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The flat child society

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Whereas those who still believe that the earth is flat are unlikely to go far in geographical careers in politics or the mass media, teaching or research, members of the flat child society still dominate all these areas. Their cardboard cut-outs stereotype childhood stages, from the troublesome baby and the egocentric toddler to the volatile crisis of puberty, now stretching implausibly from around 8 to 25 years.

Public opinion generally agrees that the child is an expensive burden, requiring firm adult management. The young yob and thug appear regularly in the news alongside the beautiful tragic child, victim of crime or accident, each ratcheting up adults' anxieties about risky childhoods. Now that rules against sexism, racism and homophobia protect other minorities, children are among the few groups whom journalists and politicians can denigrate with impunity. Politicians know that such abuse appeals to many voters - and that there are no children's votes to lose.

The flat child has one-way parasitical relationships, absorbing adults' care, time, teaching and income, but offering little of substance in return. The corollary of the flat child is the idealised adult: always wise, informed, stable, responsible, infallible and competent. The adult must set and enforce non-negotiable boundaries for the thoughtless greedy child. This is one of countless examples of identifying the flat child with another species, the not-yet human. The boundary advisers seldom acknowledge that all human relationships involve boundaries, implicit or explicit, if we are not to be doormats or tyrants to one another, and relationships involve constant boundary negotiations from subtle to violent ones. Punishments are hardly conducive to love, respect and friendship between adults, whereas they are deemed essential in rearing a flat child.

This article briefly reviews questions about flat child beliefs, and then some examples of flat child policies. I will end with questions about how more rounded views of children and adults might support more informed and rational public debate and policymaking.

Questioning the flat child

Children have been remarkably silent in this series, so I will begin with quoting Harriet who, when she was 29 months, greeted her mother in the morning: 'Hello. You have a nice night's sleep? Let's have a think before we get up. What you thinking about?' And, with concern, 'You happy?' Harriet illustrated how unreal and remote the flat child is from everyday life. She spoke about children's central concern with reciprocal personal affective relationships. Our research in premature baby units found that some adults were sure that babies markedly preferred care from their parents and from certain nurses, and were anxious with other nurses, appearing to be less concerned with the mechanics of care than with the emotions and relationships the care expressed. Children aged 0-3 years in a Children's Centre we observed showed similar responses: trust and liking for certain staff, anxiety with others and, in some cases, weeks of sadness and protest about being away from their parents.

Research has shown how much richer children's conversations are with their mothers at home, including disadvantaged homes, than at nursery school, and Judy Dunn and colleagues have shown how greatly young children contribute to each other's learning through imaginative play. Empirical research has shown many exceptions to each supposedly slow stage in the flat child's ascent towards 'adult' morality and reasoning, and leading psychologists have critically refuted developmental stage theories. And yet the popularity of flat child theories outlasts their credibility, just as women were similarly dismissed for millennia as inevitably deficient, despite clear evidence to the contrary.

Flat child policies

Led by the Treasury, the government has taken towards new extremes the flat child's supposed helpless

need for constant adult supervision right up to 14 years, with the extended Children's Centres, open 50 hours a week, 48 weeks a year, to enable parents to work full time. The Government policy Every Child Matters (ECM) aims to reduce the risks to every child of becoming a criminal, being abused, and failing to become a highly qualified high earning adult, although policy documents admit these first two risks are low. ECM aims are set out as five outcomes (such as staying healthy, being safe), 26 Public Service Agreements for Local Authorities to meet in 'partnership' with parents (such as reduce obesity rates), and 13 Key Indicators to measure performance. ContactPoint, the national computer index will record numerous personal details about every child up to 19 years (www.everychildmatters.gov.uk), with scant regard for the privacy rights of children or parents. Extensive ECM legislation has been rushed through with little time for debate (for a summary of key points see Action on Rights for Children).

Academics and professionals working closely with children and young people might be expected to question the almost complete confinement of children and parents within government surveillance and regulation. They might have shown how certain European countries, with better educational achievements than in Britain, start formal schooling some years later. Their young children play, create and relate instead of, as with many British children, spending their early years learning to fail. German 10 year olds have only morning school, and are free to roam around with friends until the evening. Families also avoid huge childcare costs when Finnish 8 year olds are trusted to look after themselves at home. However, British experts have tended to be resigned, or else supportive and interested in ECM's multi-million pound employment, training and consultancy opportunities, all based on propagating flat child theories and policies.

Towards a more rounded and rational society

Many concerns in this series of articles implicitly relate to flat child fallacies and the urgent need to recognise children as real, reasoning and relating people, agents and contributors to their families, schools and communities. Instead of going through the details of how our concepts of childhood shape our policies, our beliefs about the good society and hopes for the future, I'll simply suggest a few questions for discussion.

Poverty traps one in 11 pensioners, but one in three children. How can new respect for the work many children do, their good sense, and the ability of many of them to look after themselves and one another, help adults to work with children to reduce child poverty?

Debt. How might greater respect for childhood, like any age a precious unique time, stop politicians from piling debts on to young families and younger/future generations (huge debts for student loans, housing costs, Private Funded Initiatives to be repaid over 40 or 60 years, support for the retired)? How are democracy, rights and citizenship rethought when younger children's participation is respected?

Global warming/peak oil. How might greater respect for children increase real concern for their prospects for reasonable survival over the next decades, and active policies to promote sustainable communities and justice between generations, with fairer sharing between old and young of finite resources and also mounting costs?

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