1.3 DAVID ELKIND

The Hurried Child: Is Our Impatient Society Depriving Kids of Their Right to Be Children?

David Elkind's work observing and writing about young children spans 30 years. Elkind was born in 1931 in Detroit, Michigan, and is currently a professor of child study at Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts. Early in his professional career, he worked as a postdoctoral fellow at Jean Piaget's International Center for Genetic Epistemology in Geneva, Switzerland. It was there that his observations of young children led him to investigate their thinking at a variety of levels. In the 1980s Elkind wrote three influential books entitled *The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast Too Soon* (Addison-Wesley, 1988), *All Grown Up and No Place to Go: Teenagers in Crisis* (Addison-Wesley, 1984), and *Miseducation: Preschoolers at Risk* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1987). Elkind wrote *The Hurried Child* while serving as president of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1986–1988).

The following selection from "The Hurried Child: Is Our Impatient Society Depriving Kids of Their Right to Be Children?" *Instructor & Teacher* (May 1982) presents Elkind's view of how young children in America are being raised. Our fast-paced society has led many parents to put their children's development on high speed, often bypassing the once-in-a-lifetime opportunities only available in childhood. Elkind attempts to put the brakes on society's rush to get children from childhood to adulthood so quickly. He advocates play as one effective way to counterbalance the hectic lifestyles many children lead.

Pressure to succeed at all costs, pressure to cope, pressure to survive—Sound like the beginning of a list of adult stressors? It probably is, but add to it pressure to achieve before one is ready to achieve, pressure to grow up and quit acting like a child when one still *is* a child, and pressure to struggle to the top when one is only four, six, or eight years old. Combine those pressures and others, and you have the stressors we are placing on our children as we hurry them into premature adulthood.

We even want them to *look* like adults. Take, for example, the mid-teens sex symbol who sensually gyrates her hips as she models the designer jeans that are so appealing to the young. As a matter of fact, today even preschoolers wear miniature versions of adult clothing. From LaCoste shirts to scaled-down designer fashions, a whole range of adult costumes is available to children.

Three or four decades ago, boys wore short pants and knickers until they began to shave; getting a pair of long pants was a true rite of passage. Girls were not permitted to wear makeup or sheer stockings until they were in their teens. Children's clothing signaled adults that children were to be treated differently, perhaps indulgently, and children could more easily act like children; but no longer. Clothing is just one of the more obvious examples of how we hurry today's children into adulthood, pushing them toward many different types of achievement and exposing them to experiences that tax their adaptive capacity.

Look at the media, for example. Music, books, films, and television increasingly portray young people as precocious and present them in more or less explicit sexual or manipulative situations, reinforcing the pressure on children to grow up fast in their language, thinking, and behavior. Can children be hurried into growing up fast emotionally, as well? The answer is no. Feelings and emotions have their own timing and rhythm and cannot be hurried. Young teenagers may look and behave like adults, but they usually don't feel like adults. Growing up emotionally is complicated and difficult under any circumstances but may be especially so when children's behavior and appearance say "adult" while their feelings cry "child."

Academic achievement is another example of the many pressures adults place on children to grow up fast, to succeed at all costs. Society has no room for the "late bloomers," the children who come into their own later in life rather than earlier. Children have to be successful early or they are regarded as flops. This pressure to succeed has gone so far that many parents refuse to allow their children to be retained in kindergarten—despite all of the evidence that this is the best possible time to retain a child. "But," the parents say, "how can we tell our friends that our son failed kindergarten?"

A recent study of children who have been held back in kindergarten found that almost all of the parents involved were pleased with the result. They thought that repeating kindergarten had given their children, who were socially or intellectually below the norm at that time, a chance to catch up at their own speed. Many of these children were able to join their own age group later and, far from being handicapped, were helped by the opportunity to move at their own pace.

AT WHAT AGE SHOULD A CHILD KNOW HOW TO READ?

As teachers know all too well, parents hurry children when they insist that the children acquire academic skills, such as reading, at an early age (indeed, some programs now promise parents that they can teach their children to read as infants and toddlers). This pressure by parents reflects the parent's desires, not the children's needs or inclinations. Although some children gravitate to reading early, seeking out books and adults to read to them, such children seem to learn to read on their own and with little fuss or bother; but they are in the minority. Only 1 to 3 children in 100 are estimated to read proficiently (at second grade level) on entrance to kindergarten. If learning to read were as easy as learning to talk, as some people claim, many more children would learn to read on their own. The fact that they do not, despite being surrounded by print, suggests that learning to read is not a spontaneous or simple skill. The majority of children can, however, learn to read with ease if they are not hurried into it.

Children confronted with the task of learning to read before they have the requisite mental abilities may develop long-term learning difficulties. In one high school, for example, we informally compared the grades of students who had fall birthdays (September, October, November, and December) and had entered kindergarten before they were five years old with the grades of students who have spring or summer birthdays (April, May, June, and July) and had entered school after they were five years old. Boys in particular who entered kindergarten after age five rather than before had an advantage, in terms of grades.

Children should be challenged intellectually, but the challenge should be constructive, not debilitating. Forcing a child to read early, just like forcing an adolescent to take algebra when simple arithmetic is still a problem, can be a devastating experience for a young person who is not intellectually prepared for the task.

THE ABUSE OF THE FACTORY SYSTEM

Schools today hurry children because administrators are pressured to produce better "products." This pressure leads administrators to treat children like empty bottles on an assembly line, getting a little fuller at each grade level. When the bottles don't get full enough, management puts pressure on the operator (the teacher, who is held accountable for filling her or his share of the bottles) and on quality control (making sure that the information is valid and the bottle is not defective). This factory approach causes schools to hurry children because it ignores individual differences in mental abilities and learning rates. The child who cannot keep up in this system, even if only temporarily, is often regarded as a defective vessel and is labeled "learning disabled" or "minimally brain damaged" or "hyperactive."

The factory mentality of our schools has been reinforced by machine-scored group testing probably more than any other single factor. Dependence on such testing has grown dramatically over the past 10 years, as parents and legislators have more vocally expressed their dissatisfaction with the schools and with children's attainments. Whether blame is placed on television, single-parent homes, working mothers, or the decline of authority, academic performance has been declining, and efforts to remedy the situation rely heavily on testing and teacher accountability. The problem with this system is that it pushes children too much, forcing them into a uniform mold. Children are being pressured to produce for the sake of teachers and administrators.

Management programs, accountability, and test scores are what schools are all about today, and children know it. Children have to produce—or else. This pressure may be good for many children, but it is bound to be bad for those who can't keep up. Their failure is more public and therefore more humiliating than ever before. Even worse, society convinces children who fail to achieve that they are letting down their parents, their peers, their teachers, the principal, the superintendent, and the school board. This is a heavy burden for many children to bear; therefore, they become much more concerned with grades than with what they know. Not surprisingly when these young people go out into the work world, they are less concerned with the job than with the pay and the perquisites of the job. What schools have to—and parents ought to—realize is that the attitudes they inculcate in young people are carried over into the occupational world.

Schooling and education are thought of in narrow terms; the focus is on attaining basic concepts and skills. But education—true education—is coincident with life and is not limited to special skills or concepts and particularly not to test scores. Education should not come packaged or sequenced. Much of it is spontaneous, an outgrowth of openness and curiosity that must be imparted to children. Pressuring children to get certain marks on tests that, at best, measure rote knowledge is hardly the way to improve children's education. What good is education if children can read but not understand what they read or if they know how to compute but not where, when, or what to compute?

CHILDREN ARE HURRIED BECAUSE WE ARE HURRIED

What is the first expensive, utilitarian gift that we usually give our children? A watch! We hurry our children basically because we hurry ourselves. For all of our technological finesse and sophisticated systems, we are a people who cannot—will not—wait. We are, in short, a hurried people, and only in the context of a society that is hell-bent on doing jobs more quickly and better and is impatient with waiting and inefficiency can we understand the phenomenon of hurried children and hope to help them. First we must recognize what we cannot do. We cannot change the basic thrust of American society, for which hurrying is the accepted and valued way of life. When hurrying reflects cultural values like being punctual, then urging children to be on time has social

justification. But the *abuse of hurrying* harms children—that is, when hurrying serves parental or institutional needs at the children's expense without imbuing them with redeeming social values.

Young children two to eight years old tend to perceive hurrying as a rejection, as evidence that their parents do not really care about them. Children are emotionally astute in this regard and tune in to what is a partial truth. To a certain extent, hurrying children from one caregiver to another each day, or into academic achievement, or into making decisions they are not really able to make is a rejection. It is a rejection of children as they see themselves, of what they are capable of coping with and doing. Children find such rejection very threatening and often develop stress symptoms as a result.

Accordingly, when parents have to hurry young children, when they have to take the children to a child care center or to a babysitter, they need to appreciate children's feelings about the matter. Giving children a rational explanation—"I have to work so we can eat and buy clothes" and so on—helps, but it isn't enough to deal with the child's implicit thought—"If they really loved me, they wouldn't go off and leave me." We need to respond to the child's feelings more than to her intellect. One might say, for instance, "I'm really going to miss you today. I wish you could be with me." The exact words are less important than the message that the separation is painful but necessary for the parents, too.

School-age children are more independent and more self-reliant than are younger children. Consequently, school-age children often seem to welcome hurrying because they are eager to take on adult chores and responsibilities, particularly in single-parent homes, in which they may try intuitively to fill the role of the absent parent. The danger with this age group is that too often parents interpret this display of maturity as true maturity rather than what it is—a kind of game. The image to keep in mind for this age group is Peter Pan, who wanted to assume adult responsibilities but did not want to grow up and accept some of the negative qualities that children perceive as characteristic of adults. Children want to play at being grown up, but they don't want adults to take them too seriously.

WE CAN COUNTERACT THE EFFECTS OF HURRYING

One effective tool against the onslaught of hurrying is play. Unfortunately, the value and the meaning of play are poorly understood in our hurried society. Indeed, what happened to adults in U.S. society has now happened to children—play has been transformed into work. What was once recreational—such as sports and summer camp musical training—is now professionalized and competitive. In schools, when budgets are tight the first areas to be cut are art, music, and drama. Television and other media, suffused with the new realism, offer little in the way of truly imaginative fantasy. Perhaps the best evidence of the extent to which children are hurried is the lack of opportunities for genuine play available to them.

Children need to do more than play, of course. At every turn they are learning social rules—how to behave in a restaurant, on a plane, and at a friend's house; how to put on clothes and take them off; how to eat with utensils; how to wash behind their ears; how to dry themselves with a towel, and so on. Children can also learn basic concepts about space, time, number, color, and so on. But they need to be given an opportunity for pure play as well as for work. If adults believe that each spontaneous interest of a child is an opportunity for a lesson, they foreclose the child's opportunities for pure play.

Play is nature's way of enabling us to deal with stress, for children as well as for adults. Parents can help by investing in toys and playthings that give the greatest scope to a child's imagination—for example, a good set of blocks that give children leeway to create and that can be used for years; crayons; paints; clay; and chalk. These are all creative play materials because they allow for a child's personal expression.

Along the way, all of us—parents, teachers, and citizens—must assert the value of the arts in the schools. Overemphasizing the basics in contemporary education without a balancing emphasis on personal expression through the arts hurries children by destroying the necessary balance between work and play. The need for employees to have modes of personal expression at work is just beginning to be realized and appreciated by American industry. Schools must recognize that children also work better, learn better, and, yes, grow better if the time they spend in social adaptation—learning the basics—is alternated with healthy periods devoted to avenues for self-expression. Far from being a luxury, time and money spent on the arts enhance learning and development by reducing the stress of personal adaptation and giving children an aesthetic perspective to balance the workday perspective.

We must see childhood as a stage of life, not just the anteroom to life. Hurrying children into adulthood violates the sanctity of life by giving one period priority over another. If we value human life, we will value each period equally and give unto each stage of life what is appropriate to that stage.

We should appreciate the value of childhood with its special joys, sorrows, worries, and concerns. Valuing childhood does not mean seeing it as a happy, innocent period but rather as an important period of life to which children are entitled. They have a right to be children, to enjoy the pleasures and to suffer the trials of childhood that are infringed upon by hurrying. Childhood is the most basic human right of children.