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Saving Childhood

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Film Critic, Radio Host

Longtime co-host of *Sneak Previews* on PBS and chief film critic for the *New York Post*, Michael Medved now hosts a daily three-hour radio talk show syndicated in more than 70 cities throughout the United States. Regular topics include the media, politics, culture, American history, childrearing, and religion. Mr. Medved, whose columns have appeared frequently in the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Sunday Times* of London, is a member of the board of contributors of *USA Today*.



An honors graduate of Yale and a Hillsdale College Life Associate, he is also the author of eight nonfiction books, including the best-sellers *What Really Happened to the Class of '65?*, *The Shadow Presidents*, *Hospital*, and *Hollywood vs. America*. His latest book, *Saving Childhood: Protecting Our Children from the National Assault on Innocence*, was written with his wife (a clinical psychologist and a best-selling author in her own right), Dr. Diane Medved. *Saving Childhood* has just been published by Harper-Collins, and Mr. Medved's remarks were adapted from its contents. ▲

Who is making war on our children? We are, according to cultural commentator Michael Medved. Specifically, he charges Americans with condoning a popular culture and an educational system that destroy the innocence of childhood.

Mr. Medved's remarks were delivered at the February 1998 Shavano Institute for National Leadership seminar, "Heroes for a New Generation and a New Century," in Scottsdale, Arizona.

To Frighten and Corrupt Our Young

In every corner of contemporary culture childhood innocence is under assault. The very idea of parental protectiveness has been overwhelmed by relentless pressure from a society that seems perversely determined to frighten and corrupt its own young in a misguided effort to "prepare" them for a harsh, dangerous future.

From the bleakest ghettos to the most privileged suburbs, families face the same fears. We worry not only about what might happen to our kids on the way to school but about what values they will learn once they get there. We are concerned not only with the threat of physical assault but with the emotional and moral battering that our children endure from peers and the media. In short, we feel powerless to counteract the implacable social forces that push our own flesh and blood to grow up too soon—and too cynical. We may shower youngsters with every sort of material blessing and glitzy diversion, but we can't seem to give

them the greatest gift of all—a secure, optimistic, and reasonably sheltered childhood.

Nihilistic messages now come at our kids from so many directions at once that childhood innocence doesn't stand a chance. Consider:

- In Philadelphia, a four-year-old keeps squirming away when embraced by a favorite uncle who has come for his weekly visit. When asked by her puzzled relative what is wrong, she tells him that her nursery school teacher warned her against any adults who “touch her too hard.” If he persists in squeezing her, she tearfully informs him, she will have to call the police.

- In Dallas, a three-year-old returns from a play group to regale his disbelieving parents with an earnest, straight-faced singing and dancing rendition of “Mama’s Got a Great Big Butt.”

- In Salt Lake City, a first-grader begins compulsively throwing away her previously cherished dolls, much to the horror of her parents. It takes several hours to get an explanation: Her teacher showed the class that the world was so bad—and so crowded—that nobody should have children. The sensitive and solemn girl didn't even want to pretend to raise babies of her own.

- And in our own home, in the winter of '94, our daughter, Shayna, joins her excited kindergarten classmates for an after-school field trip to the botanical gardens. As these neatly uniformed parochial school kids squeal and giggle in the back seat of a van, the adults listen to the hourly news on the radio, which includes a graphic description of Lorena Bobbitt cutting off her husband's penis and throwing it out the window of her car. Hearing this, our daughter covers her ears in horror and begins sobbing, soon joined by two of her frightened classmates.

Admittedly, such anecdotes represent relatively minor upsets in a world scarred by youth violence, widespread substance abuse, teen pregnancy, and adolescent suicide. Nevertheless, such small examples illustrate the depth—and breadth—of the problem. Today, even the most conscientious and protective parents feel helpless when it comes to shielding the innocence of their children.

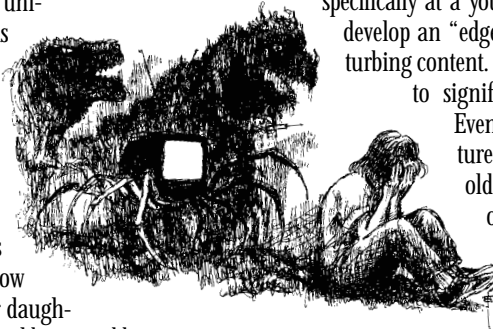
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“They’re Trying to Kidnap My Kids”

The most visible assault on that innocence involves the omnipresent messages of the mass media. As one anguished mother commented to me years ago: “My resentment toward Hollywood [filmmakers] is entirely personal—because I can't escape the feeling that they're trying to kidnap my kids.” The big entertainment conglomerates continue to churn out jaded and cynical diversions that seem to go out of their way to undermine the most important values parents want to impart to their own offspring. Aging boomers look back nostalgically to the innocent TV offerings of their youth, from *I Love Lucy* to *Leave It to Beaver*, and lament the fact that the “Beaver” has transmogrified into “Beavis.” Meanwhile, the wildly popular cable cartoon show *South Park* is so crude and offensive (and, yes, inventive) that its characters make even Beavis and Butthead look, by comparison, like Will and Henry James. In this new show, a group of Colorado third-graders exemplify the current vision of childhood, demonstrating every imaginable anti-social and self-destructive attitude, while cheering violent wrestling matches between Santa and Jesus, or interacting with fanciful characters such as a talking pile of feces known as “Mr. Hanky, the Christmas Poo.”

South Park highlights the fact that in today's media culture, even material about children—or aimed specifically at a youthful audience—attempts to develop an “edge” by exploring risky or disturbing content. The rating “PG” now seems to signify “Profanity Guaranteed.” Even gorgeously animated feature films pitched at five-year-olds, such as Disney's *Mulan* or *Pocahontas*, feature dark and politically correct preaching about persecution of Native Americans or the liberating impact of cross-dressing.

These messages matter because, for most American kids, media images represent their chief source of information about the larger world beyond the home. TV alone occupies today's youngsters for some 25 hours a week—not even counting the additional time lavished on films, videos, pop music, and video games. In a typical year, the average American child will invest more hours digesting the products of the entertainment industry than he will spend in a classroom—because kids don't take summer vacations, Christmas breaks, or weekends off when it comes to their media consumption. This immersion in artificiality erodes childhood innocence through



its inevitable emphasis on the bitter and the bizarre, emphasizing dysfunction and danger that is inherently dramatic.

Counselors, Condoms, and “Enlightened” Attitudes

Unfortunately, the time children spend in school seldom serves to counteract this malign media influence; far more often it reinforces it. Contemporary curricula warn kids about global warming and overpopulation in the name of environmental awareness and impose guilt concerning slavery or Japanese internment or Native American genocide or oppression of women—all in the interests of sensitivity and multiculturalism. Anti-drug, anti-smoking, and “safe sex” instruction (targeted at children as early as kindergarten) serve to advance the idea that it is not the home but the school—with its counselors, condoms, and “enlightened” attitudes—that represents a safe haven in a child’s life.

Parents themselves too frequently collaborate in prematurely terminating childhood innocence. In order to provide some elusive edge in the pursuit of academic glory, even pre-school kids are hurried into competitive, high pressure situations and find themselves rushed from one demanding (but theoretically “enriching”) activity to another. Through it all, mother and father prefer the role of pal to that of protector, striving to become good friends rather than guides. With self-absorbed parents trapped in perpetual adolescence and refusing to accept adulthood, children can’t enjoy the sheltered, solid, and predictable atmosphere traditionally associated with childhood.

Preparation Replaces Protection

The assault on innocence from the media, schools, and parents themselves comes cloaked in the best of intentions and with an aura of utter inevitability. As Marie Winn observed in her wise 1981 book, *Children Without Childhood*, society has abandoned its old emphasis on “protection” of kids and embraced a new priority of “preparation.” According to this thinking, children can’t afford the luxury of sweetness and simplicity in some sort of golden age of innocence but rather must equip themselves to confront a bitter, dangerous world—and the sooner the better.

The new preparation model may seem to make logical sense, but the sad fact is that it doesn’t work. Rather than reducing the levels of teenage drug addiction, sexually transmitted diseases, gang violence, depression, and suicide, all efforts to confront kids with life’s bleak realities at ever earlier ages appear to have made the situation worse.

The first step in saving childhood involves a clear rejection of the failed and bankrupt notion that terrifying and pressuring kids somehow helps them cope with the world’s challenges. Feeling helpless and hopeless promotes neither success nor happiness. Instead of abandoning our young to today’s trendy cynicism, American families should exalt childhood innocence, not just as an absence of information or an enforced ignorance but as a positive value in its own right, featuring three indispensable elements: security, optimism, and a sense of wonder.

Security and the World’s Best Instinctive Conservatives

All kids crave security and predictability. If you doubt that proposition for a moment, just pause to consider their culinary preferences. As a child, I wanted to eat hot dogs at every single meal; my own daughters and my own son express an unswerving preference for macaroni and cheese. When it comes to the contents of the daily lunch box, children hardly crave surprises or exotic choices. Even in the most sophisticated households, they seem to prefer the old reliables like peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches to adventure-some fare like Cajun shrimp or sushi. And you can forget about trying new restaurants. Children want to eat at the same neighborhood joints over and over again.

Rearrange the furniture in your daughter’s room lately? That’s the sort of minor change that’s likely to produce a major revolt. Our girls not only insist that the dresser, desk, and bed remain in precisely the same position but that their Barbies are arranged in their familiar rows. Even a pleasant family milestone such as buying a new car to replace some beloved old clunker may provoke tearful protest from youngsters who instinctively resist all change.

My wife and co-author, Diane Medved, a clinical psychologist, believes it is easy to understand these profoundly conservative instincts among nearly all kids. Young people go through such intense and dramatic change in their bodies and their emotional

makeup that they inevitably want as little alteration as possible in their surroundings. If I go off on a business trip and return three days later, I look at the kids and know they are different—noticeably grown and transformed in just that brief time away. No wonder these constantly changing children yearn to be enveloped by predictable patterns!

That is why family ritual can play such an important and constructive role in children's lives. These traditions may include Sunday outings, Monday night parents-and-kids basketball games, or just the simple but crucial habit of tucking in the youngsters and saying prayers at bedtime. Each family develops its own unique and sometimes quirky ways of observing birthdays, meals, and other occasions. Older rituals, rooted in religious faith, involve more timeless, universal elements, providing children with a solid sense of their place in the family and in the world.

We saw religious ritual perform its protective function with our kids when they faced the greatest challenge of their young lives—moving, for the first time, to a new home. After 20 years in the same house in Los Angeles, we made a decisive—and for our children, devastating—break and relocated in Seattle. During the first six days in the Northwest we rattled around a strange and empty house, waiting for the moving van to arrive with our possessions. Living in sleeping bags, the three children complained almost constantly; they missed their friends and wondered why we had to disrupt their lives to come to this different and disorienting place.

Then on Friday evening we welcomed the Jewish Sabbath. As the sun went down over Lake Washington, Diane and I set out paper plates and food that we had bought at a nearby market. We lit the candles and said the traditional blessings over the wine and bread. Then we blessed each of the children and sang some of the songs that they had heard every week from the time they were infants. Finally, our older daughter, Sarah, then nine years old, came over to hug her mother and said: “You know what? Maybe it won’t be so bad here after all.”

Children appreciate the power of ritual. That is one of many reasons that seemingly small gestures, such as reciting the Pledge of Allegiance in the morning or thanking God before a meal, can provide significant benefits. Children deserve to know what to expect from life, and they also deserve to know what is expected of them. In other words, they need to feel a sense of predictability when it comes to the consequences of their actions. Even if those consequences involve punishment or other unpleasantness, consistency and reliability contribute to a belief in an ordered world that makes sense—helping to rescue childhood.

Hard-Wired for Optimism

Nearly all kids seem to be hard-wired for optimism—an attitude that represents the second key element of childhood innocence. It is possible that pseudo-sophistication, media assaults, trendy cynicism, and a misguided educational system can eventually shatter this natural hopefulness, but, in so doing, these forces must overcome a child's healthy instincts.

Have you noticed, for instance, that children inevitably prefer stories with happy endings? My daughters have been studying Shakespeare in the home school cooperative Diane has organized, and so far they have covered *Twelfth Night* (their favorite), *Much Ado About Nothing*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It*, *Taming of the Shrew*, and *The Tempest*. Over dinner, I recently asked them why they hadn't tried to tackle *Hamlet* or *Julius Caesar*; and the girls looked at me as if I were an imbecile. They declared in unison, “Why would we want to? Those stories are so sad!”

I am sure there will come a time when they confront the tragedies of Shakespeare and the tragedies of life, but I am gratified that they feel no inclination to do so when they are nine and eleven, respectively. It hardly helps children to depress them in the name of preparation and to convince them at an early age that life is random, chaotic, or doomed. Unless kids look forward to the future with anticipation and joy, the process of growing up will seem merely pointless and painful.

Educators spend a great deal of time and energy today trying to build “self-esteem.” But far more important than implanting the notion that “I'm a great kid” is establishing the conviction that “It's a great world.” If a feeling of amazement and joy at this vast and dazzling universe escapes our offspring in childhood, it will likely be denied to them for a lifetime.

What is the best way to counteract the whining self-pity that plays such a prominent role in politically correct thinking and pop culture? The true antidote to pessimism isn't some forced Pollyanna optimism—it is gratitude, expressed fervently and frequently. Anyone fortunate enough to be born in the United States, this blessed island of sanity and decency in the midst of the dark, bloody, turbulent ocean of historic human misery, should make every day Thanksgiving Day and the Fourth of July.

We need to acknowledge our appreciation for our country, for its founders and heroes, and for our own parents and grandparents. Above all, however, we owe a debt of gratitude to the Almighty, who has

showered us with gifts and opportunities of an altogether unprecedented nature. The refusal to recognize that debt sours our present and threatens our future. We all know what happens in our own lives if a parent, a spouse, or a business associate deserves our appreciation but some spirit of stubbornness or pride prevents us from expressing it. The resulting sense of ingratitude can become an acid that corrodes our very soul. At the moment, public and private ingratitude in America has become an acid that is corroding the soul of our society.

Recapturing a Sense of Wonder

The vast majority of American parents have consciously misled their children and felt no guilt whatever about the deception. Even the most hip, educated, and fashionable families tend to tell kids at one point in their lives about Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy. Why do we go to such great lengths to persuade them to accept these far-fetched fantasies? We do so because we instinctively, and most often unconsciously, understand the importance of the third fundamental aspect of childhood innocence: a sense of wonder.

Any parent who has watched a child's wide, excited eyes glimpsing the miraculous presents that appear on Christmas morning under the tree, or reading the note left under the pillow by the fast-moving and elusive Tooth Fairy, comprehends the priceless nature of this sense of wonder. A belief in magic, in goodness, in angelic protection, in well-deserved miracles—these are the very essence of childhood. Such attitudes encourage the imagination and foster an appreciation of the world. They are precious precisely because they are so fleeting. If a four-year-old passionately believes in Santa Claus, then he and his family can revel in the messages of supernatural generosity and kindness involved in his belief. If he still believes in Santa Claus at age 24, then his parents will feel less proud: They have either raised a young adult who is deeply disturbed—or a die-hard liberal.

The point is that childhood should remain fundamentally different from adulthood, with kids reveling in the freshness and fun of their experience. In his great poem about vanished childhood, "Fern Hill," Dylan Thomas writes,

. . . it was all
Shining, it was Adam and maiden,
The sky gathered again
And the sun grew round that very day.
So it must have been after the birth of the
simple light
In the first, spinning place

In this spinning place we all inhabit, we can best protect a sense of wonder in our kids by nurturing a sense of wonder in ourselves. Pausing to rejoice in everyday delights—especially in the company of those we love most—can promulgate the important awareness that life is always precious, always new.

And it is, without question, much too precious to waste so much of it on TV. When it comes to defending childhood innocence, we have inexplicably invited the principal enemy and potential destroyer into our own living rooms. By the age of six, the average American child has spent more hours watching the tube than he will spend speaking to his father in his lifetime. This is madness and, in a very real sense, child abuse. And the old parental excuse, "My kids only watch the quality programs," does not carry any weight at all. The underlying problem with television and kids isn't quality. It is *quantity*.

If you are unconvinced, try the following thought experiment. Imagine that William Bennett, former drug czar, becomes our new TV czar, and he is granted special authority so that every television show must pass a "Bill Bennett virtue test" before it is broadcast. In this fantasy world, the tube would become considerably less destructive, but it would hardly be transformed into a benign factor in our lives. As long as our kids watched 25 hours a week, television would still harm family relationships, physical health, moral development, attention span, reading ability, and communal life.

Regardless of programming content, our hurried, over-scheduled kids still need to get up off the couch, join softball games with neighbors, read books for fun, joke with friends, interact with family, or just play by themselves in the yard to stretch their imagination. Every family can benefit by turning off, or turning down, the TV set, and eliminating, or at least reducing, the impact of this dominating influence. If you worry that a decision to get rid of the boob tube would make your child stand out from some of his peers, please remember: One of the greatest gifts that parents can give their offspring is the courage to be different.

Our chance to influence, for better or for worse, the children that God has entrusted to our care is always too brief. Last year, on my daughter Shayna's eighth birthday, we celebrated with a Sabbath meal. Our guests all helped serenade her with the traditional "Happy Birthday" over the cake—without candles, since we refrain from creating fire on the Sabbath. Our daughter enjoyed every minute of the occasion, but toward the end of the day as the Sabbath was ending and the sun was going down, she came over to me to cuddle. "Well, I want to say good-bye," she said sweetly.

This alarmed me, and I asked her why she felt

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the need to say good-bye.

“Because,” she explained, “after today, you’re never going to see a seven-year-old daughter again.” She was right, of course. After today, the precious gift of your child—at this unique moment in his life—is gone forever.

In his incomparable book of poems, *A Child’s*

Garden of Verses, Robert Louis Stevenson declares,

The world is so full of a number of things,
I’m sure we should all be as happy as kings.

In that spirit, may all our children linger in
the garden. 🌲
