



The generation game

In just a few decades childhood has changed out of all recognition, says Barbara Beck. What does that mean for children, parents and society at large?

“WHEN I WAS a kid, we were out and about all the time, playing with our friends, in and out of each other’s houses, sandwich in pocket, making our own entertainment. Our parents hardly saw us from morning to night. We didn’t have much stuff, but we came and went as we liked and had lots of adventures.” This is roughly what you will hear if you ask anyone over 30 about their childhood in a rich country. The adventures were usually of a homely kind, more Winnie the Pooh than Star Wars, but the freedom and the companionship were real.

Today such children will spend most of their time indoors, often with adults rather than with siblings or friends, be supervised more closely, be driven everywhere rather than walk or cycle, take part in many more organised activities and, probably for several hours every day, engage with a screen of some kind. All this is done with the best of intentions. Parents want to protect their offspring from traffic, crime and other hazards in what they see as a more dangerous world, and to give them every opportunity to flourish.

And indeed in many ways children are better off than they were a generation or two ago. Child mortality rates even in rich countries are still dropping. Fewer kids suffer neglect or go hungry. They generally get more attention and support from their parents, and many governments are offering extra help to very young children from disadvantaged backgrounds. As adolescents, fewer become delinquents, take up smoking and drinking or become teenage parents. And more of them finish secondary school and go on to higher education.

The children themselves seem fairly happy with their lot. In a survey across the OECD in 2015, 15-year-olds were asked to rate their satisfaction with their life on a scale from zero to ten. The average

score was 7.3, with Finnish kids the sunniest, at nearly 7.9, and Turkish ones the gloomiest, at 6.1. Boys were happier than girls, and children from affluent families scored higher than the rest.

That is not surprising. Prosperous parents these days, especially in America, invest an unprecedented amount of time and money in their children to ensure that they will do at least as well as the parents themselves have done, and preferably better. Those endless rounds of extra tutoring, music lessons, sports sessions and educational visits, together with lively discussions at home about every subject under the sun, have proved highly effective at securing the good grades and social graces that will open the doors to top universities and well-paid jobs.

Working-class parents in America, for their part, lack the wherewithal to engage in such intensive parenting. As a result, social divisions from one generation to the next are set to widen. Not so long ago the “American dream” held out the prospect that everyone, however humble their background, could succeed if they tried hard enough. But a recent report by the World Bank showed that intergenerational social mobility (the chance that the next generation will end up in a different social class from the previous one) in the land of dreams is now among the lowest in all rich countries. And that is before many of the social effects of the new parenting gap have had time to show up yet.

Tell me the ways

This special report will explain what has led to these momentous changes in childhood in America and other rich countries, as well as in middle-income China. They range from broad social and demographic trends such as urbanisation, changes in family struc- ►

► ture and the large-scale move of women into the labour force in recent decades to a shifting emphasis in policy on the early years and the march of digital technology.

Start with the physical environment in which children are growing up. In rich countries the overwhelming majority now lead urban lives. Almost 80% of people live in cities, which have many advantages, including better opportunities for work, education, culture and leisure. But these often come at a cost: expensive housing, overcrowding, lack of green space, heavy traffic, high air pollution and a sense of living among strangers rather than in a close-knit community. This has caused a perception of growing danger, even though crime in Western countries in the past few decades has declined, so statistically the average child is actually safer.

Even more important, the domestic environment for most children has changed profoundly. Families have become smaller, and women bear children far later than they did only a couple of generations ago. In the vast majority of rich countries the average number of children a woman will have is now well below the replacement level of 2.1. Households with just one child have become

commonplace in Europe and the more prosperous parts of Asia, including China. That means each child has more time, money and energy invested in it, but misses out on the hustle and bustle of a larger household.

Families have also become far more fluid. Rates of marriage have declined steeply, and divorce has become widespread. Many couples in America and Europe now cohabit rather than marry, and a large and growing proportion of children are born out of wedlock. Far more of them, too, are being brought up by lone parents, overwhelmingly mothers, or end up in patchwork families created by new sets of relationships. Again, this happens far more often at the bottom of the social scale than at the top.

At the same time the number of women going out to work has risen steeply, though in recent years the trend has slowed. The post-second-world-war model of the nuclear family with a breadwinner husband, a homemaker wife and several children has become atypical. In America the share of women of working age in the labour force has risen from 42% in 1960 to 68% in 2017. To a greater or lesser extent the same has happened in other rich coun- ►►

Little man or little angel?

How perceptions of childhood have changed through history

FOR MOST of Western history, childhood was nasty, brutish and short, or even non-existent. Before modern medicine and public-health standards, many infants did not live to see their first birthday—and if they did, they were expected to grow up at the double. In the two millennia from antiquity to the 17th century, children were mostly seen as imperfect adults. Medieval works of art typically depict them as miniature grown-ups. In 1960 one of the first historians of childhood, Philippe Ariès, declared that in medieval Europe the idea of childhood did not exist. Most people were not even sure of their own age.

For much of that time newborns were considered intrinsically evil, burdened with original sin from which they had to be redeemed through instruction and education. That changed in the 17th century, when children instead began to be seen as innocents who must be protected from harm and corruption by the adult world. Childhood came to be regarded as a separate stage of life. John Locke, a 17th-century English thinker, saw the mind of a newborn child as a blank sheet, to be filled in by its elders and betters. A few decades later Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a Swiss philosopher, argued that children had their own way of seeing, thinking, feeling and reasoning and should be left to develop as nature intended. In the late 18th and early 19th century the Romantics went one better, crediting children with deeper

wisdom than adults.

Parents' relative lack of interest in their children in the Middle Ages may have been a rational response to a distressingly high infant mortality rate, reckoned to have been around 200-300 per 1,000 live births in the first year of life, compared with single figures per 1,000 in rich countries now. Many others were wiped out by diseases and accidents before the age of ten. Parents would not want to get too attached to a child who might not be around for long. Besides, in the absence of reliable birth control, families tended to be large,



so less attention would be focused on each individual sibling.

Young children were encouraged to take part in adult activities as soon as they were able, usually starting between the ages of five and seven, and begin to work alongside grown-ups as they became more capable. In agrarian societies they had always been expected to help out at home and in the fields from an early age. In post-revolutionary America they were expected to become independent as soon as possible because labour was in short supply, which made the relationship between the generations less hierarchical than in Europe.

The Industrial Revolution turned children into an indispensable source of income for many poor families, often before they were fully grown. In Britain a parliamentary report in 1818-19 on children in cotton mills around Stockport and Manchester put the average age for starting work at around 11½.

But by the end of the 19th century the state had begun to clamp down on the exploitation of children in the West. Education for the younger age groups became mandatory in ever more countries. Children were seen as in need of protection, and their period of economic dependency lengthened in both Europe and America. The scene was set for the emergence of what Viviana Zelizer, a sociologist at Princeton, has memorably described as “the economically useless but emotionally priceless child”.

► tries. Mothers now mostly return to work within a year or so of giving birth, not five or ten years later. In the absence of a handy grandmother, the child, even at a young age, will probably be looked after outside the home during the working week.

The first few years of a child's life are now receiving more attention as new evidence has emerged about its vital importance in the development of the brain. James Heckman, a Nobel prize-winning American economist, has suggested that early investment in a range of measures from high-quality child care to support programmes for parents offers excellent returns, far better than remedial interventions later in life.

Governments in many countries have started to increase the number of public child-care and kindergarten places to supplement private provision, both to encourage more women to take paid jobs and to promote the development of young children from less privileged backgrounds. This report will look at the wide variety of early-years care on offer in different countries (ranging from plentiful and relatively cheap in the Nordics to scarce and often eye-wateringly expensive in the Anglo-Saxon countries, with most of the rest of Europe somewhere in between), and try to assess what difference it makes. In East Asia this is the first rung of a fiercely competitive educational ladder.

The report will also consider the effect on children of an array of screen-based devices, from televisions to smartphones, offering a feast of passive entertainment, interactive computer games and the opportunity to connect with peers remotely. Not long ago children used to rile their parents by declaring they were bored, but now "being bored is something that never has to be tolerated for a moment", writes Sherry Turkle of MIT, an expert on digital culture. In rich countries the vast majority of 15-year-olds have their own smartphone and spend several hours a day online. There are growing concerns that overuse might lead to addiction and mental illness, and that spending too much time sitting still in front of a screen will stop them from exercising and make them fat. The digital world also harbours new risks, including cyberbullying and sexting.

But the first thing this report will explore is the new face of the institution still central to any child's life: the family. ■

The family

Essential ingredient

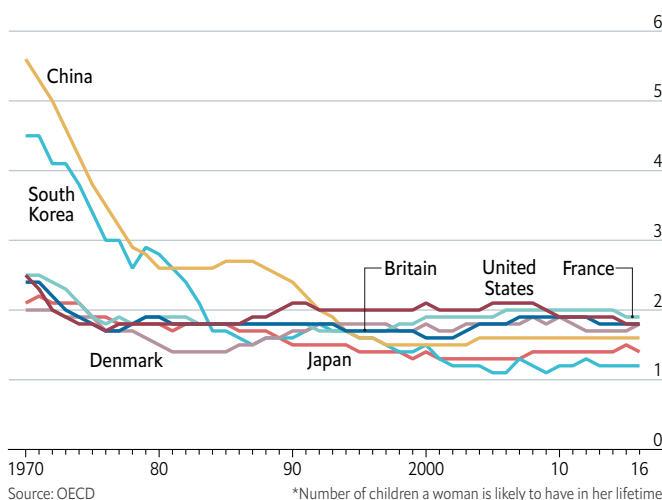
Smaller, more heterogeneous, but still indispensable

ON A RAINY Saturday morning, the Museum of Childhood in east London reverberates with the sound of hundreds of small children enjoying themselves. Some are stacking bricks, others are playing in a sandpit as their parents look on. A large Victorian rocking horse attracts a queue of young riders. On a nearby wall a notice outlines a project on which the museum worked with a local school to find out what seven- and eight-year-olds consider important in their lives. The clear winners were the children's families—along with Lego, a construction toy.

The family is still the best place for a child to get the love and security it needs to grow into a well-balanced adult. Child-development experts agree that almost any family, however imperfect, is better than none at all. It does not even have to last for ever, only long enough to provide a safe and warm space for those crucial early years. That is just as well, because today's families are very dif-

Two is plenty

Total fertility rate*



Source: OECD

*Number of children a woman is likely to have in her lifetime

ferent from those of a few decades ago.

Most obviously, they are smaller. Across the OECD, the total fertility rate (TFR)—the number of children a woman is likely to have in her lifetime—is now 1.7, against 2.7 in 1970 (see chart). Even America, which until recently used to procreate more than most of the West, is now close to the rich-country average. In South Korea the fall in the TFR has been precipitous, from 4.5 in 1970 to 1.2 now.

The road from five to one

Over the same period China's TFR has plummeted from 5.6 to 1.6. That is often attributed to the country's one-child policy, but the ultra-low birth rates of other countries in the region, including Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Vietnam, suggest it would have happened anyway, if somewhat later. In 2016 the Chinese government, alarmed by the prospect of a rapid decline in the country's working population, relaxed the rules. That brought a small uptick, but by the following year the numbers were down again. In time the policy is likely to be scrapped altogether, but no one expects a baby boom.

Asked what is holding them back from having larger families, Chinese couples often cite the cost of raising children. But the country's increasing urbanisation has also played a part. Many of its modern cities are just as crowded, traffic-ridden, polluted and devoid of green spaces as those in the West, if not more so. They are uninviting places in which to bring up a family.

Both in China and throughout the rich world, couples marry far later than they used to, and have their first child when they are much older. At the start of the 1990s in most OECD countries the mean age of women at first marriage was between 22 and 27, and for men two or three years older; now it is 30 for women and over 32 for men. In Sweden, the place with the oldest brides and grooms, it is 34 and 36 respectively.

And many no longer bother to get married at all. In the past half-century marriage rates in the developed world have roughly halved, though there are big differences between countries, and not necessarily along the lines you might expect. Americans, for example, marry at twice the rate of Italians, French and Spaniards. The Chinese are keenest of all, reflecting a strong aversion to births out of wedlock, for both cultural and practical reasons.

In most rich countries such attitudes are a thing of the past. The average proportion of children born to unmarried parents across the OECD is now around 40%, compared with 7.5% back in 1970 ►►

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