordinary workers to read and to possess basic numeracy. Moreover, parents in those days were not, it seemed, doing a very good job – their children were unruly, unkempt, played on streets that were dangerous, and needed to be brought under control. Employers needed people who were trained in routines, repetitive tasks, who would follow instructions, and pay due deference to their bosses.

There was widespread opposition to giving too much education to children of the working classes – too much might give them ideas above their station and challenge the monopoly of the rich and powerful; it might also lead them to read unworthy books and seditious political pamphlets that could end in revolution. Moreover, without a religious and moral focus, a secular public school would be dangerous to social stability.

Schools nonetheless proved to be the perfect training ground for the industrial age. In fact, schools were designed along factory lines, with bells signalling start and finish times, short periods for lunch and rest, and strict discipline from teachers to instil fear in the souls of future workers. Compulsory schooling separated children from their parents for large parts of the day and it took most children out of the workplace (farm, factory, or office) altogether.

The New Child is already well and truly beyond the point of routinised control within a factory model of education. She has been taught to be an individual. He asserts his rights as an equal well before adulthood. She already knows her way around the world of new technology, more so than her parents. He demands to be heard, to be involved in decisions affecting his own life. And parents encourage this.

Individualised, active learning

Today's children are active, not passive learners, sorting and shaping what they learn according to family interests, resources, and personal choice. Above all, they have immediate and unmediated access to unlimited information, ideas, values, alternative norms of behaviour. And the horse has bolted, there is no going back.

The prevailing emphasis on economic growth and global competition has driven schools into a competitive stance on testing, achievement of results, less emphasis on the growth of the whole child and social, community-oriented values – individualism reigns supreme and the child's attitude to others is affected. Parental values that favour social responsibility and respect for the needs of others are under threat, and children need careful guidance in this regard. We suggest that individual mastery is not contradictory to cooperative

learning and our thinking about testing and competitive examinations must be challenged.

It follows that a 'national curriculum' cannot be imposed uniformly on every child or classroom. Individualised attention from teachers (always seen as desirable, but difficult with big class sizes) must be the order of the day, with individualised pathways for every child starting from their strengths and weaknesses, building out to ensure they cover the material, the ideas and disciplines of a broadly common curriculum, but not, certainly not, reverting to the old days of lock-step, study-this-today, that-tomorrow, in every classroom in the nation.

It always used to annoy Patricia that many of the teachers who regarded TV as 'bad' saw computers as 'good' learning tools. Computers were word-based tools, good for writing essays and even calculating logarithms; teachers are familiar with these concepts and thus felt comfortable with computers while rejecting the visual-based learning that TV offered. Today, with convergence, the technologies have come together, and computers bring far more exciting content than most of us could ever have imagined.

The impact of computers on classroom learning is already being felt, partly through the ability of students to interact with one another, exchange information and ideas with one another, learn from one another. So when we say individual mastery should be the order of the day, we do not mean isolating students from their peers and not learning together. Indeed, there is plenty of evidence that students learn most effectively in cooperative teams, through group work and discussion, using individual strengths and special interests to benefit their peers. The old rural primary school is still a good model of 'learning by teaching', where the older kids helped explain and monitor the work of younger kids. Today, that sort of cooperative learning will inevitably involve new digital forms of information exchange and creativity, yet most teachers are well behind their students in seeing its potential.

A 'national curriculum' cannot be 'taught' using outmoded 20th century pedagogy. The digital natives will not tolerate it, and teachers will have to both come up to scratch and change their methods of teaching, beyond the chalkboard and the textbook. What should be uniform is a determination to help every

child master the basics of language, communication, literacy (including media literacy), and numeracy, and not accept failure on the part of any child.

Most education policy is still driven by notions of investing in the future – higher skills for a communication age, global competitiveness, lower welfare payments and a higher GDP. And there's nothing wrong with that – every nation has to survive and thrive. But the goal of mastery, of not accepting any child's failure, should be driven by more than economic arguments. It should be driven by the goal of ensuring every citizen an informed, engaged and meaningful life, a goal of education for its own sake.

This means we cannot accept a national curriculum based around economic training needs. Nor can we revert to an old-fashioned approach to testing, assessing standards of performance, at fixed times in a child's life. That never worked and it won't in the new age of technological learning.

It's reasonable to devise a set of desired 'outcomes', the actual content, knowledge, skills, abilities we think every child should have achieved by the end of schooling, but we do an injustice to children whose language is not English, whose parents are poorly educated or on low incomes, to children who learn in a different way from others – who are more spatial, physical, musical, less verbal, or just need to ponder longer over a problem, for example – if we don't tailor their learning to suit their different backgrounds. A set of outcomes is a general goal, not a hurdle every child (or every school for that matter) should be expected to reach in a set time.

Instead, the goal of schooling should be to help each individual child master the basics, and then build a portfolio of skills that stands, at the end of each year and at the end of schooling, as a record of subject matter covered, skills learned, knowledge acquired and applied in meaningful ways, Many of today's schools are already doing this, particularly in the private sector where better resources make a more individualised program possible. At Anderson's Creek Primary School in Melbourne's outer east, every pupil works on an individual program, doing assignments by computer, and able to ask older kids for help via the school intranet. Classrooms are open, walls knocked out so teachers and kids can interact and share activities. Every child graduates from that school with a disk of all their work through primary school, every assignment and project,

reports on progress from their teachers, a real 'portfolio of skills' that says much more than the standard school report or a set of examination marks can.

David Loader, the principal of Eltham College, has written about *Schooling for the Knowledge Era* and applies his principles throughout this private school. He sees self-directed learning as the key to success, encourages teachers and parents to support self-management, and is excited by the results. He preaches trust and hope, not a negative view of children, and his teachers comment on how different students are, confident and assertive, with no thought that they cannot learn effectively given the right guidance and peer support. He lists the elements of the knowledge era classroom as: adaptable space for people to move around in; more flexible time rather than the restrictions of a tight timetable; access to the internet; teachers who can collaborate with and engage young people rather than simply manage them. You might like to ask yourself how your own children's school measures up on these criteria – it may well be that the flight of middle-class parents to the elite private schools represents a flight to the past rather than the future. The best of them have shifted from the traditional routinised factory approach.

> ***"It may well be that the flight of middle class parents to the elite private schools represents a flight to the past rather than the future."***

Yes, a good curriculum should include many common elements – how can any democracy have an intelligent discussion about its priorities and programs without some shared elements of knowledge and understanding? But in an age of rapid change and innovation, we need every child to develop their unique capabilities, to find out what they are best at, to explore those areas in depth and with genuine involvement, not to turn out having performed to certain standards like peas in a pod. That is not what the New Child is like or should be like.

'The basics' – reading, writing, and mathematics – are core elements of life, but they must be thought of within a framework of multiple and individualised skills: language as the core of global communication, mathematics as a tool for coping with physical and economic challenges, scientific method as an

approach to logical discussion and the empirical verification of alternate theories, the nurturing of musical, bodily-kinaesthetic, and spatial skills where there is potential, and – above all – the development of each child to their full potential.

Moreover education, from early childhood to schooling, vocational training, and further education, has to be designed as an exciting, challenging, engaging enterprise, not as a formidable set of hurdles to be jumped when adult society dictates. Our task is to engage the New Child with the world, not turn him off learning, not to imply that having passed a certificate, having reached certain outcomes-based standards, that's it.

Continuous, life-long learning is the way of the future, not age-graded tests, not course completions and certificates or degrees gained. Unless every child is imbued with the desire to learn and re-learn, unless every child is taught *how* to learn, how to discriminate between sound and unsound sources of information, how to solve new problems, how to adapt to new learning situations, no nation will keep up with the rate of technological change, nor will its citizens be able to contribute usefully to solving the global challenges ahead.

Howard Gardner's latest work involves a set of propositions about learning with which we heartily agree. He insists that mere information is of little use and what we should encourage in children is a set of five 'minds', or ways of knowing and thinking.

Gardner's 'Five Minds for the Future'

A disciplined mind – both in the sense of knowing how to work hard and steadily over time to improve skill and understanding, and in the sense of having real expertise in at least one scholarly discipline, craft or profession, something that will probably take at least 10 years of work to master. In other words, a mind that doesn't think things come easily. Not the 'smart' kid, who thinks that with a bit of work, or luck, or just because of innate intelligence, they can do anything; but the kid who knows how to persist in trying to master the process, master the craft,

learn the profession thoroughly, someone prepared to put in the effort. As Carol Dweck's research has shown, this implies telling children that hard work, effort, persistence is the path to achievement, not just thinking how smart they are and being rewarded for putting in a minimum of effort. It also implies having teachers who are themselves masters of their subject matter, who have a disciplined mind and serve as a role model for fully engaged learning.

A synthesising mind – one that can sift through the endless information now available on the internet and elsewhere and put it together in ways that make sense. Children today are bombarded with information, not just a few books in the school library and a home encyclopaedia, so memorising facts is now less important than the ability to synthesise, to evaluate what 'information' is sound and relevant to the task at hand. This clearly involves a good sense of judgement, based on the principles of the discipline involved, an ability to order, re-arrange, see connections between elements of a problem. To us, this is an essential quality of the good teacher, as well as of the student.

A creating mind – one that can break new ground, come up with new ideas, ask unusual questions, and develop unexpected answers. Not everyone is going to be an Einstein or a Picasso, but everyone in a changing world needs to think ahead, find new ways of doing things, and not depend on the old accepted routines and ideas. Too often we discourage children from suggesting or trying new ways; going beyond the taken-for-granted way is the only hope for innovation. School should encourage the New Child to be challenging, to be thoughtfully creative, not just to run with the mob.

A respectful mind – is necessary in the modern world because we are so inter-connected. We've always taught children to respect the values and customs of others, not to mock differences, but we will not survive in the global marketplace if we don't truly understand these 'others' and work effectively with them. This does not mean we have to agree with or 'respect' a terrorist or a society that maltreats its minorities, but we

do have to find ways of working with them towards our own goals, and 'respect' in this sense demands an effort to understand why they think and behave the way they do. Indeed, the new forms of communication available to children on the internet augur well for their developing a greater acceptance of and respect for the thoughts and ways of other people.

An ethical mind – one that sees beyond one's own self-interest and can work unselfishly to improve the lot of all. This implies an ability to see your own work and your own goals in light of the broader society, the good society, the common good and the interests of others if we are to survive and be fully human.

These minds, or ways of thinking, are required at all levels of society. We can develop them if we have parents and teachers better understanding that education is not about testing and examination success, not about qualifying for a job in the narrow sense, but about developing the best in every child.

If we don't, we will end up with a dumbed-down, narrow-minded, blinkered generation hell-bent on pursuing individual ends in a world ever more reliant on cooperative and ethical action to save itself from disaster. Indeed, the pathway to all of these 'five minds for the future' is through cooperative, not competitive, learning. A child who respects the ideas and wisdom of others, who has an ethical approach towards other people and their welfare, will automatically draw on the disciplined knowledge of other people and be able to synthesise the information gained in more useful and creative ways than a child left to wallow on her own. In today's business world, teamwork is an essential skill; the capacity to come together with others and share ideas, knowledge, and experience in order to generate more creative and productive solutions to the problem at hand.

Mastery, not competitive ranking, is the aim

What might such solutions comprise? There are some pretty clear lessons to be learned from the latest research on testing.

First, making sure every child is literate and numerate in the early years (and not allowing any child to fall behind) is of prime importance. Otherwise they lose that enthusiasm for learning and stagger along a path of under-achievement which costs them in terms of life quality and costs the nation economically.

Second, direct instruction (including via digital means), formal methods of teaching, and a phonically-structured way of learning how to read, have better outcomes than just letting reading 'come naturally' through some version of the 'whole-word method'. As with any form of brain development, one link builds on another; sounds and words need repetition and reinforcement. The letter 'b' can sound like 'bee' or 'buh'; 'a' sounds different in 'apple' from how it sounds in 'ape'. Children have to know how letters sound first, then combinations of letters into what we call phonemes, such as 'un' and 'der' for the word 'under', or 'chil' and 'dren' in 'children'. It is well known that children who never learn how letter combinations form different sounds or parts of whole words soon give up in despair of understanding the written word. Many are then labelled as having ADHD, attention deficit disorder; yet that condition can be 'cured' by a systematic effort to teach them how words and sentences work.

Third, testing systematically, even competitively, does raise standards in literacy and numeracy, but not if it is centralised, top-down and overly intrusive. What this means is that within a school, teachers need to have control over how and when they test, and the testing should be aimed at diagnosing where students are having trouble. Then, instead of punishing schools that 'fail' on national tests at fixed stages, they should be resourced to provide rigorous and individualised remedial instruction to those students who have 'failed'.

The goal, and the message to students and parents, is mastery on the part of every child, not an acceptance that some kids just can't or won't learn. If that means grading kids into 'ability' groups (better called 'performance' or 'mastery' groups) then fine. But they will not be left in the same ability group for every subject or every class. The worst feature of the old grading system was the way it labelled kids for life and assumed some were not brainy enough to master learning. The kid who can't spell may need a special group on phonic sounds, and not just to be labelled as 'performing a grade below his age group's expected level', as some ridiculous student reports now say. The best-performing school systems allow for autonomy in the hiring and firing of teachers, reward

outstanding performance, and demand high, not low standards from teachers and pupils. Mastery at every level is the key.

In a recent report comparing school systems across the world, McKinsey Global Education identified the crucial differences in student performance outcomes. The main one was the quality of teaching, not how many dollars was spent per student. If two average eight-year-old children are given different teachers – one high quality, the other not – their grades will diverge more than 50 points in three years.

The top-performing school systems don't necessarily pay teachers more, but they do attract the best recruits by making entry into teacher education highly selective; they do motivate good teachers to improve their techniques, and get rid of those who consistently fail to teach well; and they set high expectations for all students – not just the best and brightest, not just boys or the better off, not just in the humanities, but in maths and the sciences as well.

The report says high-performing school systems, such as those of Korea, Finland, and Hong Kong, aim at across-the-board improvements, not simply at bringing the bottom group up to scratch. It points out that despite Australia's good teacher–student ratios, and increased spending on education, we still rank seventh overall and eleventh in maths, and are well outside the top tier in those skills needed for 21st century jobs, such as complex problem-solving.

That is one reason why education chief Barry McGaw insists we should rethink our current focus on the 'strugglers' and give as much attention to improving the performance of our best students. It should not be either-or, or even giving priority to one group over another. Effort and high achievement on the part of every child should be the aim, developing every child's (varied) capacities to the optimum level, but certainly not accepting that any child in the new century can survive and thrive without adequate literacy, numeracy, problem-solving and complex thinking skills.

As Sir Michael Barber, a senior advisor on education to the former Blair government in Britain, said recently: 'A high quality education system must help every child succeed, not leave some behind. Family socio-economic background makes a huge difference of course – kids with professional parents have heard

45 million words by age four, those with working class parents 26 million, while kids from 'welfare' families have heard only 13 million words by age four. But disadvantage can be overcome by quality teaching and specialist one-on-one attention to unlock the barriers to learning. If that means larger class sizes for the majority, so be it; the evidence shows putting money into lower pupil/teacher ratios has not improved student achievement.'

CHAPTER 13

An ideal revolution

The Rudd government's rhetoric aside, we are already caught up in an education revolution that is a direct response to the needs of the New Child. Both the nature of a child's experience in family life, and their familiarity with the new technology, demand a radical shift in how we think about learning and teaching. Debates about how to teach literacy and history, about Australia's relative standing in OECD comparisons on children's achievement levels for reading, maths, and problem-solving skills; about the search for a national curriculum; about the shortage of teachers and demands for better pay; and – last but not least – about more emphasis on subject matter expertise, and less on teaching methods, all reflect a crisis that must be faced.

And Australia is not alone. The British government is grappling with similar issues. In December 2007, the UK's minister for children, schools, and families launched a sweeping Children's Plan, which aims to make Britain 'the best place in the world for children and young people to grow up'. Despite its optimistic language, the very fact of this plan indicates that the problems are real. In contrast to the Rudd government's intention to apply computer technology to its 'education revolution', the British minister makes no mention of the role of new media – a real oversight, in our view.

The task we all face is not simply about helping every child become computer-literate, important though that is. It's a greater challenge to rethink literacy and learning for the 21st century, drawing on community-wide resources to ensure children have the competencies necessary to communicate and operate effectively in a new digital environment. Teaching itself and the role of teachers

vis a vis parents and others in the wider learning community should be revamped, to better meet the needs and match the skills of the New Child as a self-directed learner. We must also close the gap of disadvantage that prevents full personal development for every child and threatens the economic viability of the wider nation in a competitive global market.

Learning happens everywhere, throughout life

The most important message is that learning takes place everywhere, not just within the school. This has always been true, but it's better understood now, and schools have to change dramatically in recognition of that fact. We need to think of education as an enterprise that encompasses the learning that takes place in classrooms, after-school programs, libraries, community centres, and in family homes. Attempts to redefine cities such as Ballarat as a Learning City are a good start. They try to integrate early childhood services with the schools and family support agencies; to link local businesses with vocational education and work experience for local students; to open up the resources of local and business libraries to everyone; and to engender across the community a broad enthusiasm for lifelong learning. As American writer Richard Florida puts it, economic and social development depend upon quality of place, by which he means:

- what's there – the quality of the built and natural environment;
- who's there – the diversity of people, tolerance of difference, and the creative capital latent in the community; and
- what's going on there – the vibrancy of community life, events, activities that might stimulate creativity and a better quality of life.

Obviously, the quality of local schools is a central aspect of that quality of place.

The second important message is that learning has to be conceived in a wider policy framework, not just within one area called an education department. As the British Children's Plan puts it:

> Government does not bring up children – parents do – so government needs to do more to back parents and families. All children have the potential to succeed and should go as far as their talents can take them. Children and young people need to enjoy their childhood as well as grow up prepared for adult life. Services need to be shaped by and responsive to children, young people and families; not designed around professional boundaries. It is always better to prevent failure than tackle a crisis later.

Early years education

The early years are critical to a child's later development. So what happens in child care, pre-school, at home, and on television are all in need of close attention. It's time to close the debate about whether full-time mothering is better than having kids in child care, and to insist that quality child care and universal pre-school education are accessible to every child in Australia. Every mother wants the best for her children. Some stay at home for the first few years, others return to a paid job. The most powerful research finding is that children flourish when the mother is happy about her situation, and fail to thrive when she is not. So ensuring the contexts in which her children live – the home, neighbourhood, child-care centre – are all of optimum quality is essential. Above all, it is important to link up or integrate the full range of services and resources available in each community that might help parents and their children.

The need for better community understanding of what should be happening in the early years has led federal Labor to adopt an Australian version of the Early Development Index (AEDI), developed in Canada at McMaster University. The Melbourne Children's Hospital Centre for Child & Adolescent Health has tested the AEDI, which gives a common language to discuss the needs of young children, allows year one teachers to assess more clearly child development needs in the crucial first year of school, and tells each community what is working well and what their priorities for children should be.

The AEDI covers five main 'domains' of early childhood development, elements every Australian parent should keep in mind as they guide their children towards life at school. The crucial thing to note is that the index does not focus only on knowing the alphabet, or being able to add up sums, nor does it set fixed amounts of learning content for young children. Instead, it highlights areas of

learning and development that are essential to later learning, and also, what is vaguely called 'readiness for school'.

The Australian Early Development Index (AEDI)

Physical health and wellbeing: for example, gross and fine motor skills such as holding a pencil, running in the playground, having enough energy for classroom activities, motor coordination; independence in looking after their own needs such as getting a glass of water, going to the toilet, daily living skills.

Social competence: for example, curiosity about the world; an eagerness to try new experiences; ability to control their own behaviour; cooperation with others; following the rules; the ability to cooperate, play and work with other children; appropriate respect for adult authority; knowing the standards of acceptable behaviour in public places.

Emotional maturity: for example, the ability to reflect before acting; an empathetic response to other people's feelings; a balance between being too fearful and too impulsive; able to deal with feelings (of anger, jubilation, fear, etc.) at an age-appropriate level.

Language and cognitive skills: for example, reading awareness; being able to play board games; age-appropriate writing and numeracy skills; being able to recite information back from memory; understanding similarities and differences.

Communication skills and general knowledge: for example, the ability to tell stories; to communicate their own needs and wants in a socially appropriate way; some basic knowledge about life and the world around them; understanding the symbolic use of language.

If you are the parent of a young child, you'll recognise their many slips and little triumphs across these five domains. Every child will be more or less capable than others in each of them; nothing in development is uniform. But the AEDI

is a good guide to what early development as a human being is about – kids have to be aware of the world around them, be able to communicate in various ways, learn some self-control, and understand the feelings of others and be able to get along with other kids and adults.

All these areas of early development are 'doing', mastering something, coming to grips with reality, learning how to 'get around' in the world of other people, and placing the self in relation to others. Life is not about ego-tripping, or pleasing your parents; it's about knowing your way around – that's what all the intelligences are, ways of making things happen, forging a pathway through life and its many challenges. Intelligence is an applied skill, not some free-floating entity inside the brain.

"… staff assumptions that parents had taught adequate social skills were not well-founded."

The index is not a test or a hurdle every child must jump before they start school. It does not diagnose specific learning disabilities, who needs extra assistance, or who should be held back from starting school. Nor can it be used to tell which teachers are 'failing' or what methods work best. But it can suggest, for example, that in a particular community, there is an overall deficit in behavioural control (children unable to self-manage, control tempers, etc.), or reading awareness (some kids have no books in the home, don't know how to 'look at' a picture and 'read' it, never play word games in the car), or communication skills (such as the ability to tell a story, follow a sequence, have a bit of general knowledge as the basis for conversation).

At Williamstown Primary School in Melbourne's inner west, the principal, Bill Green, and his staff identified a lack of social skills among their students. They sensed that children were coming to school overly anxious about their ability to cope, and decided that staff assumptions that parents had taught adequate social skills were not well-founded. In Green's view, today's parents indulge their kids too much, reward them inappropriately for little improvements in behaviour, and seem to believe that as parents they can and should 'get it right'. If they fail with their kids, something or someone else must be to blame, or they should be able to buy in a solution.

Instead of accepting that 'It's OK just to be OK', they expect too much of their children and of themselves. Green calls this the insecurity of the age: 'an absolute fear of not being liked or loved, whereas previous generations took it for granted that their kids loved them, it was no big deal'. The children at his school were coming to class not knowing how to interact with other children, unwilling to share, 'happy to be in their little cocoon of delights'.

Green and his staff developed a program entitled 'Willy Kids are Friendly Kids', to improve the tone of the school. The impact on both student behaviour and achievement has been remarkable. Broad themes are agreed for each term – courtesy, respect, cooperation, responsibility – and then broken down into weekly activities that each teacher develops in their own way with each class. For example, the theme of courtesy ranges over ideas such as smile; listen; please and thank you; give way; excuse me/sorry; taking turns; being helpful; and punctuality. The theme of responsibility covers activities based on doing your best; setting goals; who can help me?; consequences; seeing it through; having a go; and being positive. Teachers model these behaviours throughout the school, reinforce and reward special efforts, and draw parents into the process through newsletters and school meetings. The school has hired a qualified specialist (forsaking expenditure on other things) to liaise between parents, teachers, outside experts, and family support agencies in the local community where children need additional help.

An early childhood curriculum

The remarkable thing about education policy has been its blind spot in relation to informal learning, especially the significance of what happens in the home.

For too long it was assumed parenting came naturally; at least now there are better attempts at teaching parents about how children develop (though there is still too much reliance on offering a few website hints and evening classes on 'good parenting'). Worse, schools have only reluctantly welcomed parents as 'partners' in the education of their children, with a consequent failure to build on every parent's intimate knowledge of their child's strengths and weaknesses. Because of bureaucratic divisions, schools have also ignored the wider learning resources of the community (such as local libraries, the availability of good

playgrounds, the presence of a growing number of 'elders' in the community who might know something of value to young people). And too many teachers have refused to see the learning potential of television, and now characterise computers as the magic way forward, instead of thinking more broadly about a whole new way of learning.

As described in Part II, television programs such as *Sesame Street* and the Australian pre-school program *Lift-Off* can be designed with children's developmental needs in mind. Just as *Sesame Street* was linked with America's Head Start program for disadvantaged children, so *Lift-Off* was designed to enable its lessons to be reinforced throughout every home, child-care centre, and school in the nation, through a massive outreach program. The program's philosophy and objectives still serve well as a model for how we should approach the new childhood faced by today's children. They were based in part on Gardner's work on multiple intelligences, but went much further. *Lift-Off's* theoretical position was that parents and educators have several inter-connected tasks:

> To intrigue and delight young children.
>
> To develop and expand the competence of young children across every domain of human capacity and skill.
>
> To contribute to the richness of the whole child by extending the child's horizons and by amplifying his/her innate capacity and desire to question, explore, experiment, discover, cope and learn.
>
> To foster the child's capacity to contribute responsibly to the lives of those around him/her and to the world at large.

This is a very different set of tasks from merely teaching children to read and write, to behave well in class, or to be successful in school examinations. The program's guiding philosophy went well beyond just trying to make individual children feel good about themselves:

> There is a need to move away from a focus on 'self' towards fostering a sense of responsibility for others and of the mutual interdependency of the

human family on this fragile planet, a focus on what the child (given the full development of potential) can contribute to the world around.

We need children who are vital, playful and inquiring, with a broad-based range of capacities and skills. The art of parenting and teaching children is to strike a balance between, on the one hand, a challenge which extends the child and invites a reaching out and, on the other, an achievability and familiarity which provides a secure, safe intellectual and emotional context in which every child can be playful, exploratory and risk-taking.

Young children live and grow with us in their and our present, and ultimately that is sufficient justification for the highest quality of care, nurturance and education for them.

Childhood is not simply a preparation for life. It is life.

The Curriculum Board of Australia adopted the framework unanimously, and published books for teachers on how to use the program and children's storybooks based on *Lift-Off* characters and stories. Every organisation involved with children in Australia cooperated in the outreach program. It lasted for the time *Lift-Off* was broadcast by the ABC. Once that stimulus was withdrawn, the whole program could not be sustained, but the effort was not in vain. Virtually every state has a curriculum framework for early childhood development. Most look very similar to the *Lift-Off* framework, except that they tend not to have such a holistic approach, and few of them even consider the role television and other media play in the growing understanding of every child.

It is time for the federal government to fund a similar program for early childhood now. Furthermore, given the dominance of media in the lives of children and in their informal learning, no successful education program in any subject can avoid integrating media with the wider curriculum, and no education revolution is worthy of the name (and will fail) unless media literacy and media production are central. A computer on every desk is only a start.

Every school a digital school

The education revolution means the government and schools will be spending $1 billion over four years to make every school a digital school. Computers will not only open up the limitless resources and information to be found on the Web; they can transform learning in many ways. We are living through a time of transition where kids are learning faster than their parents and teachers. As they grow up to be parents we can expect they will be more knowledgeable technically than their parents are now, and more in control of their children's mastery of new technology. Today's digital natives will be tomorrow's digital elders.

The British film producer David Puttnam, whose movies include *Midnight Express* and *Chariots of Fire,* has become concerned with media education through various of his public roles: first as chairman of the National Film and Television School in London, but more recently as chairman of Futurelab, a British agency dedicated to furthering innovation in education through new practices and new technologies. Part of the challenge for educators is to think differently about the nature, purpose, and practice of education in the 21st century, Lord Puttnam says:

> For the first time in history teachers are being asked to prepare a generation for a world they could not envisage. Yet the education system remains relatively unchanged and is more attuned to the immediate past than the immediate future. The learning opportunities offered by such technologies as multiplayer online games are being overlooked … Education systems need to protect the ethos or they will be swamped and overtaken by the commercial market. Steal the technology, steal the ideas, use the energy and inventiveness, but protect the values you are teaching …

He is very critical of education systems where teachers lack the technological know-how to be effective teachers in the new century:

> Students are forced to power down when they enter the classroom to cope with their teachers who are suspicious of technology and begrudging of its place in schools. Are we going to allow the disconnect between learners' everyday lives and experience of formal education to grow from a gap to a

chasm? Are we going to allow it to get to the point where the entire process of learning has atrophied beyond the point of salvation? Should we fail to accept this potential we run the risk of relegating education to second-class status in the information world.

Futurelab is involved on a continuing basis on research that brings new media into the classroom. Some of its projects include game design: *Astroversity* uses game technology to support the development of scientific inquiry skills in students aged 12 to 14; *Newtoon* allows young people to write and play microgames on their mobile phones, using the principles of Newtonian physics as part of the game rules; *Ecolibrium,* which can be accessed from home or school, is an internet-based virtual world where children can create their own creatures and then observe their interaction with the ecosystem.

"… learning and games-playing should come together."

Professor Stephen Hempel's research in the UK has revealed that a very clear set of strategies has been evolved by children playing computer games. To succeed in even the simplest game children have to lock their problem-solving into a tight cycle of observe, question, hypothesise, test. This exactly matches the scientific method that education has been trying to embed in young scientists since the birth of science. Because teachers and policymakers did not play those early games, they had no idea just how sophisticated the young learners' iterative strategies were. Now that education and games are literally starting to speak the same language, learning and games-playing should come together. Kids love to learn, kids love to play. But it has taken us a long time to make progress towards putting those two facts together.

This time around, teachers will not be able to ignore and denigrate the technology as they did with television. The forces of change are upon them. Extensive, effective, teacher training programs are required. It will be important to demystify the technology. Computers are a communication tool with expanding dimensions and interactive capabilities. As they become more widely accessible in schools, the potential for students to both research and create material will allow teachers to shift to a mentoring role. If teachers are not trained adequately, students who are not well facilitated will blunder their way round the Web in search of information, and teaching programs will fail.

Parents have a role in this too. Some parents are already working to ensure the internet is a safe and constructive medium to aid their children's learning; they monitor their kids' time on the Web, the games they are playing, where they are surfing, and the computer is located in a public space where it is possible to supervise; not in a bedroom. Trust plays an important part in the relationship that must be built up between parent and child to enable free and safe usage of this extraordinary technical resource. This is as it should be.

The trend towards family game development could help lead parents to monitor their children's behaviour when they are gaming and playing online, to actively play games with them, and also to lay down some ethical rules to follow. Online games have become infinitely more complex over the past decade. The majority of gamers are male, but the Entertainment Software Rating Board, which oversees the self-regulation of gaming in the US, says that 41 per cent of PC gamers are women, and with mobile phones, this figure reaches 50 per cent. Parents are becoming more familiar with gaming online through the digitising of casual games like solitaire and board games such as Monopoly and Scrabble, part of a new movement toward intergenerational family gaming. Stephen Spielberg has collaborated with Electronic Arts on a puzzle game designed for Nintendo's Wii console that the entire family can play together. This trend opens up opportunities for educational games to be produced that can reach children and their families at home. And this is the very positive side of the internet revolution.

Teach ethics through narratives

Part of a school's job is to teach children how to develop as good citizens able to live in a community. As a society we have done little reflection about the constraints we should have on the pursuits of individual self-interest, and what our responsibilities are to each other. Children need to study ethical behaviour, and politicians should keep well clear of defining the curriculum content. But by their behaviour, the standards they set, the morality of their actions, political leaders set the tone for the society as a whole. We cannot have respect for one another if we cannot respect our political institutions. Kevin Rudd has a most important challenge to restore respect for government after the Howard years, when public cynicism toward politicians reached an all-time high. It's a much

easier task for parents to develop respect in their children if there are leaders we can respect.

When we were children we were cocooned in stories where the 'goodies' and the 'baddies' were obvious: the good guy always won. We grew up to understand life was more complex than that, but we developed a kind of moral compass to guide us. Television has played an important role through quality news and current affairs to disabuse us of moral certitude, by showing a world far less black and white in the values it portrays. It has helped expose the corruption, hypocrisy. and cynicism of our economic and political system, but it has also exploited its excesses.

Media and advertising have pushed the boundaries of acceptable behaviour and been so successful in commercialising the seamy and immoral side of life that we aren't sure we know what's right from wrong any more. Politicians lie blatantly. Old testament values are back; an eye for an eye. And as President George W. Bush once said, 'You are either with us or you are against us'. In the past decade, we have had to grapple with images revealing the existence of a brand of terrorism that has no regard for innocent victims. We have been confronted with violence so evil, so vicious, nihilistic, and insane that we don't know how to respond. And children watch us as we watch these images and listen to the politicians' confused rhetoric.

Defining the good guys and the bad guys is not so easy any more. Parents struggle with these tough issues, while the media, governed by the bottom line, push program content to new limits and depths, to titillate audiences and engage newer and younger children as 'markets' in ways we would never have contemplated a decade ago.

Media organisations can't be left to go their own way without restraint. With their comprehensive reach and wide appeal, mass media are central to developing narratives to teach an overarching set of values including respect for others. Neil Postman, an influential American sociologist, argued 15 years ago that schools can do this by teaching about the 'transcendent narratives' of our time. He deplored what he described as 'the descent into barbarism represented by the common gods schools are now forced to serve: the God of economic utility, which tells kids how to make a living, not how to make a life; the God of

consumerism, which tells kids they are not what they do but what they own, or the God of technology, which insists that the main purpose of learning is to help the young accommodate themselves to technological change, to become what the technology will make them become, not what they have the potential to be'.

'Transcendent narratives' construct ideals, prescribe rules of conduct, provide a source of authority and give a sense of continuity and purpose to our lives. But identifying these narratives has become a challenge we haven't yet been able to meet. As prime minister, John Howard recognised a lack of values in our culture which he wanted to overcome by the compulsory teaching of history to our children and our immigrants – but his was a narrow brand of nationalistic history based around a set of chosen 'facts'.

The great narratives that used to inform Australian education and were the basis of the revival of our film industry in the 1970s were the stories of our convict origins; our irreverence, anti-authoritarianism, egalitarianism, mateship, and the fair go; the pioneers' struggle to explore and settle the bush; the Anzacs' sacrifice; the family and the suburban dream; the story of our multicultural society. Such narratives, conveyed through schooling and the study of our history and literature, gave a sense of meaning and purpose to our lives. We understood who we were and where we came from: we were Australians, not an inferior class of British or American. We learnt what that meant.

Among our heroes were a bushranger – Ned Kelly – and a horse – Phar Lap – both symbols of difficult eras. Both were the subject of films. Other movies with classic Australian narratives included *Gallipoli, Breaker Morant, Sunday Too Far Away, My Brilliant Career, Picnic at Hanging Rock, and The Last Wave;* then there were television series like *All the Rivers Run* and miniseries like *The Dismissal, Power Without Glory,* and *Bodyline.*

Now we are preoccupied with the stories of celebrities – Shane Warne, Ben Cousins, Wayne Carey, Kylie Minogue, Paris Hilton, Britney Spears, and other sport stars, pop idols or stars of reality television. 'Britney Spears' was the most popular search term with Yahoo's Australian users in 2007. Our transcendent narrative is consumerism – McDonald's, the McMansion, and shopping. Decent core values are hard to find within our institutions generally, but the media we are steeped in too often represent the very worst of our culture. Children

have little hope of resisting these values when their parents don't seem able to. Perhaps it's not surprising that our film industry is in the doldrums along with our children's television, unable to find and write the stories to which audiences will respond.

Our stories about mateship, collaboration, and community have been replaced by thin and crass stories about individual, not collective, responsibility for our lives; infinite market growth, and the god called the bottom line; freedom to covet material goods; fear of refugees taking what's 'ours' away from us; terrorists among us; soft porn everywhere we look: certainly not stories about idealism.

The mass media and the arts industries are weathervanes of the times. The best stories will reflect what is going wrong in our society, examining the conflicts people face through strong and complex characters. They reflect social truths and present cautionary tales about what is happening to the social fabric. We should not shy away from depicting violence, even to children; it is what we say about violence that is important. Is it represented in context; does it illuminate the human condition, give us greater understanding of its origins and how we should respond? Children need to understand these things as do all adults.

The new individualism – everyone for themselves and their family, not for community – brings its own ethical and moral dilemmas. We have already seen the phenomenon of Smart Mobs and 'swarming' to bring people together quickly. The idea started out as fun. Hundreds of people registered on Flash mob websites to receive emails instructing them where to meet. People got together for 10 minutes then disappeared. In Rome, one mob arrived at a bookshop and proceeded to ask bewildered staff for a list of non-existent books. In Berlin, another group marched onto a busy street whipped out their mobile phones and shouted 'yes, yes' in unison.

Not all mobs are harmless however, as the Cronulla riots in Sydney demonstrated. Word of the gathering was spread quickly by group text messages, along the lines of 'Come to Cronulla this weekend to take revenge. This Sunday every Aussie in the Shire get down to North Cronulla to support Leb and wog bashing day.' On the streets of Melbourne we are seeing this phenomenon at work increasingly. Such actions demonstrate the far reaching power of the new media technologies.

Our task for the future and for our new government must surely be to reclaim for our kids the human element, to rejuvenate our sense of common good, and place schools at the centre of the transcendent narratives of the present and the future. A computer on every desk and the ability to access the internet must be accompanied by careful guidance and teaching from both teachers and parents. It may be that children will learn more respect for different races, colours, and creeds as they encounter them through the World Wide Web. But families, schools, and the media should convey narratives which offer guidance, and demonstrate moral limits to what is acceptable behaviour and some sense that there are human limits to self-assertion both in a global and in a virtual world. A cultural renewal is required.

Today, the most important new narrative is the story of the planet on which we are bound in a common destiny. We are all caretakers of the Earth and its environment; we are all affected by pollution and inequality. Global warming is already undermining the Earth's natural life support systems: it threatens the systems humans depend on for survival, and threatens the processes underpinning our economy, social stability and life processes. As record numbers forsake religion, which has prescribed a value base for society for centuries, saving our world environment provides a transcendent narrative that unites us all in our own interests. A second, related story is of the clash of civilisations, which demands understanding and tolerance from us, if there is to be a resolution. Australia has a strong history as a land of immigrants who have lived together with broad racial tolerance. As new citizens from Britain are declining, eight of the top 10 nations from which new citizens came in 2006 were non-English-speaking, and Chinese and Indian migration are increasing. The story to tell all children is that we are developing a complex and diverse multicultural society, a unique social experiment in the world. For most of these new citizens Australia is seen as a great place to live; we should make it a country worthy of their emotional commitment, not one where they are designated inferior to be set apart in separate schools and communities.

> ***"Today, the most important new narrative is the story of the planet on which we are bound in a common destiny."***

How do we generate cultural renewal? What are the steps to be taken? One very good example of cultural renewal is Al Gore's fervent crusade to halt global warming's deadly progress in its tracks by exposing the myths and misconceptions that surround it through his inspirational documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth.* This was an undistinguished piece of filmmaking – more like a PowerPoint presentation – but in its departure from the hackneyed concerns of most films, and its determination to involve ordinary people in the biggest issue of our day, it was extremely successful. Another powerful and meaningful step for cultural renewal was the simple apology to the stolen generations by the Prime Minister which moved so many Australians and generated goodwill which enabled indigenous leaders to sit down with elected leaders to plan with hope and determination for the future. It generated a large wave of follow-up discussions and 'sorry sites' on the World Wide Web. Both events provide models that give educationists something to think about in developing ethical responses to the problems around us.

Media literacy

Educators and governments worldwide recognise that media literacy is an important educational tool for children in the new millennium. Once again, Ofcom is demonstrating the kind of leadership we would like to see more of from ACMA in Australia. In May, 2008, the British media regulator brought together in London a combination of world-class experts for an international media literacy research forum conference to develop the concept.

For kids to best understand the new technology and how to use it effectively, media literacy education should be a compulsory subject at all levels of schooling – part of the core national curriculum. The subject needs a production component, and a critical as well as an ethical and philosophical component, alongside practical techniques on how to navigate and participate in the media responsibly and safely. This is not another additional burden on an already overcrowded curriculum, it is the underlying core to using technology well throughout the curriculum as a whole.

In many states in Australia YouTube, Flickr, MySpace, Facebook and other social networking sites are banned from use on school computers. This is a

very shortsighted approach to education for the New Child. Now that kids can create their own films and place them on YouTube, they need proper training to express and structure their 'own voice'; to script, direct, and edit. We should start with children as young as six – the Club Penguin devotees who are learning how to create their own penguin personas, meet friends to play together online, and master the technology. Teachers and parents need to be their guides in this process, and in teaching them what is appropriate and inappropriate to create and distribute.

Control of media content and production should not simply pass into the hands of children; they will always need guidance. Skilled as they may be at using mobile phones, MP3 players, computers and SMS texting, they are not always thoughtful or critical about what they are doing. Without training, their messages will be less informed and effective in persuading others to their view. Children need to understand how media is produced, how it is structured, how advertising works, how they may access the media, and what they need to be aware of when they do so. Then their voices will be more resonant. As part of a media literacy program kids also need to be taught the difference between information and knowledge; plagiarism; copyright; and moral rights.

There are serious issues involved with free roaming of the internet which kids need to understand early. They should be encouraged and assisted to develop a code of ethics governing responsible behaviour on the Net, including who to chat to, what unpleasant surprises they may find there, and how to protect themselves. Stranger-danger has taken on a new meaning in cyberspace, where exploitative adults lurk in chat-rooms waiting to contact the young. Pornography is one of the biggest revenue earners on the internet and the operators of porn sites are among the biggest generators of spam. The US porn industry is said to be worth $12 billion. It is inevitable your child will encounter online pornography. Although the Australian government is working to establish a 'clean feed' to eliminate porn, it is highly unlikely this will be 100 per cent successful, because porn has gone mainstream. Society's idea of what defines pornography has changed as we now see billboards and television programs with images that would not have been in the public domain even 10 years ago.

The debate about porn is now so confusing that the authors of *The Porn Report* argue there is 'good', 'ethical' porn and 'bad' porn. There is 'couples porn', 'feminist'

porn, 'hardcore' and 'misogynist' porn. So where do kids stand in this debate? How are we supposed to enlighten them about the subtleties of pornography, when on the drive to school they can see a massive billboard advertising Wrangler jeans with a headless model pulling her pants down to show her backside crack? Once children enter cyberworld where all types of pornography are pervasive, and those involved are experts in encryption and dissemination, children need to be prepared. Kids have to be taught not all adults are responsible people and there are rules of conduct for a decent civil society.

"Kids can now bully in cyberspace … and adults can be shut out by a password."

As part of a code of ethics kids also need to understand the ramifications of cyber-bullying: children and their parents and teachers need to be engaged with behavioural experts in workshops and programs about 'netiquette', to help deal with these issues. Intimidation and bitchiness are easy in an environment that is largely unsupervised. Kids can now bully in cyberspace where they have access to a free chat service and where they are not held accountable, and adults can be shut out by a password. Or they can send anonymous threatening messages via a mobile phone: 'We're watching you, we know your every move, tell any one about these messages and we get you and your sister'. The West Australian government will spend $400,000 on a world-first, five-year study into cyber-bullying, after an initial survey indicated that 15 per cent of students had experienced such harassment.

An education revolution? Quality is the answer

No true education revolution can succeed without a major physical and organisational revamp of our schools. If we want children to see education as an enjoyable challenge, schools have to be physically attractive, welcoming, and engaging places.

Look at your own local school and compare it with the most affluent private schools. There's no comparison, and we are short-changing most of our children by neglecting the physical planning and design of buildings, playgrounds, and

related support services for the majority of the nation's schools. There are 6853 state-provided schools in Australia today. Putting more money into each one hardly seems difficult when we commit $6 billion to a set of 24 outmoded Super Hornet jets and $15 billion to Joint Strike Fighter jets by 2013. A school made up of 1950s prefabricated chook-pens, surrounded by fences, hard asphalt surfaces, and stuck on an isolated suburban block, just won't measure up. The Rudd government's move to alter the funding formula for all schools to reflect the socio-economic status of students' families may go some way to rectify the glaring gap in school facilities and resources. But area disadvantage includes poorer services in general, not just in the schools, and government will have to provide more than money to overcome that inequality in children's life chances.

If parents are 'the child's first educators', then schools must involve parents closely in every decision about their child's schooling and become part of the process of extending their child into formal as opposed to informal learning. This does not mean parents challenging every decision or action of the teacher; it means working with teachers in full knowledge of what is the learning task, what methods are sound, and what results they are looking for. Above all, it means engaging parents to be enthusiastic about learning, to convey positive motivation, and encourage curiosity and effort on the part of their children. It means teaching parents about healthy child development, about the nature of intelligences and individual differences, and how to temper their own expectations and create optimal learning for every child.

Schools in Australia (August, 2007)		
Government schools	6853	71.5%
Private schools	2728	28.5%
Primary only		70.8%
Secondary only		16.2%
Combined		13%

Full-time students:	3,416,523
Government schools:	66.4% (down from 70.3 per cent in 1997)
Private schools:	43.4% (up from 21.4 per cent in 1997)
Participation rates:	
14 year-olds	98.4%
15-year-olds	94.5%
16-year-olds	84.5%
17-year-olds	64.5%
Retention rate year 7–12:	
Female	80.2%
Male	68.8%
Indigenous	42.9%

Source: ABS release 4221.0

This statistical portrait of the Australian school system is shocking, in its way. It reflects a large flight to private schools in the space of just a decade, and a retention rate that falters badly as students approach the final year of high school. It's also noticeable that far more girls than boys stay on to complete year 12. The retention rate for indigenous students is particularly disastrous.

If children are to learn respect for expertise and experience, teachers must be the best qualified of all the professions but, unfortunately, many are not. There is no excuse for teachers being unable to spell or write grammatically, and no excuse for conveying incorrect information or ill-informed views. Kids with a computer on their desk can look up Wikipedia in a flash and contradict a teacher anyway. Teachers need subject matter expertise, not just a training in teaching methods, and their pay should be commensurate with their training level and comparative effectiveness in getting kids to learn.

In our view, the word 'teaching' is a misrepresentation of the task of guiding children's learning today. Though they may sound like jargon, terms such as

'learning navigator', 'mentor', 'subject matter expert', 'group tutor', 'seminar leader', better match the learning situation . Not every teacher has to be good at 'lecturing' or 'explaining'; some are better at running group discussions, one-on-one tutoring, or remedial tutoring. Not all will have computer expertise, but they should all be able to guide students to find the best information, show them how to organise knowledge, how to tackle problems, apply critical thinking, and explain the scientific method and how historical investigations work – the uses of evidence, hypotheses, and theories.

Learning theorist Lev Vygotsky argued that when children work alone (as on a puzzle, or building a tower) they rarely stop to think about their process of thinking. Good teaching is a collaboration, where a parent or a teacher can structure learning to lead the child through that next step between what he knows already and ultimate mastery, at an appropriately challenging level of difficulty. The Reggio Emelia kindergarten approach, and several state education departments, have built on this idea of 'scaffolding' the child's learning through collaboration and individual, active learning guided by the teacher's expertise. The New Child will increasingly locate his own information, and carry out his own experiments and projects. The teacher then has to become a 'scaffolder', a guide to help the child discriminate between sound and unsound information, informed and uninformed opinion, valid resources and reliable methods of investigation; she is a helpful critic and evaluator, not a top-down 'instructor' in the old teaching style.

If children are to see education as a lifelong enterprise, there should be people of every age at school engaged in new learning. And if education is to develop the capacity of the whole child, then schools must draw on the resources of the wider community, be closely involved with family support services and the health system, and have close institutional links with the business community, local government and the law. In our view, primary schools should be converted into something like 'community learning centres', co-located and working cooperatively with maternal and child health centres, local libraries, child care, parent education classes, even aged care facilities, where young and old can interact, older people (not only parents) may serve as tutors or mentors, giving the child a sense that everyone is always learning, everyone has something of value to contribute.

The Victorian government has made a move in this direction with integrated children's hubs, and by implementing recommendations for children's resource zones, where all child-related services are linked at the local level through early learning plans and community forums to develop those resources best suited to the needs of local families. Its 2008 Blueprint for Early Childhood Development and School Reform aims at a much greater integration across services in the cause of learning. The federal government has also made a start on integrating services for Aboriginal children and families in the Northern Territory and Mount Isa, Queensland. It is pointless to have separate, unlinked services which parents find hard to locate, with costly duplication and no concerted approach to meeting families' needs. At the very least, primary schools should be sources for community and family information – how to find local family support services, play groups, medical specialists available to parents in the locality or region, providing notices of local events, sports meetings and so on.

"The pooling of resources is the best way to overcome financial shortages and shortcomings in (school) facilities."

The pooling of resources is the best way to overcome financial shortages and shortcomings in facilities. School buildings and grounds are community facilities, part of a community's infrastructure, not to be isolated and kept apart as if learning is separate from life outside. Small schools could share administrators, pool equipment and services, and swap teachers, instead of being isolated, unequal little enclaves.

We believe our secondary system is badly organised, and not well designed to meet the needs of the New Child. As we discussed earlier, brain development undergoes another surge at puberty, and teens lack the capacity to plan their actions well, to apply what is called the 'executive function' of the brain. That means a different approach is needed for children aged 11 to 15. In middle school, the focus should be on practical, project-oriented tasks. These should be group projects, with students working cooperatively to solve problems, rather than competing individually. They should be practical, because in these years puberty and hormonal changes make abstract thinking harder, and motivation quixotic. A community focus would help, such as helping run the local library

or building a new playground, but the foundations of the academic disciplines need to be laid in these years with no apology.

Hard effort should be required, as in Eltham College's hospitality industry course, which is based around a first-rate public restaurant where students learn the full range of restaurant management skills. And, above all, hard physical activity (preferably in the afternoons) should break the day and the passivity of schoolroom work for adolescents. That we have allowed school sports and physical education training to lapse from many school curricula is a disaster.

At 15 or16, the New Child should be ready to move on to a senior college, marking their greater maturity and mastery, beginning to study specialist subject matter and prepare for the challenges of tertiary education and vocational training. It would probably be a good idea to combine these colleges with TAFE colleges, because our current secondary schools are too much oriented to a university destination. Simply adding on a few technical subjects, or having VET courses run in schools in isolation from the further education experts of TAFE seems illogical. Moreover, it is important at this level to reinforce the idea that education does not stop at the end of schooling, is not limited to academic study at university, that adults are still learning and 'dropping back in' to pick up new skills, upgrade previous skills, find a new vocation.

At this level, there should be no backing away from education as job preparation, but narrow job specialisation needs to be discouraged. Business and community leaders need to be closely involved with these senior colleges, so that courses offered are relevant to local and regional needs; they should not be the sole preserve of teachers or the education departments. Education is too important for the nation to leave it in the hands of those who don't understand how the economy works or how it is changing. These would be the ideal elements of an education revolution.

The Rudd revolution

So how does the Rudd government's proposed 'education revolution' measure up against our expectations?

Much has been said about the proposal to provide a computer for every student in years nine to 12, to make every school 'a digital school', but Labor's policy is more than that. Part of the money is to go towards improved broadband speeds. Teachers are to receive extra training, Web portals for parents will be developed, and robust new filtering technology provided to trap internet nasties.

Moreover, the stated policy recognises that 'computer technology is no longer just a key subject to learn, it is now the key to learning in almost every subject'. It mentions examples such as maths and financial spreadsheets, historical visual tours, virtual farming, computer-aided design, architectural 3D models, manufacturing robotics, time-lapse photography in biology or monitoring experiments, access to e-books and documentaries, long-distance teleconferencing, and communication with overseas experts. Such opportunities for the New Child did not exist even 10 years ago and should revolutionise the education process.

However the revolution needed to transform education for the 21st century is not simply technical and methodological. A new vision is required, that recognises the opportunities for the development of creativity by children as active producers, and for interactive communication between young people globally through the use of new media.

That is where much work still needs to be done. It won't be enough to train teachers to use the internet well, or provide help with computer infrastructure (and there are already criticisms that federal funds will not be available for such support). What is needed is a whole revolution in the concept of teaching, learning and communication. Education has to go outside the local school. Children – certainly older students – will not need to come to school at all, other than to be guided, assessed, and redirected to more positive pathways. They may need to sit in local libraries, local businesses, at home, not in a rigidly designed classroom.

The Rudd government has committed to a $1.9 billion increase in Commonwealth funding for government schools over the next five years. This includes benchmark funding of $9000 per primary school student and $12,000 per secondary student. It also plans to spend $810 million to help 'struggling' schools become high achieving schools, $428 million for students with special

needs, $179 million for indigenous students, and $380 million targeted at students with a disability. That sounds impressive but is, in our view, merely patching up an ailing system. We need a much more integrated approach, as outlined above, based on what we know about child development and the needs and aptitudes of the New Child.

A more promising aspect of Labor's education platform is a clear recognition of the importance of the early years of child development. Their Early Childhood Plan aims to lift investment in the early years to OECD standards – currently Australia spends only one fifth of other OECD countries' investment in this area, just 0.1 per cent of GDP compared with an average of 0.5 per cent GDP.

"What is needed is a whole revolution in the concept of teaching, learning and communication."

Parents anxious about giving their children the best possible start now pay out several thousand dollars a year for private child care and pre-school classes. The government's goal is to ensure that every four-year-old has access to 15 hours a week, 40 weeks a year of high quality child care, in centres run by a qualified early childhood teacher. It will lift the child-care rebate to 50 per cent of parental costs (up to a top of $7500 per child); will establish 260 new long day-care centres (an acknowledgement that 14 hours a week for four-year-olds does not really meet the needs of working parents); and invest $77 million in training and further education for child-carers. Given the importance of the early years to later development and productivity, we see no reason why the federal government should not be funding at least half the costs of universal child care and pre-school education.

Since the majority of child-care workers have no training in early childhood development or education, it is vital for every centre to have at least one such qualified staff member, to guarantee the needs of children are properly met and staff-child ratios are in place. Victoria is trying to end the old distinction between child care and kindergartens – the notion that only kinder is 'educational' and child care is 'just child-minding' – because both experiences are vital to the child's development. A better term would be 'Early Learning Centre' for all of them, insisting that every location offers a variety ranging from short-term care,

to long day care, to pre-school classes and parent support services. The best of the Children's Hubs and the Best Start programs (several aimed at Aboriginal and other disadvantaged children) are already doing this.

When you look closely at the Rudd revolution, the right signs are there. We await their implementation.

CONCLUSION

The raw material of the future

The status of children in Australian society is at tipping point.

We currently have about four million children, aged 14 or under. That's about a fifth of the national population of 21 million. Families with young children are already well and truly a minority of Australian households, and by 2020, children will be less numerous than the group aged 65 plus. Their claims to attention from government and the wider community are already under threat from the growing numbers of aged, singles, and migrants – the aged who will demand more funding for care, the singles who often resent paying for anything that looks like favouritism for families, and the migrants whose skills are cheaper to import than to inculcate in our own offspring.

The New Child's future will hold challenges we have never faced – responsibility as carers for a growing number of older people; the challenge of repeatedly retraining and redefining their expertise for jobs not yet invented; the urgent need to adjust their lifestyles because of global warming, rising sea levels, water refugees, and global unrest; and the shift in free market ideology and consumerism required by those same challenges. It is the current generation of children that will forge a far-reaching accommodation between nature and human intervention, redefining the rights of the individual to unfettered choice in the saner direction of human survival through cooperation and care; from what you own to what you do, especially with others, both in a private and a communal sense.

Who then are the New Children this book has described? The majority of them start out life with two loving parents, but complexity makes family life an

uncertain experience. One in every 10 children lives with cohabiting de facto parents, and not within a formal marriage arrangement that offers them more legal protections. Though divorce rates have stabilised, one-fifth of all kids now live in a one-parent family, and a quarter of kids will spend at least some part of their lives in such an arrangement. Another 8 per cent live in a step or blended family. These children need inner resilience, and trustworthy reliable adults in their lives, no matter what their family type or circumstance.

"… new technology adds a potent element to the mix for families already struggling to adjust to change."

Today's children have older parents, generally both working, who want to be their friends rather than wise elders or authority figures. There are fewer siblings, so their family life is more adult-talk, adult-see, adult-copy as the gap between generations recedes. Because of a declining birth rate, there will be fewer peers around, and more time spent alone or in arms-length relationships with virtual friends. Today's children will be financially dependent on their parents for much longer – for schooling, further education, housing and care – and most will stay at home until their mid-thirties. But they will expect an independence in decision-making most offspring have never had before, taking risks with alcohol, drugs, money, and sexuality earlier in life, without the emotional maturity to always handle the consequences.

Close to a third of them will never marry, but they'll have plenty of experience of serial, short-term relationships. Their approach to emotional attachments will be, for some, more cavalier and immediately gratifying and, for others, a yearning for a perfect rather than an adequate partner for life. The search for spiritual meaning in life may well shift from a self-image based on what you buy to one based on mutual respect and communication, finding purpose in communal projects rather than private partnerships.

And while the majority of them are growing up amid an affluence not seen by previous generations, giving them new power as consumers, over a tenth of Australian children live below the poverty line, while 6.5 per cent have neither parent employed. They lack any model of consistent workplace attachment, and are in danger of falling into a new class of uneducated, untrained, alienated

poor. For the majority however, their parents are often out at work, with 65 per cent working more than 45 hours a week.

The traditional roles of men and women have shifted markedly, despite the faltering of feminism, and continued male resistance to change in the workplace culture. Harried, hurried, worried, today's new parents fear that they are not giving the New Child enough attention, and tend to overcompensate through gifts, agreed privileges, and by fostering relationships akin to friendship with their children, a choice their parents would never have contemplated. On the other hand, the New Child is so used to seeing mothers and fathers work outside the home that they are less fazed by this arrangement than their parents. They will certainly never revert to the breadwinner–housewife model of their grandparents' era. Paid employment is now part of the universal psyche.

Perhaps more influential in child–parent relationships has been the rapid development of new technology: it adds a potent element to the mix for families already struggling to adjust to change. The world of media marketing is out of control, leaving parents feeling powerless and confused. The New Child is technologically savvy and, at the click of a mouse, can shut parents out of the pages he has entered where there are no roadmaps, no guidelines, just market-led values, and where he can explore virtual worlds, adult porn, chat-rooms with strangers, unsorted information and opinions, as he tries to forge an identity via the internet.

The New Child spends up to seven hours a day on computers, mobile phones, iPods and interactive gaming, using technologies her parents do not always understand and entering virtual worlds her parents cannot always navigate. It's not so much the amount of time she spends using media that is concerning, as it is her bombardment with damaging messages about promiscuous sexuality, junk food, and celebrity role models who are personally out of control. The corporations' ruthless exploitation through media of children's newfound spending power has caused a crisis for parents and children alike.

Free-market sophistry asserts the rights of individuals who have not yet developed to the point of making informed choices about anything, let alone the way their bodies are used and abused. Governments have dodged away from regulation, and parents, wishing to be cool and not over-controlling, succumb

to every whim while worrying nonetheless that things are amiss. Meanwhile, the mass media have reneged on their responsibility to tell Australian stories and to educate the young through quality programming, in favour of crassly commercial 'reality' and infotainment formats aimed simply at selling.

The new technology has challenged the authority of grown-ups as experts and wise elders. Children now have direct access to diverse sources of information, countless authorities who know more than their parents. They can question, challenge, ignore, and mock what parents say about the world. And they do. Too many parents and teachers feel inadequate in face of this information onslaught, abdicating their proper role as mentors, modifiers, and navigators through the hazards of life.

The ideology of choice and individualism masks a rampant market scam urging kids to conform to the latest lifestyle fad. Such a market has, in itself, changed the nature of childhood – how children play, their peer group relationships, what they learn from adults compared with the mass media, how they see themselves, perhaps even the way their brains are wired.

The risks go well beyond outcomes for particular individuals or families. They are now reflected in the national health and wellbeing profile. While two-thirds of today's parents rate their children's health as excellent, more than a fifth of kids are obese or overweight. A quarter of children drink more soft drinks each day than water; one in 10 eat takeaway meals five times a month and have junky breakfasts. More than a third of children living within a radius of three kilometres of school are driven there, instead of walking. Worse, the culture of everyday alcoholic celebration, multiple liquor outlets, and alcopop drinks aimed at youth leads 10 per cent of young people aged 12 to 17 to weekly binge-drinking. Teen drug abuse and random violence in city streets is also on the increase.

The New Child is, in the main, immunised, sent to pre-school by age four, and variably well educated. She eats meals with both parents most of the time, spends three-and-a-half hours a day in physical activity, and is likely to play organised sport of some kind. Yet, as with all such statistics, it is the one-third who miss out, who fall at the bottom of the heap, the kids whose parents can't afford to educate them, feed and house them properly, or are unable to guide

behaviour in positive directions, that we should most worry about. And that is where we must demand more of government and of the school system.

Children need a new deal. They are fewer in number than ever before, but more vital to the future of the nation. Yet adults seem unable to deal with them in smarter ways that would encourage their full potential. Having kids should be the greatest pleasure life can offer, not a deadly serious business, but parents are becoming a burdened minority, left to cope with their children with less and less support from the rest of the community. We think they need to smarten up their game by insisting that kids be kids, and by demanding that governments, schools, employers, and the media wake up to their responsibilities for the next generation. Parents, however, cannot do it all alone.

They must commit to gaining a better understanding of the process of sound child development, to setting limits, and asserting their experience and responsibility to guide children towards a mature sense of their own capabilities. But they need support in this. Australia long ago ratified ILO Convention 145 on Workers with Family Responsibilities, but we have failed to enforce it or do much about re-educating employers, managers, and supervisors so they act on it. Parents need to work, but they need to be able to meet their family responsibilities as well. Just as we enforced equal opportunity and affirmative action legislation, so too should government enforce those provisions preventing discrimination on grounds of family responsibilities. It is not beyond our capacity as a nation to pay for parental leave in the same way many European countries have for years.

It is a national necessity that parents be available to raise their children as they see fit, and not be forced to farm them out too young to long-day child-care centres, or to grandmothers who may prefer or need to stay in paid employment. The quality of all non-parental care needs to be monitored and mandated. It's up to government to enforce such a changed work-family culture through the provision of appropriate maternal and parental leave, just for a start. Damage is being done to the fabric of family life, and to the experience of children, by every employer who turns a blind eye to the value of helping parents attend to their family's needs. The best companies accept that need, develop sensible policies and work-family programs, and then reap the benefits in better recruitment, retention, and performance.

Teachers and schools must smarten up their act. We now know a great deal more about the brain's development and the complex nature of intelligence in its many forms than we did even two decades ago. We understand the importance of the early years for a child's development. We need curricula and teaching methods that use that knowledge and build up every child's capacity to be 'brainy', not just those tested to give the school a reputation.

As well, parents, teachers, and the schools have to step in and fill the gap left by the declining influence of churches, community organisations, and kids' clubs in teaching the New Child about social relationships – how to share, cooperate, take turns, be courteous to and respectful of others, taking responsibility for their own actions – skills once reinforced by just about every adult the child encountered, now undermined by a culture of self-indulgence and immediate gratification. Teachers alone cannot do this of course; they must enlist parents and other professionals to help build a school climate where such values of civility surround the child and spread outward into the wider community.

Learning is today driven by the learner, equipped with multiple forms of technology, and teaching is a new business. Learning has to be community-based, life-long, directed to full brain development and the nurturing of talent in its many forms. Teachers have to be the brightest, best-trained, best-paid professionals we can find. Schools must be designed as community learning centres, with education seen as an enjoyable, challenging, fulfilling enterprise for life. And educators must adapt to the new learning technologies, not turn their backs on the energy and potential clearly there. No education revolution will be effective if it squanders the educational potential of the media – as it currently does – and fails to incorporate new information technology and an extensive media production program for children into its plans.

Governments have to come to terms with the abuses which come from so-called self-regulation of the market: abuses now threatening children's health and wellbeing, pushing a false maturity onto children who think they are individuals but who lack the psychological maturity to see through the mass-produced images and forge their own autonomy as ethical citizens and responsible adults. Obese, sick, dumbed-down kids will not be able to take charge of the future.

There has to be an integrated effort, not the usual piecemeal approach where one department is responsible for schools, another for child care, another for

youth, housing, health, urban planning. Above all, we urge a more integrated, cross-departmental focus on children and their families as a whole, less division between bits and pieces. Childhood health cannot be separated from urban planning, child care from workplace regulation, child protection from preventive family support services, yet that's too often the way it is. The only way to guarantee making a dent in disadvantage for indigenous children is to make sure they have quality pre-schools, schools and job training, and work hard to be an Aboriginal person within that mainstream, not at the disadvantaged margins.

We need an overall Children's Framework, to be applied to every form of government activity.

Such a concentrated focus on children and their best interests would probably remove some of the ambiguity around the diversity and relative legitimacy of family types: all children regardless of family type need a better deal. Children are children, and if proposed government actions are cross-checked against the interests of good child development and learning, we will get a clearer picture. For example, we would be able to ask local government, why is the litter not cleared away from our parks? Are our playgrounds as safe as they should be? Do we have enough local libraries in our area, and are they supplied with the latest and best children's books? We could ask state governments why urban planning is often not designed with children's interests in mind, and why children's services are not usually co-located with local schools. And we could ask the federal government why television channels are allowed to circumvent the Children's Program Standards, overlooking their responsibilities to provide and promote quality children's programming. Or why school funding is not at a level that guarantees a quality education for every child. Or why they are not yet paying for quality pre-schooling for every four-year-old in the nation.

"There has to be an integrated effort, not the usual piecemeal approach …"

All of these proposals depend on adults for answers. Of course we should consult with children about how they see their local schools and neighbourhoods, and about what might improve their interest in education, their access to

leisure activities, and their understanding of the world. But as we have argued throughout this book, one thing kids really need is smarter adults, because adults remain the decision-makers, planners, policy-makers.

We need government with clear goals – running a sound economy to give our children the best chance in life, to support parents in their primary task of raising the next generation, to foster communities in which civility, participation, and the common good are more important than individual gain. The predominant culture today is one of hollow individualism; what appears to be personal freedom of choice turns out to be a series of consumer decisions. There are better ways to move forward so the talents of the next generation are not wasted in mindless consumption, self-interest, and lack of hope.

Our generation has to decide quickly how to restore the underlying values and lessons that we want to teach children, values that have disappeared in the pursuit of a better, bigger material lifestyle. They are much more than the doctrine of economic utility, which tells kids how to earn a living, not how to make a life. They are more than a lifestyle of shopping and consumerism, which tells kids they are what they own or wear. As Neil Postman would say, they underpin lives lived in a spirit of community, respecting and tolerating others, and forging a sustainable future.

We have to recognise the shifting nature of childhood, and invent new ways of meeting children's needs more effectively, both for the sake of children themselves, and for the health of society as a whole. These are the tasks of smarter grown-ups, adults changing with the times to guide and support the New Child's progress towards a healthy and fulfilling future. If we don't rise to the challenge, we are all in trouble.

NOTES

Introduction

Page:

vii Our first book: Patricia Edgar, Don Edgar, Millicent Poole, Tom Roper and Margaret Higgs, 1993, *Under 5 in Australia,* Heinnemann, Melbourne.

viii There are few comprehensive studies of Australian children: An economic study, the Household Income and Labour Study (HILDA), is also useful and we refer to it occasionally in these pages. It is run by the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research at the University of Melbourne for a group that also includes the Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER) and the AIFS.

Chapter 1 - Children don't live in normal families anymore

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Percentage of children speaking a language other than English at home	
NSW	16.3
Vic	15.5
Qld	5.7
SA	8.4
WA	8.4
Tas	2.1
NT	27.1
ACT	10.4

Source: ABS Cat No 2914.0.5502, 2006 Census

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Winners and *Touch the Sun* were unlike most television for children being produced around the world. *Round the Twist,* a 13-part miniseries, introduced a new comedy genre to the international market. Until then, children's television had largely consisted of adventure and animation, while the BBC made classic children's stories based on English literature. But the BBC saw the potential of *Round the Twist* and purchased the series, which became the number one children's program in the UK. The worldwide popularity of the series demonstrated the thirst for innovation in ideas for television storytelling for children which could also be commercially successful. See Patricia Edgar, 2006, *Bloodbath: A Memoir of Australian Television,* MUP, Melbourne.

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2–6	Cigarettes (various top brands)
7	Huggies nappies
8	Other cigarette brands
9	Tip-Top
10	Cadbury chocolates
11	Nestle/Peters
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Regulators:

Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA): www.acma.gov.au

Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy: www.dbcde.gov.au

Office of Communications, UK (Ofcom): www.ofcom.org.uk

Activists:

Electronic Frontiers Australia: www.efa.org.au

Kids Free 2B Kids: www.kf2bk.com

Young Media Australia (YMA): www.youngmedia.org.au

Games, game research, virtual worlds and social networking:

Club Penguin: www.clubpenguin.com

Futurelab: futurelab.org.uk

Games lab, Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI): www.acmi.net.au/games_lab.aspx

RunesScape: www.runescape.com

WorldWithoutOil: www.worldwithoutoil.org

www.bcbo.com

www.flickr.com

www.secondlife.com

www.teen.secondlife.com

Media websites:

ABC Kids, Rollermâché, a site where kids can learn how to make their own videos and animations and upload them. Particularly directed at kids in regional Australia: www.abc.net.au/rollercoaster/rollermache

BBC Children, includes a video for children, 'Find out how to make a movie', about how to shoot and upload kids' own stories: www.bbc.co.uk/children

Experts on children's media:

Australian Children's Television Foundation: www.actf.com.au

World Summit on Media for Children Foundation: www.wsmcf.com/foundation/foundation.htm

World Summit on Media for Children and Youth, Karlstad, Sweden 2010 will be run on the theme of challenges in young people's world of communication: www.wskarlstad2010.se

Sesame Workshop: www.joanganzcooneycentre.org

Other experts:

Australian Bureau of Statistics has a very useful site which is easy to search: www.abs.gov.au

Australian Institute of Family Studies: www.aifs.gov.au

Australian Psychological Society, 2007, 'Helping girls develop a positive self image': www.psychology.org.au/publications/tip_sheets/girls_positive_image

Centre for Community Child Health, Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne: www.rch.org/ccch

Senate inquiry into the sexualisation of children in the contemporary media environment: www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/eca_ctte/sexualisation_of_children/index.htm

SureStart, the UK government's program to assist child development, support appropriate child care and help parents: www.surestart.gov.uk

Victoria's Office for Children: www.office-for-children.vic.gov.au

Introductory information:

www.wikipedia.com

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