

If Children are the Future . . .

All Work and No Play...: How Educational Reforms Are Harming Our Preschoolers

Edited by Sharna Olfman

Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003. 215 pp.

ISBN: 0-275-97768-4. \$39.95. Hardcover.

No Child Left Different

Edited by Sharna Olfman

Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006. 237 pp.

ISBN: 0-275-98522-9. \$39.95. Hardcover.

Review by Brent Dean Robbins

Both texts under review are part of the Childhood in America series edited by Sharna Olfman, who directs the annual Childhood and Society Symposium at Point Park College each year. In my estimation, this series of books has produced some of the best collections of work exploring the cultural context of childhood today. The other volume in the collection, *Childhood Lost* (Olfman, 2005), never arrived from the publisher, so I am unable to review it. But if the other two texts in the series are any indication, it should also prove to be an indispensable resource for any concerned citizen of the U.S., but especially those with a special focus on children, including parents, teachers, physicians, therapists, and others charged with the care of our youth.

All Work and No Play... was the first book in the series, and it sets its sights on recent changes in public education and the implications for our children. The chapters offer a wealth of information, much of it quite shocking, and each essay is written in a clear, easy to understand style that will appeal to a wide audience, but without diluting the message. My one complaint is that the book could have provided a more balanced variety of perspectives on recent reforms in education, which, as ironic as it may seem, would have made the criticisms in the current volume more compelling. Due to the absence of opposing voices, the book may appear to some audiences to be sensationalizing the issues under consideration and runs the risk of merely "preaching to the choir." Given the quality and tone of the essays, this flaw is easily forgiven.

The book is divided into four parts. The first part explores the role of play in early childhood education, and laments how current educational policy has increasingly eliminated opportunities for play in exchange for rigid implementation of formal curricula. In one of the stronger chapters in the book, "A Role for Play in the Preschool Curriculum," Dorothy Singer, Jerome L. Singer, Sharon L. Plaskon, and Amanda E. Schweder review the literature and make the case that play is essential for the needs of developing children. They also deliver the sad news that, in spite of this need, the opportunity for play in schools has been diminishing at an alarming rate. For example, Federal guidelines emphasize the importance of communication skills, including vocabulary, reading, computer language, phonics, and comprehension of stories, but there is little emphasis on the development of social skills and not one mention of imaginative play.

Part two of the book is dedicated to the topic of technology and its negative impact upon young children and their developing brains. Frankly, these essays came across to me as alarmist and unbalanced in their interpretation of the research literature. Jane M. Healy in her chapter, "Cybertots: Technology and the Preschool Child," is very specific in her belief that children should not be exposed to computers until the age of seven—a position that I think most would agree is quite unorthodox and extreme, perhaps even unrealistic in today's world where computers are readily available in most U.S. households. Frank R. Wilson's chapter, "Handmade Minds in the Digital Age," is similarly biased in its stance on the issue.

The third part of the book addresses the topics of imagination and emotion, respectively. In "Imagination and the Growth of the Mind," Jeffrey Kane and Heather Carpenter develop a compelling theoretical argument that current conceptions of thinking, and therefore also the education of young minds, is based on outmoded Cartesian perspectives that do not adequately account for the centrality of imagination in learning. "The Vital Role of Emotion in Education," authored by Stuart Shanker, makes a similar case for the role of emotion in education. Steeped in a Cartesian mindset, educators have tended to emphasize "rational processes and the inhibition of emotion" (p. 149). Shanker's argument is rooted in the empirical work of Stanley Greenspan, which suggests that emotions "serve as the critical architect or mediator for higher-level mental functions" (p. 151). The thesis is well-argued and appears to be well-supported too.

The final essays of the book in Part Four each address the question of how the rise of technology and the demise of play may be contributing to

the current mental health crisis among our children. Each chapter provides an excellent review of the literature that will leave any reader with a sense of urgency to do something, anything, to remedy the problems outlined throughout the book. The stakes do appear to be high. Thomas Armstrong's essay convincingly suggests that excessive exposure to media technology and the lack of opportunities for more traditional, imaginative play may be the reason for the rapidly increasing prevalence of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. I think he's right. But I think it's also important to look at other trends, such as radical changes in the family structure and parenting, which may be contributing to the problem too.

Eva-Maria Simms' essay, "Play and the Transformation of Feeling: Niki's Case," is an outstanding chapter which, in the author's words, illustrates "the critical role of play in children's affect and cognitive development through a phenomenological-structural analysis of play as it unfolds over the course of a play therapy case" (p. 178). The analysis identifies seven characteristic features of play—among them, a safe, predictable, and caring adult presence in the background and the invitation of the sensuous world, to name a few—each of which are quickly and continually eroding in our advanced industrial age.

The last chapter, "Pathogenic Trends in Early Childhood Education," is penned by Olfman, and it is one of the strongest articles, most especially for its pointed critique of our self-centered, individualistic culture and its impact on our young people. She hits all the right notes and is ready and willing to back up her claims. Many of her points are repeated and elaborated upon in the third book of the *Childhood in America* series: *No Child Left Different*.

No Child Left Different is a superb collection of essays that, in comparison to the above volume, has more clarity of vision and, in terms of the quality of the essays, is a notch above its predecessor. The theme of the book is the alarming increase in the use of psychotropic medication to treat behavior problems in children and adolescents. As a whole, the authors generally agree with a single, vital point: modern psychiatry is out of order and increasingly driven by irrational socio-economic forces that, among other things, have led us to a point in time when we are drugging our children unnecessarily without proper concern for the long-term consequences of these drugs on young minds and bodies.

Part One of the book addresses the topic of environmental influences on maladaptive behavior. Topics under discussion include the role of the

community, environmental toxins, and media violence in the production of problem behavior in children. I was particularly intrigued by the essay, "Toxic World, Troubled Minds," by Varda Burstyn and David Fenton. I was genuinely alarmed to learn just how vulnerable our children are to a wide variety of environmental toxins, including lead, mercury, and persistent organic pollutants that, when there is repeated and cumulative exposure, can have detrimental effects on child development and well-being. Jane M Healy's chapter on "nature and nurture" will be old news to most professionals, but the chapter is so clearly written, it could be quite clarifying for the non-professional who might otherwise find the other chapters difficult.

The latter part of the book more directly addresses the issue of child psychiatry and its aftermath. Michael Brody's chapter, "Child Psychiatry, Drugs, and the Corporation," is an excellent history of the changes in medicine that have had an impact on the delivery of psychiatric services to children and adolescents, and the chapter nicely sets up every other essay that follows in the text—because each in their own way address more narrowly the concerns Brody manages in his paper. The chapter begins with the emergence of the medicine model with the 1950's with the develop of new psychotropic drugs, including Thorazine, Mellaril, and lithium, which set a trend in drug marketing that is still with us today. But, as Brody continues to elaborate, the "medical model" and over-reliance on psychotropic medication today is powered in large part by the rise of the pharmaceutical industry and managed care insurance companies, which act in concert to push drugs to our kids in order to line their own pockets. Their economic power has helped to institute, through the power of lobbying, a variety of increasingly lax statutes that has given more power to the drug companies to market their products directly to consumers and to persuade doctors to use them with a variety of incentives—some of the carrot variety and others of the stick. Add to this volatile mixture the insurance companies invention of capitation—a flat fee to a general care physician rather than payment for individual services—and it is no surprise that, in the U.S. in 2002, "about 2.7 million prescriptions for antidepressants were written for children aged one to eleven, and more than 8 million for children aged twelve to seventeen years" (p. 92). Nor is it a surprise to learn that 4-5 million youngsters have been diagnosed as ADHD and fed stimulants that are in the same class as cocaine.

In Daniel Burston's chapter, he focuses on the case of bipolar disorder diagnosis and children. Following up on the themes of Brody's chapter, we

find that socio-economic forces have compelled physicians to over-diagnose children with bipolar disorder when that diagnosis is not truly warranted—which means many, many children are medicated by powerful psychotropic drugs with potentially serious side-effects when they need not be. The same theme is repeated in Lawrence Diller's chapter, which focused on ADHD and the drug Ritalin; Mary Burke's chapter which explores depression and anxiety in children; and Margo D. Main, whose focus is on eating disorders and their link to consumerist culture. Every last essay is expertly written, clear as a bell, and vastly informative for a wide variety of audiences.

In short, both books in Sharna Olfman's *Childhood in America* series are quite excellent—and in some circles, especially amongst parents—should be required reading. I'm especially fond of *No Child Left Different*, which benefits from its clarity of focus on child psychiatry and the very convincing argument that psychiatry today is no longer a rationale enterprise. I consider it one of the most important books of the year.