

Children, Youth, Elders Re-linking the Generations

By Don Edgar

Since the Australian Institute of Family Studies was established in 1980, we have kept in mind two slogans about family links and supports: 'Every individual has a family'; and 'The family does not stop at the front door'. What we meant was that family policy cannot be based solely on a static image of parents and children living together under the one roof.

Most families start off as a couple, then go through a stage of parents and children living in one household. But once the children have grown and gone, does the couple no longer have a family? If the parents separate or divorce, do the children not have any family? When a partner dies or the children are grown, the family still exists, though the patterns of interaction have changed. Thus family policy has to address the nature of these interactions, across households and across time.

SPECIALISATION AS A FORM OF EXCLUSION

Our two slogans were also meant to direct attention to the links between generations. The family as an institution is important precisely because of its concern with the reproduction and socialisation of new members of society, and with relationships over time, including both material and cultural transfers across generations. The family exists not only 'at the interface between the individual and society, but it also establishes links over time, not simply links between and across generations, but also links that constitute the continuity of society itself' (Morgan 1985).

The problem with modern society is that complexity breeds division; indeed society rests upon a specialisation of labour and a structured exchange between groups with different expertise and interests. As individuals, we carve out a specialised niche for ourselves. In that complexity, we tend to lose sight of our inter-dependency, the fact that despite our much vaunted 'independence' we do not and cannot survive alone.

We have experts on everything: on childhood, youth, ageing, ethnicity, welfare,

on the myriad skills the work-force and society demand. There is nothing wrong with this; it is inevitable and has positive outcomes for society as a whole.

But the combined effect of individualism and specialisation not only hides our basic reliance on one another, it also pushes us into groups whose characteristics tend to be narrowly labelled. The child can/should do certain things. A youth is treated differently from both a child and an adult. Despite the continuum of age and the wide variability in human capacities, we label some as young, others as aged. Though the boundaries blur (you can vote at 18 but you pay full adult fares from 16; retirement used to be at 65 but often happens sooner), we tend to stereotype and deny the capacity of others to do what we can do.

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The concept of professionalisation lies at the extreme of this grouping and labelling process. A block of special knowledge is carved off from the general; the 'dirty work' is handed down to the less well trained; a system of restricting access to that specialist knowledge is devised so that entry becomes a privilege; a special language or jargon grows and a mystique about the profession, its theoretical base and a code of ethics develops around it (Vollmer and Mills, 1966; Dunkerley, 1975; Ben-David, 1963-4). Those without that professional expertise may acquire other forms of expertise but they are by definition inexpert and they feel relatively 'useless' in that particular specialist field.

Such a process, when applied to broader social groupings, can be counter-productive for a healthy and inclusive society. It can make people feel inadequate when in fact they could be useful to others; it obscures both their needs and their potential as resources for the well-being of others.

Let me illustrate in relation to our children, our youth and our elders.

We now take for granted that child labour as it was in previous eras, whether in agricultural households, or in the appalling conditions of the factories and urban slums of the Industrial Revolution, is unacceptable. Using children for profit, exploiting their labour, exposing them to physical danger and exhaustion is bad. But we forget that social motives for getting children off the streets, out of the factories and sweatshops and into the schools were not all philanthropy and enlightenment. The basic motive was economic for an industrial society needed an educated workforce. Childhood ignorance and exploitation was bad not just for children but for the whole economy.

The irony of what Zelizer (1985) and others have called the 'sacralisation' of children's lives (the investment of children with sentimental or religious meaning) is that parents lost the direct benefits of child labour while still carrying the major cost. Far from abolishing child labour, it was simply transformed into schooling. Instead of parents using children directly for the family's benefit, the State invaded family autonomy, imposed a new form of child work - education - from which society would benefit. The value of children to society increased while their 'payoff' to parents decreased. Parallel with this went other forms of State control, such as controlling adoption and the sale of children, and regulating children's insurance and substitute care arrangements. Nor were such reforms easily won, with strong resistance from vested interests gradually losing out to the new image of the 'sacred', the 'priceless' child.



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A further irony is that the family's material investment in children was obscured. In Denmark today, for example, family input is estimated to be 75 per cent of the cost of children; in Australia, with less government investment at every level of education and other family support services, the cost to families is even higher.

Yet increasingly we hear people say that parents should pay for their own child's education as a private matter, not a public one. There are now no universal tax concessions, allowances or deductions for families with children. There is resentment at social security outlays on supporting parents, because they are blamed for their own problems, and people ignore or don't care that social security is merely below poverty support for children, who are our future.

Two broad factors underlie this public indifference to the fate of children. One has already been mentioned – the privatisation of the family which obscures the family's input to society. But the other is that very idealisation of childhood, its sacralisation, which we have come to take for granted as a cultural value.

In our attempts to protect children we have gone too far. We have produced 'the useless child', excluded from the productive life of the community, brought up as 'a privileged guest who is thanked and praised for helping out' rather than as one

responsibly sharing in contributing to family and community well-being. Educators may have been unthinking collaborators in this process which is now backfiring in growing social indifference, even hostility, to the well-being of children. Perhaps some re-examination of the 'usefulness' of education to children in a changing society is essential.

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The transformation that took place before and after the turn of the century meant children lost their economic usefulness. Even working-class children were evicted from the labour market and, like their middle-class forerunners, became 'experienced loafers'. As Zelizer puts it: 'The new sacred child occupied a special and separate world, regulated by affection and education, not work of profit.' As she argues, this was not simply an economic change process; it was the result of a battle between two opposing views of childhood. Child-rearing

and its importance to later development had been discovered, and children were, in part, removed from the damaging influence of home; at the same time they were made more 'precious' through the new emphasis in motherhood.

Thus a cultural process of the sacralisation of children's lives transformed their economic status, so that both education and household help for children became valued as moral training rather than as help for the parent.

Several other writers point to the theme I have outlined above: that children have become less useful to society and that is the reason for adult indifference and hostility towards them. Greer (1984) attacks the child's 'parasitic' role in the family compared with other societies where they have a clear sense of the group they belong to. Child liberationists claim that children's rights should include access to economic power via honest labour. Boocock (1975) argues that children's rights have been overemphasised at the expense of children's obligations: 'the roles of self-denying adult and irresponsible child are frustrating for both parties'. Kagan (1977) sees economic dependency as a psychological hazard to children: self-esteem depends too much on parental love. In the Institute's research on children (Edgar 1985; Amato 1987) we found self-esteem in children was higher where there was a combination of parental





interest, family cohesion and responsibility for chores that were a real contribution to the well-being of the whole family group.

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The research of the Whittings (1975) and Elder (1974) reinforces the view that real productivity from children, meaningful contribution to the wider group, engages children's sense of self-worth, independence and competence. Mnookin (1978) feels our child labour laws may have become an undue restraint on the rights of young people. And Toffler (of *Future Shock* fame) predicts a possible campaign for child labour, when the 'electronic cottage' brings production back into the home.

We need to ask ourselves, are we training our children to be incapable of real productive work once let loose from the protected domain of home and school? Do we give them 'make-work' while conveying to them the message that they can contribute nothing meaningful until they become 'adults'? How realistic is such an education process when Japan, Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines make their children work very

hard at school, when women are voting with their feet to return to work, regardless of whether children need their undivided attention or not, where Sweden provides massive child care and has a higher productivity level than Australia.

I am not arguing here for a return to 'using' children, but rather to help them feel useful in their own right. Nor does this mean useful in a narrow utilitarian, 'jobs' sense. It means making every child feel that he or she is valuable to others, and has something to contribute to the rest of the family, to friends, neighbours, school, to a society of inter-dependant social beings. Such a process would stress the development of every child's full potential and their inclusion in meaningful social contributions rather than the mere pursuit of individual self-interest.

YOUTH USEFULNESS

Similar argument can be applied to our young people. We have managed to extend the period of 'adolescence' to a longer period of 'youth', ranging from about age 13 to age 25 years. This socially-produced period of hiatus between childhood and full adulthood creates several problems.

Modern society needs well-educated citizens. Jobs now require not only more specialised knowledge but also a well-developed capacity to think, to solve problems, to adapt to change. American business has already realised that mere

vocational training on top of the basic 3R's is not enough. (Conference Board 1988) Yet much Australian educational debate is still stuck on a narrow view of schooling which forgets that productivity growth depends upon creativity and adaptability.

Current attempts to improve school retention rates are important. So too are attempts to re-vamp the curriculum so that all children develop competence in a range of scientific, mathematical, social and personal areas. Attacks on such reforms reflect an outmoded view of what our young people require and they condemn many to the continued incompetence bred by a narrowly specialist 'academic' curriculum.

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The labour market itself is so changed that jobs for young people are in short supply, are poorly paid or in part-time service areas badly connected to further education and training. So school retention is a way of keeping them off the unemployment lists as well as, in theory at least, improving their preparation for a much changed labour market.

We have not had the wit to alter the structures of work and education to articulate

more effectively this prolonged phase of youth-to-adult transition. In fact, we are uncertain about whether 'transition' is an appropriate word to describe the situation of young people today. Many of them earn some income while studying; many contribute to parental support. By age 20, or earlier, they can lead an adult personal life yet still be dependent on parental housing and income support (Hartley 1989). The Institute is following up its 1983 adolescent sample to study the new meanings of 'becoming adult'.

We need to challenge many current assumptions about youth wages and youth income needs. The costs of living for a 17 year-old living away from home are no different from those of a 27 year-old. Not all can rely upon parental support. So moves towards a 'training wage' might better reflect our social objectives than allowances based upon an outdated age-stage framework.

Responses to youth homelessness should be broadened to a policy of youth usefulness, of including every young person as a contributing member of society. What many young people lack is a sense of place, a stake in the school, the home, the wider society. In my personal view, there has been a neglect of teaching a sense of responsibility, of co-operation, sharing, mutuality, giving to others, in favour of too great an emphasis on 'individual fulfilment', 'rights', and the 'exploring self'.

This is no call to authoritarian discipline of forced labour, or a denial of autonomy and choice. It is instead a quite radical call for what I have described elsewhere (Edgar 1985) as 'co-operative competence', a restructuring of school and work life based on sharing our resources and skills, an insistence on the inclusion of every individual in a society of full participation. Our youth need to be shown that their efforts are appreciated, their contributions needed.

The answer has to be a **social** approach to youth issues which gives them a stake in Australian society, a sense that they are responsible not only for themselves but for others, that others rely on them to pull their weight. We need a new respect for the rights of others and our obligations to them, a sense of caring and sharing rather than the competitive ethic which pits each of us against everyone else.

It can be done, but not by pushing youth further into a ghetto of their own. Their links with younger and older generations could be the key to a rekindling of usefulness. A positive relationship with someone who really needs them would build self-esteem and motivate co-operative effort. Learning by teaching others younger or less able than themselves; acting as a support contact for an aged person; doing community work that makes a meaningful contribution rather than just make-work; being part of group projects and adventure

programs that challenge and extend the sense of competence. Programs such as *Westrek* in Western Australia which offer active learning and support to unemployed youth, or similar to J.F. Kennedy's Peace Corps movement could be developed imaginatively if the will existed to deny the barriers of 'youth' policy and develop cross-generational links.

In the October 1988 issue of the United States magazine *Children Today*, Calhoun puts well the point I am trying to make. He points to the amazing vitality, the undaunted spirit of youth, assets which can be captured for community, enhancing both their own self-esteem and helping the community to meet vital needs. What a resource to waste, to reject! We have to develop co-operative programs (not just government) which focus on the 'dignity of exchange', in which the ability of the individual to contribute is acknowledged as an integral part of the individual's receipt of needed services.

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What a change that could bring about. Yet we treat our youth as a 'problem' to be 'handled' by some special youth policy or program. The truth is that they are an asset, with great energy and enthusiasm for life. The best recipe is that of responsibility in action, of revising 'work' for them that links them with others who need, rely upon and appreciate their contribution. If we cannot develop schools, activities, processes that give young people this stake, this sense of place and mutual responsibility, we may well have lost the human essence of our society.

CHANGING IMAGES OF THE AGED

In the 1960's hippie period, young people were exhorted never to trust anyone over the age of 30 years. Advertising and the television have been dominated by youth, and the social image of the aged is generally negative. In an Institute study of *The Television Family* (Stewart 1983), we found the elderly (over 60 years) made up only 4 per cent of the characters in TV programs, whereas they comprise 14 per cent of the population.

A negative approach to our elders is not only insulting, it is downright damaging to our economic and social well-being. It ignores the value of experience, wisdom and highly developed skills which could be used in different ways for the social good. It ignores also the fact that with an ageing population, Australia faces a shift in the nature of 'care' and the dependency ratio, and may need to retain its older workers in the labour force longer as new recruits become fewer in number.

Our propensity to label and exclude is

perhaps nowhere more evident than in relation to 'the aged', and the vocabulary we use symbolises the problem. When do we pass from being 'young' to 'adult' or 'old'? When does 'elderly' become 'old', become 'aged'? What does the word 'aged' signify to younger people?

The word 'elders' seems to me preferable because it is relative rather than categorical. The 'aged' seems to require a cut-off point, a descriptive set of characteristics which may become stigmatising. Laslett's recent call for recognition of the 'Third Age' as an age of freedom limited only by financial resources and the language of dependency is apt. He points out how much society would benefit if we were to encourage their contribution and if they were to recognise their 'responsibility for the social future'.

We cannot afford to put our elders on the scrapheap. They are invaluable human resources, if not economic contributors. Their role as grandparents is invaluable, but as more miss out on this role more could be drawn into new social roles as resource persons for early childhood, as mentors for youth, as wise elders for the community at large.

UNITED STATES INITIATIVES

Several US programs aim at intergenerational exchange. The *Gray Panthers* founded in 1970 by Maggie Kuhn was an advocacy group against 'ageism' involving active collaboration between younger and older members of society to address social policy issues. Volunteerism has been encouraged by a 1975 agreement between the US office of Education and the US Administration of Ageing. It works both ways: for elders to provide service in the nation's schools, and for the schools to provide educational, nutritional, recreational and volunteer opportunities for the nation's elderly. A 1976 California program introduced older persons as resources in classrooms throughout the state. Michigan developed *Teaching-Learning Communities* to bring elders, their crafts and their caring into the public schools. In 1978 a \$10m award from the Clark Foundation helped several school systems develop intergenerational programs using older persons to support the growth and learning of youth. This has grown to the point where in 1982 over one million older residents acted on a variety of volunteer roles in the public schools.

There are groups such as the Pittsburgh *Generations Together* which prompted the 1985 California Intergenerational Child Care Act (unfortunately vetoed by the Governor). In New York, SERVE involves 1500 senior volunteers in family support agencies. The 1981 White House Conference on Ageing reported on 'Older Americans as a Growing National Resource'. The 1982 World Assembly on Ageing in Vienna expressed concern at the alienation in Western societies, calling

for programs to enhance generational solidarity.

Statewide and regional networks on intergenerational programs are multiplying. Illinois in 1987 recommended family policies across the age spectrum. New Jersey in 1985 promoted the concept of intergenerational programs in schools, social service and community organisations. Pennsylvania in 1985 directed Departments of Ageing, Public Welfare and Education to work together to increase the availability of child care services through models involving senior citizens; and in 1988 set up such model child care centres for state employees.

Several umbrella groups are actively pushing the cause of better links between the ages. *Generations United* established in 1986, lobbies for public policies and programs which recognise the inter-dependence of children, youth, families and the elderly. Several Intergenerational Program Guide Manuals' have been published to help others develop such activities.

INTERGENERATIONAL EXCHANGE

In Australia we seem not to be even on first base in thinking about better links between the ages. Our terminology and our narrow, programmatic approach to different age groups ignores the need to maintain those connections between the generations which Margaret Mead (1972) said were essential for the mental health and stability of the nation'. Its changing demography may well accelerate the potential conflict between the old and the young, and many of our youth are caught in a limbo of irrelevance and indifference.

If children are our future, then youth, adults and elders need to invest in them. But equally, we need to invest in and draw upon the resources of each generation, for we live in a world already too divided and can ill afford our separateness. Intergenerational approaches to social policy and programs could bring young and old together to learn from experience, enjoy and assist each other.

We have a totally inadequate research base on intergenerational transfers. There is doubtless still a good deal of exchange and transfer across the generations. But it is largely privatised and more could be done publicly to encourage a reciprocal respect and exchange as the basis for an inclusive and just society.

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