

At his urgent request, we recently bought our 4-year-old a pair of "velcros." These shoes "lace up" with strips of Velcro and make learning to tie laces an anticlimax. Not long before, I got David a \$2 digital watch with which he can tell time as well as any grown-up. His fingers already knew how to work a calculator, although they were hard put to write numbers. And since he was 3, David has tapped out words on our home computer. Writing by hand is still difficult for him.

In each such case, our son has taken a shortcut on learning skills that also blaze the trail of growing up: tying shoelaces, telling time, figuring numbers, and writing words. And in the process, like so many of today's children, David will march toward adulthood at a much brisker pace than did either of his parents.

Are kids growing up faster these days? In dress, manner, and command of worldly information they certainly seem to be. Rising rates of sexual activity, alcohol abuse and suicide among teenagers and preteenagers support the impression that today's children are increasingly adultlike. Less dramatic but perhaps more telling are kids' beauty pageants, pro-style ball teams, and the look of sophistication that dominates fashionable children's wear.

Consider this story: Like so many parents, the mother of a Philadelphia first-grader is contending with pleas from her daughter for designer label clothing. The child is 7 years old, and on her own initiative, she recently ordered forms to enter a beauty contest for children age 2 and up.

One morning, they went for what seemed an innocent drive. The mother turned on the radio. "What do you call a cow who's had an abortion?" asked the announcer. "A decaffeinated cow," was the answer. The mother quickly changed stations. After a minute, a little voice asked, "Did you get the joke?"

"No," answered the mother.

"I did. It's like de-calf."

"Do you know what 'abortion' means?" asked the mother.

"That's when you won't have a baby," replied her 7-year-old.

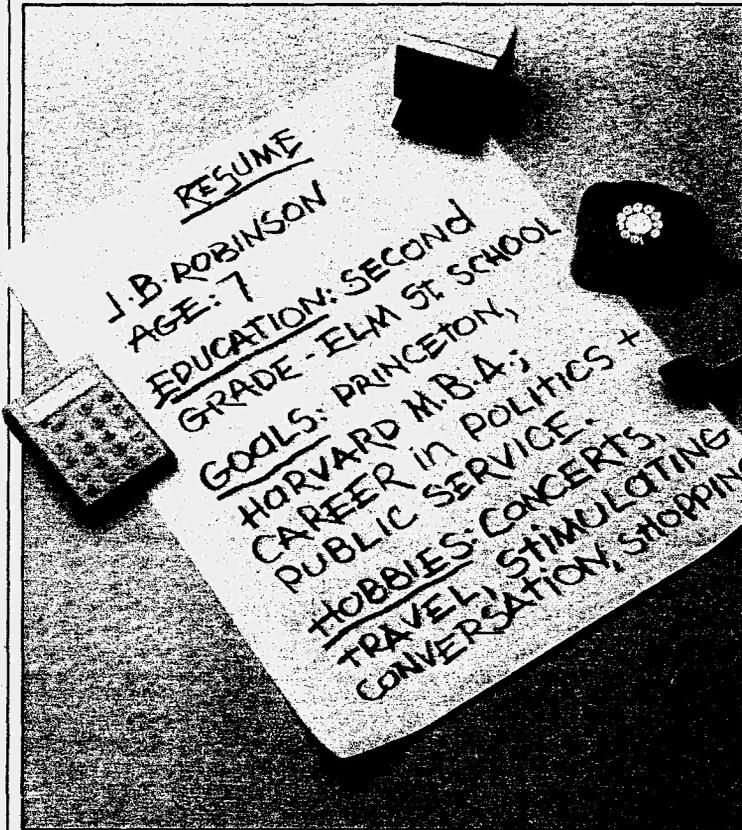
"It's frightening," lamented the mother afterward. "I hadn't even heard that word when I was her age. Now they see it in the headlines or hear it on television all the time."

In his book *The Disappearance of Childhood*, media historian Neil Postman argues that by making almost any human experience visible to viewers of all ages, television has virtually eliminated parents' traditional role as guardians of adult secrets. And the world TV portrays is one in which chil-

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ARE KIDS TOO "OLD"?

By Ralph Keyes



dren seldom act childlike. Popular programs such as *Diff'rent Strokes*, *Gimme a Break* and *Who's the Boss?* (to name just a few) feature a precocious army of mini-adults, led by Gary Coleman. Such shows convey a clear model for how 1985's children ought to act: smart, witty, and mature for their age.

The look of maturity is this season's fashion statement for kids. Not only is designer wear now available for children of all ages, but generic parachute pants are sold for infants, and multi-zipper flight jackets for toddlers. According to Managing Editor Patricia Van Olinda of *Earnshaw's Review* (a children's wear trade magazine), styles that used to take a year or two to work their way down from older to younger age brackets may now do so within a single season. One of the strongest trends reported by retailers: the degree to which children as young as 5 or 6 are choosing their own "look." Most typically, the look is one they've seen on Music Television or on bigger kids who saw it there.

The principal setting for stylistic cross-pollination between generations is the great American shopping mall. Like Babylon of old, today's mall is a crossroads bringing together Americans

of all ages and from many walks of life. "I think they do grow up faster," says Temple University Professor Martin Millison about children in shopping centers, whom he studied for his Ph.D. thesis. "They become more worldly. They're coming in contact with a wide range of values, social classes, even problems. When you grow up hanging around on street corners and in corner stores like I did, you tend to come in contact only with people like yourself."

Dana Blackwell of Detroit's Trend Facts has been impressed by the extraordinary amount of time children in market research groups she leads say they spend in malls. The reasons given for doing so include: because that's where other kids are; to see what's new; and to spend money. What surprises every client for whom she's studied today's children, adds Blackwell, is how much money they have to spend.

Among the goods developed to sell to this market are peel-off nail polish for grade schoolers, personalized children's stationery, and designer bibs. Of course none of this is just to suit the children's fancy; certainly not the fancy of toddlers. The target market for such goods consists of affluent baby boomers who want

to outfit their children in the same style to which they've become accustomed. By so doing, they create fashion clones of themselves. The look of precocity has even become a selling point. Ads featuring grim child models wearing designer suits, jogging outfits and dark, opaque sunglasses tout "the trendiest duds to ever don a kid" and "workout wear for the busy kid who's always on the run."

This is part of what child psychologist David Elkind calls the "hurried child" syndrome. In a book by that title, Elkind argues that children who once were too coddled today are pushed too hard. This conclusion was based on his realization that spoiled children no longer dominated his young clientele. "Rather," he writes, "these children seemed to have too much pressure to achieve, to succeed, to please.... Unlike the spoiled children who remain children too long, hurried children grow up too fast."

What purpose is served by pushing our children to hurry to grow up? Some answers are obvious. A precocious child is a wonderful status symbol. A little beauty queen, football star, or violin prodigy presumably speaks well for the parents. In addition, the 40 percent of American children who are being raised in two-career families (up from 12 percent in 1959) and the 22 percent who live with a single parent (double the proportion in 1970) can help out by maturing faster. A lot of parents prefer the company of mature-acting children. One reason we hustle kids to grow up is our own need for someone to talk to. As a Los Angeles mother in her mid-30s put it, she never really enjoyed her son's company until he turned 3 and they could begin to play "mind games."

Many parents hope to accelerate the maturing process by subjecting their children to a steady diet of flash cards, educational software, and "early enrichment programs." "You feel like a bad mother unless your kid is involved in 10 types of activities," explains a mother of two in Florida. "If they're not, they might not get into Harvard."

Among the strongest market trends Blackwell has noted is the growing number of American families that own home computers. By now, 16 percent of us have computers in our homes. Those selling them have found their most effective pitch is to warn parents of the dire consequences their children will face without such help in the home. They might get left behind.

Because of such trends, says author Marie Winn in her book *Children Without Childhood*, the traditional Age of Protection enjoyed by American youngsters has given way to an Age of Preparation. But is such preparation done more for the sake of the children's futures or for their parents' reputations? Perhaps the biggest boast we can make about our offspring is that they're ahead of themselves — progressing more rapidly than the other kids. In theory we

"ADULT" KIDS

may not want our children to grow up too fast. Yet we observe favorably that a child is "very mature" or "very poised." To say they're acting "childish," on the other hand, is something of a put-down. What pride can be taken in a child who's progressing at a normal rate?

Kids can't fail to get the message. When they're taken from Baby Dior pajamas and put in Izod sweat suits beneath Diane Von Furstenberg jackets to be hustled from one lesson to the next in Aprica strollers, they quickly sense that acting older will bring a smile to the face of Mommy and Daddy. But children being what they are, it doesn't take long for them to prefer a scowl. This shift usually takes place during junior high school, when parents who had hoped to get little Mozarts and Curies end up with miniature Boy Georges and Cyndi Laupers. By then it's too late to reverse the process, of course. Childhood is more easily abbreviated than restored.

The question might be asked: So what? So what if our kids grow up faster than they used to? Mightn't they even be better off? Don't the times call for a more mature type of child?

These are valid questions. There's no biological need for childhood past the age of 6 or 7. Before the Renaissance, most children were dressed and treated little differently from adults. Yet psychologically speaking, an extended childhood is a form of progress comparable to the harnessing of electricity or pasteurization of milk. Having extra time to mature makes for better grounded adults in a healthier society. Without such time, Elkind points out in *All Grown Up and No Place to Go*, hurried children become adolescents with only a "patchwork" sense of identity.

What types of adults will our precocious children become? In some ways they will be an improvement: better educated, more aware of the world around them, and hopefully, more tolerant. But the danger is that the price of such gains will be a population top-

heavy with jittery adults. In the words of psychologist Marvin Zuckerman, "Many parents who assume that abundant early stimulation is necessary for future intellectual development . . . may actually be creating future sensation seekers rather than intellectual giants."

The unanswered question is whether kids are actually more precocious today or whether their poses are a variation on "let's play grown-up." Certainly many of them have demonstrated a capacity to grasp and mimic adult mannerisms. But we have no evidence that children's feelings mature faster. Anyone who's watched a teenager pout or play happily with a sibling's toys has evidence to the contrary. One cause of rising suicide rates is the pressure many teenagers feel to hide childlike confusion beneath a veneer of sophistication.

If anything, the pressures of the times call for a slower rather than a faster maturing process. Loathe as they may be to admit it, our kids themselves don't necessarily enjoy their apparent precocity. Many a parent is surprised to sense

relief beneath the grumbling with which their teenagers greet limits set for them. One father in Washington, D.C., is impressed by how often his punk-look 13-year-old will deliberately break rules when he knows this will get him grounded. "Either he's tired or just wants some time with the family," speculates the father. "Even though he'd never say so, he seems to enjoy the weekends he has to spend at home."

The signs are not all discouraging. Teachers report a "return to innocence" among many of their students. Balancing the questionable move to all-day preschool programs, Elkind points out, is a positive tendency to postpone the age for entering kindergarten. Even the popularity of a singer such as Michael Jackson could be seen as a hopeful sign. Unlike his predecessors such as Elvis Presley and Mick Jagger, Jackson is clearly a child beneath the flash. This could be the basis for his appeal. Because as hard as it is to face — even in themselves — children would really rather be children. **FW**