

"the disappearance of childhood" by neil postman essay sample

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The book The Disappearance of Childhood written by Neil Postman describes the historical development of the ideal and social makeup of modern childhood; childhood even though it is something biological, its core rests with a cultural construct. He begins in the Renaissance a period of time that saw the invention of the printing press and the need for literacy. The author insists that social pressures and especially the electronic media of today are pushing childhood to its end as a social institution. Postman uses examples to show that everywhere we look the behavior, language, attitudes, desires and even physical appearance of children and adults are becoming harder and harder to distinguish the differences. In essence, children are becoming adults sooner. He gives encouragement and suggestions for parents on how to stand firm against this change. His thesis for writing the book is, "the main contribution of this book, such as it is, does not reside in the claim that childhood is disappearing but in a theory as to why such a thing should be happening" (xiii).

The book is comprised of two parts the first, chapters one through four, discusses the historical aspects as when the notion of childhood began, the influence of the printing press, the period of time that the printing press began to when the concept of childhood took hold and brings everything up to the point of the beginning of the disappearance of childhood. The second half is the disappearance of the notion of childhood covering chapters five through eight. The author contends that, "The maintenance of childhood depended on the principles of managed information and sequential learning" (72). I liked the way he put the question to what we would pay for openness

and candor he answered, " if we turn over to children a vast store of powerful adult material, childhood cannot survive" (88).

Postman gives a very good show of how childhood has not always been a concept well known in culture. It was something created only since recorded history. Before written history there is no clear evidence how society viewed children and their development. Print media was being conveyed to a large audience and began, with no doubt, social change in larger numbers. At one point in history children were known as small adults, then perhaps this was something that we stopped doing when childhood was developed and we are just coming around again in a circle to treating children as adults again. At the end of the book he does address six questions that many wonder and he answers very well. The one that asked what technologies will work needing the concept of childhood, he answered the computer.

The author mentions the potent influence of television American children spend more time watching television than they do engaging in any other activity besides sleep. It is a very significant influence on child development and societies ideas of childhood. Although the author does make note that studies in this area are still needed to fully understand the consequences of this fairly new type of media. The author believes that it should be relatively easy to do studies on cognitive development of children and families that don't have television to those who watch televisions. I didn't find the book to have any really substantial studies that it could draw from, perhaps this is because more study is needed in this direction or at the time of publication, which was over thirty years ago, no studies were being done.

The loss of childhood to Postman is because of the very aggressiveness of information that is literally being thrown at children. This ranges from cartoons to the classroom. The author believes that just holding back some information from children until they are older and can better process the information would be best. Without the means to process the information of how they view actions by adults their reactions, bad or good, will become result of this processing. There is some interesting mention of a Marshall McLuhan who is a philosopher on media. Postman was able to take his very difficult beliefs and give the reader a better understanding to his philosophy.

McLuhan's philosophies give rise to the coming of the printing press, with Postman, as giving a whole new dimension to social and cultural structures. It gave rise to new ideas that did not exist before. It helped to create much of what we know in society today such as nation state, the concept of individuality and so on. Something that Postman discusses is the secret theory. This concept has reading as a way to gain secret knowledge and during the middle ages only adults were literate, so the secret was held by adults. When the primary educational system evolved reading became assessable to children for the first time exposing them to concepts such as sex and shame before he is ready.

The difference between child and adult, Postman contends, is becoming not as well pronounced as in the past. Adult views and concepts are distributed by electronic means to children. Children see such issues as homosexuality, violence, aging and death to name a few. Adults are becoming childlike in their own actions and this can be seen in television and in society in

general. I see where elderly are talked to in a way I would deem to be child talk or baby talk. The values of distinctiveness between adult and child are lost to our society. To Postman this is going to have a bad consequence to the survival of cultures. He believes that childhood should be considered valuable and fear its destruction.

He believes that the facts speak for themselves when it comes to proof. He gave statistics for crime of individuals less than 15 years of age in 1950 and found that they committed a serious crime once in every 215 serious crimes of adults over the age of 15. Compare that to 1979 and the rate is one in five. Serious crimes include murder, rape and aggravated assault. Venereal disease in childhood rose too during this time period. The most important reason why he believes the disappearance of childhood is bad is what he believes to be the rise of the "Adult-like Child" that would ultimately become the "Child-like Adult". This becoming would lack the traditional virtues adults hold idealistically. He gives impulse control, manners, and critical thought be lost to adults.

I enjoyed the book very much and hold to some of its beliefs such as how children process what is being given to them and how it might be too early for them to even attempt to process some of this information. Human development I believe does come in stages as psychologists and sociologists believe. It only makes sense since we evolve biologically, then so must our brains and our thinking capacity and ability. I don't think we can ignore technology's arrival and agree with Postman that we should consider media as a tool, but like with any tool sometimes we have to childproof our home to

ensure that they won't get hurt by these tools, the same should hold true with media content.

The author is a professor from America and has published numerous books on media theory. He has a strong conviction that new technology cannot replace the mechanism in how humans develop values, morally and culturally and that it is a problem that needs to be addressed. He gives good points to his argument but I think he lacked in giving sources showing concrete evidence. I know we cannot go back in time but we can pay attention to what is happening. His argument cannot be denied and this book is a must read for every parent and educator. Releasing the reigns on information to children might not be in the best interest of our society. I found it easy to read and gave clear meaning to what his points were. It was very interesting, but did feel that there were some biased comments throughout the book. And though I passed off to the period when this book was written. I hear all the time that we can't go back to the good old days, I wonder why not if it worked. Culture, technology and society can assimilate and with our eyes wide open it should be fairly easy to come up with a solution that the author just couldn't come up with. Since the book was written some years ago I still think it can be read and applied even in today's world.