

EDITORIAL

The Liberation of Children

One of the most important aspects of the social and personal liberation of adults is that it is ultimately the liberation of persons. The sharing of economic and political power is not restricted to men and women only — it includes children as well. The advance of liberation in contemporary western societies has profound meaning for the liberation of children. As the exercise of power becomes optional and negotiable so does the exercise of authority. The reality of family life as a process of negotiation and agreement compels a reflective consciousness of the fact that children may also negotiate rights and power. Evidence of this is the allowance of legal advocates for children in divorce proceedings; the serious attention widely paid to child abuse, child pornography, and incest; and institutional and legal prohibitions on corporal punishment for children. This evidence clearly shows that the liberation of children is embedded in contemporary adult liberation.

Traditionally our identification of the interests and wellbeing of children with those of the parent or the family severely limited our recognition of the child as an autonomous person. A revealing illustration of this identification is the fact that adoptive parents in most provinces and states in North America still have by law full traditional and legal authority over their adopted children, while the adopted child in most of these jurisdictions still has no legal access, even as an adult, to the official records of his or her original parents or of his or her birth. Our tradition is non-interference in the conduct of parenting and non-recognition of the child as an independent person.

The issue of the case of corporal punishment evidences the contemporary, reluctant liberation of children. The most celebrated case of the prohibition of corporal punishment is based on a consideration of fundamental rights of children and applies to parents as well as to schools. The Swedish law against spanking and other forms of physical punishment enacted in 1979 affirmed the view that the child is an independent person to be fully respected as such. However, the proposed reinstatement of corporal punishment by the Calgary Board of Education after several years of complete prohibition on its use exposes a discrepancy in contemporary acceptance of the personhoods of children. With significant public and professional support the Calgary Board has accepted the claim that some children can only be disciplined to institutional and social conventions by the use of physical force in the form of the strap, and thereby has acknowledged the independence of children. Oddly, the community which supports the institution of the strap for school children also opposes the use of any physical punishment as a last resort on unorthodox and nonconforming adults.

The discrepancy may be explained by our own beliefs about the immaturity of school children. It may be the case that the immaturity of school-aged children is different in kind from the immaturity of adults. The difference however cannot be that adults are properly held responsible for their beliefs and behaviour while children are not, for in this case, if it makes sense to strap anyone, it would seem to make more sense to strap adults and not children. The difference may be that the immaturity of children is "stage-appropriate", i.e. that the time is right for an advance of maturity by the use of corporal punishment, whereas with adults the "right time" for growth is past. However, given our general rejection of the use of physical force, it would seem that *only* the strongest evidence, not yet had, for such a difference would compel us to use corporal punishment on children. It may be more likely that the issue of corporal punishment is a barometer of our unsettled moral attitude toward children. Social and personal affirmation of adult liberation exposes the real independence and autonomy of school-aged children while the natural limitations of the child's physical, emotional and cognitive development compel adult care for their interests, and sometimes tempt (and excuse) adult domination.

The independence of children does not guarantee their autonomy. The recognition of child independence may in fact increase their vulnerability to those adults who will exploit their limitations without the care and benefit expected of the family and the school. Autonomy is an achievement, not a condition of personhood. It is the achievement of informed and disciplined self-governance, characterized by critical consideration of possibilities and by reflective judgement. The ideal of autonomy constitutes education as a right of all children, and the conditions of autonomy properly structure and direct our educational enterprises. It is in light of these conditions that we must examine not only the justification of corporal punishment, but *all* structures and prescriptions of family and schooling with regard to children. Given the increasing liberation of children it is crucial that we be radically flexible in our expectations as to when, how, and why a child will undergo specific learning opportunities. We must learn to expect that children will be more assertive regarding curricular judgements affecting them, that they will be more aggressive in negotiating the conditions of their participation, and that many children will be individually more competent in examining adult claims and in defending their own. Finally, understanding that educational structures and prescriptions are socially defined, and respecting the "natural" limitations of maturation and experience of both children and adults, we can justifiably encourage the participation of children in decisions regarding their education.

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