children — their status in the community and the approach to child welfare . .

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INTRODUCTION:

Today, we live in a child-conscious society.

We have seen the evolution of numerous child welfare programmes by the traditional agencies and are currently observing a proliferation of new and varied plans through recently developed agencies such as the Children's Commission. Supported by the possessive liberal-individualism in social thought, these policies and programmes purport to secure each child's individual material and emotional well-being so that he or she can develop into a well-reared, industrious and respectable community member. The trouble is that very few people seem to have considered the effects that such individualistic programmes have on our community as a whole. What are the overall objectives of child welfare programmes today? What are the values that determine policies? Are these policies and programmes flexible enough in the light of changing social values and cultural conditions? It is the purpose of this paper to raise questions about the objectives of child-welfare policies and to suggest that they may need to change their disposition towards highly individualistic programmes to an approach that emphasizes clearly established community perspectives.

Problems:

There are, however, some problems which first must be recognized. There is a tendency to be rather expert and emotional when talking about children. This often leads to inaccurate statements, or, on the other hand, expressions of uncertainty which make it difficult to state anything categorically.

Another severe problem is in defining the persons we are talking about. Certainly many people immediately think of an age, say 18 years, as defining the upper limit of childhood. The law underwrites this view. But not so long ago, the age was 21 years. The age of majority was amended to 18 because people argued that young people matured much earlier. Our sophisticated society, intense education and general affluence have been all evidenced as factors in this increased maturity at a younger age. In addition, physiologists have suggested that young people now reach puberty a year or two earlier. But still, the physical maturation stage does not correspond to the conferring of adult status. Social recognition of adulthood occurs at 18 years. The threshold of childhood turning into adulthood remains confused amongst a series of physical, social economic and legal factors, none of which appear definitive enough of themselves to become a dominant characteristic.

Terminology has further contributed to the confusion. Babyhood, infancy, childhood, adolescense, toddlers or teenagers are all terms used frequently both in a professional and lay context. Whilst professionals in one discipline might clearly define their terms, their usage often has little relevance to parents, children and other persons outside the discipline. Nevertheless, all of these terms convey a message about a group of people or a category of persons, who are young in years, act somewhat differently and who are responded to by the community in a different way.

Status & Social Change:

Children have not always received special consideration within the community. Phillippe Aries suggests that the state of childhood as a distinct notion has relatively modern origins. For instance, once a child had left his mother's succour and was able to tend to his own subsistence needs, he was treated no differently from adults in medieval society; ". . . as soon as a child could live without the constant solicitude of his mother . . . he belonged to adult society". (1) Children worked, played and lived alongside their elders with much the same responsibilities of contributing to the livelihood of the family and community unit. But the industrial revolution bred a consciousness of childhood. Adults became acutely aware of the differences children exhibit in their daily living, and consequently developed a bewildering array of regulatory mechanisms to cope with them. Children were to be developed into good adults and worthwhile citizens by being socialized, educated, behaviourally controlled and protected by the adults around them.

Through all this, the child has been seen as a natural part of the family unit. A child is conceived by his parents, belongs to them, inherits what is theirs and is subject to their rearing. The historical context makes quite clear that a child is owned, similar to a chattel, by the parents. But, just as wives sought emancipation from the ownership concept within their relationship to their husbands, children or their advocates might view their own situation as requiring emancipation.

Several social factors have operated to challenge the nature of these familial bonds. Paternalistic care has been the hall-mark of the parent/child relationship. Now paternalism has been challenged by the needs of dignity, equal worth and self-realization which many groups in our community have underlined as basic to the human condition. Relationships can be based upon consensual rules for living together and upon sharing learning processes of action and response. A new sense of freedom within a shared relationship is substituted for paternalism. The freedom of particularly a woman to change a spouse has emphasized the lack of ownership claim of one person toward another. Contraceptive methods have established the capacity to decide whether to procreate or not, and in doing so, have a different relationship between the child who is eventually born and his parents. It might be argued that planned parenting has brought subtle changes to the relationship between child and parent, placing a greater emphasis on parental responsibility toward the child and the rights he has as an individual.

So, changes in the basis of procreation, relationships of people living together, and the current social concern for the rights of individuals, minorities and the sexes have all assisted to bring the rights of children to prominence. This has led to an emerging number of claims on behalf of children. For instance, the American educationalist John Holt (2) asserts a child's right to manage his own education, to participate in political affairs, and to determine replacement familial relationships. He and other educationalists such as A.S. Neill (3) have placed an emphasis on a child's right to self-determination as compared with the normal social situation in which a child's behaviour and general social functioning are determined by the adults around him. Paul Goodman (4) has long stressed the benefits of self-development and self-fulfilment rather than socialization for conformity as far as the social systems affecting young people are concerned.

However, the issue of children's rights in the child welfare area poses critical questions. Many child welfare programmes, indeed many of the legislative provisions in the state sphere, are based upon "the best interests of the child" or "the needs of the child". Unfortunately, much is done to children which they do not recognize as in their best interests. Then, energy is often devoted to attempts to win the child's approval when this energy might have been better devoted to facilitating the child's learning experience in governing his own actions and minimizing any destructive side-effects. Furthermore, we are left with perplexing questions. When does the child know best? Should individual rights apply to all children, or only to adolescents? When can the child have control over his own life?

In discussing individual child rights, often there is a tendency to view the child in isolation from other persons and entities in his environment. The child is seen as an abstract psychological unit with emphasis on internalized individual development at the expense of his social environment and control over it. The question of children's rights has to be viewed as a question of individual rights within the community. Persons in the community have rights, some of which are said to be inherent to the human condition while others are conferred by the progress of civilization. These should be respected insofar as they do not infringe upon the rights of some other persons. A child should be seen to have the same essential rights. There may be additional rights conferred upon him because of his peculiarly vulnerable position in society, for instance, his dependency, but at the least, he should be entitled to the same individual rights as any other person.

The view of the child as an isolated psychological entity has had unfortunate repercussions when considering the child's parenting needs. It has led to the distinction between the biological parent and the nurturing or psychological parent. Goldstein, Freud and Solnit's theories (5) are cited as evidence for accepting the nurturing parent as meeting the essential needs of the child. Therefore, when a child is living apart from his biological parents, his current nurturing parents should have the legal rights over the child. However, this seems to deny a child his history, biological identity and life circumstances. Once a child is given assistance with his basic needs, why does he need his current parent figure confirmed as the legal parent? Such needs seem to relate more to the needs of the adults in the situation. When adult needs come into conflict, the child might make adequate representation of his own views, either by himself or through an advocate. We might conclude that a child given assistance with his basic needs could well cope in the community, without the peculiar, warm, intimate, coddling, perhaps claustrophobic relationship with one or two parents all of the time. At the least, the child could have the prevailing influence over time about a home, his education, recreational pursuits and daily life. A change to recognizing his status as a person would require the child's own wishes to be paramount.

Changes in Child Welfare:

There already have been changes in our approach to child welfare which recognize the child's rights as a person.

We have de-institutionalized the institutions by dividing them into units. We have deplored large congregate centres and have replaced them with family homes scattered here and there throughout the community. Foster care has been promoted as the most valuable substitute to a disintegrated family. All these changes have been based upon strenuous efforts to improve our understanding of children's needs and of those circumstances which maximize their development opportunities.

Yet, we still see claims for larger, more modern, building complexes aimed at providing every physical facility for some groups of children. A few planners still fail to take a total view of life in our community and match this with conditions for children's favourable development. At a time when scholars are deploring the large isolated school, when entrepreneurs are replacing the one huge centralist consumption centre with smaller regional centres, when politicians are propounding decentralized power bases, some wish to gather a large number of children with often special needs by virtue of handicapped ability or traumatic experience and place them in one spot where they can be "looked after". Surely the debate of institution versus cottage home has long since passed into irrelevance. People's search for loving, neighbourliness, identity and belonging has revealed a desire for community cohesion and solidarity around their intimate family units. The large physical institution has no place in such a quest.

The emphasis on neighbourhood schools is perhaps typical of the need to accommodate children in smaller groups of peers and adults. These groups, of course, should be fully participating in the life of the community. Such arrangements structurely create possibilities for children to explore relationships with one another and with adults, while strengthening the purposive introduction to understanding knowledge and skill development. The value of learning to live with one another, of understanding, tolerance and warmth as essences of civilized progress and underwritten by this drive toward experiential development. H.D. Stein in his United Nations study on "Planning for the needs of children in developing countries" reminds us that children, "not yet weighed down with artificial prejudices and narrow provincialism, . . . should have the opportunity to remain free of these stifling handicaps . . . It is through values of universal brotherhood first felt in the hearts of children that the minds of men can become open to the eventual creation of a peaceful world community". (6) This starts in the smaller intimate group linked inextricably by its participation to the local community, not in a prominent, labelling and anonymous institution. Children do not exist for child care institutions; services exist to meet a need in some children.

The disintegration of large, obtrusive institutions has been part of a strengthening community base to child-care facilities and programmes. These have been efforts to assimilate children into our community to avoid later alienation and conflict. Unfortunately though, the community is not always ready to recognize the children in its midst.

The American child psychiatrist Paul Adams (7) points out that our type of society might be viewed, by and large, as a society against children. This suggests that adults and social institutions tend to depress the spirit and will of children. Perhaps adults are not so concerned with children as with their own parental competence, management of relationships, and status of maturity. Nan Benger calls this phenomenon a failure to recognize that "children are people in their own right and not just appendages of adults". (8) Even the most well intended measures on behalf of children can be subtly undermined by the need to substantiate the status of adults or the institutions which they maintain.

Similarly, child-development programmes will be undermined if more attention is not given to major social problems affecting the life of the community generally. The United States has suffered from drug abuse amongst very young children. Although Australia certainly has not yet experienced the massive effects of these same problems, the Australian community seems reluctant to face up to its alcohol-orientated community difficulties. We can hardly expect young people to develop a sense of danger in using other drugs if our community takes little action (other than in the form of propoganda programmes) about the damaging effects of associating alcohol with activities such as driving. It could be that family welfare agencies with all their understanding of children's needs and care have overlooked the contribution they could make to resolving these general increasing social problems such as driving while under the influence of alcohol, accidents in the home, or unacceptable standards for some consumer goods.

In addition to rethinking the approach to child welfare through an involvement in community affairs and processes, agencies working directly with children are confronted with the need to re-evaluate just where they are heading with the children in their care. Times have changed. Children in institutions have been provided traditionally with minimum education. They then leave school at the compulsory leaving age to obtain employment and earn their own independent living. Also just as traditionally, young people have had to move to alternative accommodation once they are in employment, as the care provided only caters for them while they are at school. These first days of work can be unsettling and it is at this time that a young person may extract the most value from a stable relationship. But often this relationship becomes removed from him simply by geography. There needs to be continuity of accommodation and relationship during this often critical transition from dependent student to independent wage-earner.

Even then, child welfare sponsors are confronted with a re-evaluation of the objectives in providing this form of care. It is clear that we all wish to see these young people develop into well-adjusted, happy persons. In the work ethic of our culture, this has meant persons who are hard-working, thrifty and productive members of the community. However, population and knowledge explosions have dramatically altered the situation, if not the dominance of these values. Young people often require lengthier periods of dependency whilst they complete their formal education. Employment possibilities have become less in number and restricted in choice, at least for periods. Therefore, quite pragmatically, children cannot be expected to be eternal producers and ever self-reliant. No longer should they be inculcated with these over-arching values, but rather, programmes should be orientated to the cultivation of whatever would enable them to be most fulfilled and of greatest use to their fellows.

Greater emphasis must be given to educational support schemes such as

tutoring, reading encouragement and use of the mass-media, visits to places of interest and involvement in a variety of activities. Young people will need more exposure to recreational pursuits in order to develop an awareness and ability to fully enjoy the extra time that inevitably seems to be their destiny. This is not to imply that all child placements should be educationally and recreationally dominant, but simply that these characteristics must play an increasing part in the assessment of adequate opportunities for young people in substitute care.

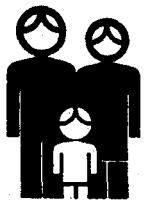
The same pressures of social change affect all families in our community and the traditional preventative casework services seeking to support families in stress must direct considerable effort into these areas. Perhaps the time and effort devoted to analysing and categorizing family problems might be better directed to providing access to opportunities for more fulfilling activity. Commentators such as Alvin Toffler suggest that our community has become so dominated by change that the individual's life environment is changing so rapidly that each is placed in danger of being overwhelmed by psychological, emotional and social pressures not experienced before. (9) If they are correct, then have the professionals really the time to indulge in precise and grand theorizing about the nature and cause of difficulties? Children are going to want rapid answers to frustrations about work and play, to isolation and loneliness, to anxiety about acceptable and unacceptable behaviour and to control major aspects of their lives. At least some of these answers lie in the opportunities offered to children to experience well-developed relationships with adults, the continuous creation of further opportunities for new knowledge, with the improving ability to apply this knowledge within his own life's situation and to explore activity that extends his capacity for expression and living.

Such an approach requires a relationship between child and adult which is very open to others in the community. Every child requires masses of information and considerable ranges of experience in order to develop in a broad way. No one or even two adults can hope to meet these requirements. Unfortunately, there are trends in our community which obstruct such open relationships. Teachers, for instance, are "boxed" into the school and rarely venture outside to visit a home or join a child in a community activity. Substitute parents seek to confirm their sole control over a child when he has lived with them for a period without natural parental contact. Some private child centres and homes object to state intervention either to impose standards or to develop other approaches. To the observer, there still remains the notion of child ownership; these children belong to this person or home and no-one has the right to interfere.

Child care or child welfare must be seen as a joint venture between parents, substitute parents, other persons in the community, and most importantly the children themselves. No single person or group can expect to provide for all a child's needs within the complexity and dynamism of today's society. Programmes for child-care should avoid focusing narrowly on individual children in isolation from their social environments, as this tends to reinforce a subordinate status position in relation to adults. Parents, substitute parental figures, private social welfare agencies, and the state must work together to create a community where all persons, including children, can lead happy lives.

FOOTNOTES

1. P. ARIES **"Centuries of Childhood"** 1973 Penguin Ed. p 123.
2. JOHN HOLT has written a number of books along this similar theme. Probably his most famous is "How Children Fail", but I have mainly used his book **"Freedom & Beyond"** (Pelican 1973).
3. See A. S. NEILL **"Summerhill"** 1974. Penguin.
4. See P. GOODMAN **"Growing up Absurd"** 1961. Victor Gallancy. London.
5. See J. GOLDSTEIN, A. FREUD, A. J. SOLNIT **"Beyond the Best Interests of the Child"** 1973. Free Press. N.Y.
6. H. D. STEIN (ed.), **"Planning for the Needs of Children in Developing Countries"** 1965. UNCF p 80.
7. P. ADAMS, "The Infant, the Family & Society" p 79 in **"Children's Rights"** P. Adams et al. 1972. Panther. London.
8. N. BERGER, "The Child, the Law and the State" p 173 in **"Children's Rights"** ibid.
9. Here, I am accepting that this is essentially the thesis put forward by Toffler in his book "Future Shock" 1971. Pan. London.



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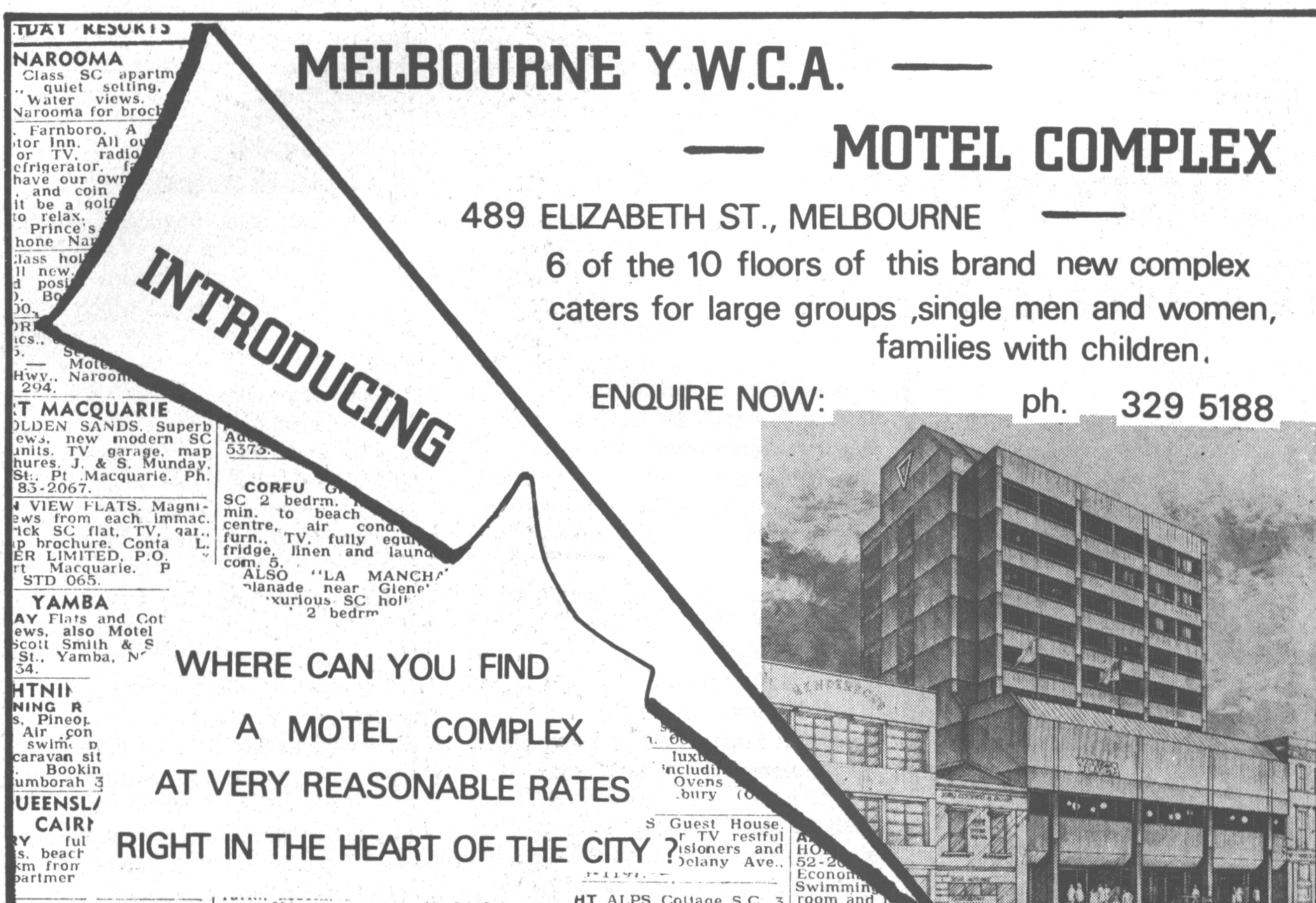

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