

The Myth of Growing Up: How Childlike Traits Benefit Adults

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Abstract

Is childhood something that we can leave behind, or indeed should? In their latest article for *Think*, Emma Swinn and Steven Campbell-Harris challenge the conventional understanding of children and adults, revealing how these rigid categories create problems in our education system, democracies and personal lives. Through the revolutionary education movement ‘Philosophy for children’ (P4C), they explore how retaining the ‘childlike’ qualities of questioning, playing and embracing uncertainty can transform our approach to learning and paradoxically help us to live more fulfilled adult lives.

When you think about it, childhood and adulthood are just ideas people thought of, and then they put boundaries around these names to create something that isn't actually real. There really is no such thing as ‘being a child’ or ‘being an adult.’ They're just labels. We're all people.
10-year-old in a classroom discussion (from *Seen and Not Heard* by Jana Mohr Lone)

When do you stop being a child and become an adult? The question is simple, but not easy to answer.

We often call people adults if they are legally recognized as such: when they turn 18 years old. But our ideas of adulthood are about more than just age. At 18, you don't suddenly become responsible or self-sufficient. Legally you are an adult, but in reality you still have some way to go.

Psychologists have recently proposed a new developmental phase called ‘extended

adolescence’ or ‘emerging adulthood’, spanning from our teens into our mid-twenties. During this period, people often delay traditional milestones such as marriage, children and linear career progression, spending more time exploring work and relationships. These legal adults, according to the researchers, don't seem to be ‘adulthooding’, doing the kind of mature things that we expect of ‘grown-ups’.

A similar shift is currently happening in our understanding of teenagers. In an article published in the journal *Child Development*, researchers found that today's teenagers are less likely to have sex, take drugs and drink alcohol than teens from previous generations. The teenagers, it seems, are just not ‘teenaging’ any more.

These articles highlight that the categories we use to describe developmental stages – adults, teenagers, children, and so on – are more complex than we often acknowledge. Our ideas may be fixed, but the reality is more fluid.



As adults, we often speak about our childhoods as though they are in the rear-view mirror. That was then, and this is now. We've grown up.

This is a mistake. As psychotherapists have now well demonstrated, the threads of our formative years stay woven in the fabric of our identity. We simply can't leave our childhood behind. We carry it with us in our memory, and in many of our deeply ingrained habits and beliefs.

When we forget this, we find it hard to extend the same patience and sympathy that we have for children to their older counterparts. When young children are upset, we are quick to check for their basic needs. Are they tired, hungry or just in need of a hug? Yet we often overlook such reasons for adults, instead searching for more sophisticated explanations, or attributing bad behaviour to some essential feature of them. This is a shame. Even though we may have grown up physically, we still have 'childish' needs. As adults, we may still turn to our parents for help if they are still

around. We may be able to mask our feelings better as we get older, but our needs remain largely the same.

Just as we often forget that adults have 'childish' needs, we also fail to remember that children have 'adult' needs too. We understand that adults need agency over their lives to feel motivated and happy. This explains why our most extreme punishment – prison – is largely about taking it away. In prison, we have little agency over what we do, and we can't decide when, where and with whom we want to do it. Similarly, we know that adults need a sense of purpose for why they do what they do. We don't think it is right to ask an adult to do something without giving them a reason.

And yet, we don't take children's needs for agency and purpose as seriously. If we did, we wouldn't have designed a system of compulsory schooling where children's agency is mainly restricted to the power to choose between pre-selected options. Just as seriously, children are

often required to learn things without knowing why they need to learn them. When teachers do try to explain the purpose of school, the answers they give are often unsatisfying. The whole point seems to be to get good grades, to eventually secure a good job, but this doesn't explain why we need to get the grades in the first place. Why learn *this subject* in particular? Why not just start training for work now? Why does everyone have to learn the same things at the same time, in the same year groups? These are questions that the adults don't – or in some cases can't – answer.

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A rigid adult–child distinction also makes little sense politically. In the popular imagination, an adult is independent and self-sufficient. But if someone is old and requires people to look after them, do we then revoke their adult card? No. For instance, those who don't have the mental capacity to understand and retain information – such as people with late-stage dementia – are still afforded the right to vote. The Electoral Commission states that, ‘A lack of mental capacity is not a legal incapacity to vote. Persons who meet the other registration qualifications are eligible for registration regardless of their mental capacity.’ In other words, if you are over 18 and legally capable of voting, you are able to vote. (Detained convicted prisoners, offenders in mental health institutions and Peers who are

members of the House of Lords are the only over-18s deemed ‘incapable of voting’ in general elections in England.) Whereas an informed and politically engaged 16- or 17-year-old, who pays income tax and national insurance on their earnings, is currently not able to vote in a general election in the UK (different rules apply for Scottish and Welsh Parliaments). We tend to use age as a proxy for maturity and intelligence, but we can't always apply this consistently.

A second set of issues with the adult–child distinction comes from the expectation that childhood is something we ought to outgrow. We see adulthood as an aspirational state, the end goal of being fully human. In 1 Corinthians in the Bible, St Paul writes ‘When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.’ Many of us agree with Paul that we eventually ought to ‘put away childish things’. Childhood appears to be a stage we need to pass through and then leave behind.

This story can distort our expectations of adulthood. We are trained to think of childhood as a state of becoming and adulthood as a fixed state – one where we are all ‘grown up’ – rather than a period of further learning and growth. To be an adult is to reach a point where we finally have things figured out. This, as every adult has discovered, is simply not true. You don't suddenly wake up one day and find that you have reached your destination. Instead, the expectation that this will eventually happen fuels a huge amount of anxiety, depression and impostor syndrome, as we compare our own lives with a mirage of the perfect adult and find ourselves wanting.

When we draw a sharp dividing line between adulthood and childhood at the age 18, then, we create problems for ourselves in our personal lives, our democracies, and our education systems.

Philosophy for Children

Schools focus on preparing children for adulthood, but too often this means moulding them into the current image of a successful ‘adult’ and neglecting the important features of ‘childhood’ that are worth preserving. Our education

system – developed by adults for children – sets up school as a proto-workplace, with quantifiable ways of assessing performance, a collection of sometimes arbitrary demands and rules, and a marked emphasis on extrinsic motivation. By teaching children to work like adults, we forget what makes the developmental stage of childhood so valuable.

Over the last fifty years there has been what some describe as a ‘revolution’ in education called ‘Philosophy for Children’, what has now commonly become known as ‘P4C’. The P4C movement was begun in the USA by Matthew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp. These philosophers and educators tried to bring a new way of teaching into the curriculum that allowed children to develop critical, creative, caring and collaborative thinking through philosophical discussions. Today, this pedagogy is taught worldwide and has many proponents (including the authors themselves).

The term ‘philosophy for children’ was coined by Lipman and Sharp to distinguish philosophy as an act of enquiry rather than another school subject. Instead of learning *about* philosophy children *do* philosophy together, participating in knowledge creation by discussing their differing perspectives on a central stimulus. P4C not only reformed ‘philosophy’, it also changed education by offering teachers a way of developing their pedagogy that was child-centred and rigorous.

‘Philosophy for children’ also dignifies the voice and ideas of children, giving them a place to think together with adults about ideas that matter to them. Adults take seriously the ideas put forward by the young people in the discussion and – as Jana Mohr Lone argues in her book *Seen and Not Heard: Why Children’s Voices Matter* – not recognizing children’s capacity for philosophical thought means we miss out ‘on their potential contributions to our collective thinking about important topics’.

However, the ‘for children’ aspect of P4C is contentious. Why is it specifically ‘for’ children and not ‘with’ children? By saying it is ‘for children’ you may imply it is not ‘real philosophy’. Why just for children, and not adults as well?

But actually, there are reasons why the ‘children’ part is important. One reason we might offer is that ‘philosophy for children’ aims to cultivate the skills we often consider ‘childlike’, but which are valuable for all. By focusing on these skills, it affirms that childhood is not something we need to outgrow. It can help us personally by giving us the intellectual humility to realize that we can ask for help and listen to others, it can help us democratically to be open-minded enough to try to understand other perspectives, and can give us the confidence to be able to face the world, and question it – equipping young people and adults with agency at school and beyond.

What we can all Learn from Children

Questioning the World

Why is the sky blue? What happens to us after we die? Why do bad things happen?

When we’re very young we tend to ask a lot of questions like these. Since everything is new, such questions don’t seem strange or inappropriate. We’ve just arrived, so we are still making sense of it all.

As we get older, we ask fewer and fewer of these questions. Those who persist in asking them are seen as a bit weird or – perhaps – as that curious breed: philosophers. Indeed the philosopher Isaiah Berlin once remarked, ‘Philosophers are adults who persist in asking childish questions.’

These ‘childish’ questions aren’t mere idle speculation, though many parents dismiss them as such. When we stop asking them, we lose far more than our curiosity. We also lose a powerful way of relating ourselves to the world.

Becoming independent means acting on reasons that we understand and have chosen to respect. Yet the world, and other people, don’t always offer up their reasons willingly. Sometimes we must make demands of the world to justify itself to us. The girl who asks, ‘Why do I have to go to school?’ is not merely rebelling against authority, but against the idea that she should do something without knowing the reason. It is a desperate cry for the world to make sense, for agency, meaning and purpose.

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School trains us to leave many questions unasked, so we get used to not asking them, and therefore get used to doing things without knowing the reasons. In later life this is a recipe for learned helplessness, and the impetus for many a midlife crisis.

‘Why’ questions empower us to dissolve any acceptance of the world as a fixed thing that has always been this way and always will be. ‘Why do I have to work in the office five days a week?’ once seemed a silly question, yet reality has since caught up with possibility with many now working remotely on Mondays and Fridays.

When we repeatedly ask *why*, we alert ourselves to the simple and empowering fact that the world was made by fallible humans like ourselves so it can be unmade and remade, perhaps into something better. It grants us permission to consider not just how things are, but how things could and even should be.

Philosophy for children is a valuable tool to help us reclaim this power of asking ‘why’ and to rediscover our agency through our reason. In a philosophical enquiry, everything is up for

debate and so everything demands an explanation. People offer reasons to justify what they think, and others are invited to engage with those reasons. Philosophy is a unique subject. There are no dogmas to accept, and every assumption can be questioned. It is the perfect training ground for interrogating our world, making sense of it all and forming the habit of questioning what we know.

Playing with Ideas

As young children, we poke and prod the world to see what it has to offer. We ask our own questions and conduct our own experiments. No one tells us to do this, incentivizing us with rewards and punishments. We are just playing, and the joy of learning is its own reward.

However, when we get older, schools teach us to think of learning more as work than as play. Education, we are told, is a way of getting a job in the future. The destination is work, rather than understanding for its own sake. Schoolwork and adult work, this implies, is something we wouldn’t want to do unless we were compensated for doing it (i.e. with grades, prizes and money).

The irony with this is that putting away our ‘childish’ desire to play actually makes it far harder to thrive as adults. The tools and information we need to learn (e.g. Google, ChatGPT, etc.) are now in abundance. What is scarce is our desire to learn. When we teach students that the ends are what really matter, they end up devaluing the means and seek shortcuts or even cheat to reach their goals. We can prove this by asking students: ‘What matters more to you, the grade you receive or the knowledge you gain from this class?’ Too many students answer the former. It’s no wonder then that schools tend to produce so few self-directed, lifelong learners.

In an ideal world, schools would take a much longer view. Instead of focusing on incentivizing students to learn in the short term through rewards and punishments, they would help students to love learning by encouraging play – a more sustainable path for future success.

Philosophy for children (P4C) can play a vital role in this transformation. Philosophical enquiries aim to nurture the natural curiosity and joy

of learning that is inherent in children. Their end is not good grades but greater understanding, promoting the view that learning is for its own sake. In an enquiry, children are taught to value their own ideas, to play around with them and to follow their own reason. By encouraging students to learn for the sheer pleasure of discovery, P4C aligns with the innate ways children engage with the world.

Not Knowing

‘Adults know and children learn’ is often how we frame the difference between adults and children. When we’re young we know we don’t have it all figured out yet. As we grow up, we gain knowledge and gradually form our picture of the world.

The danger is that throughout this process we may lose sight of the value of not thinking that we know. The Japanese have a term for this called ‘shoshin’ or ‘beginner’s mind’, which describes an eager attitude of openness to new insights, even when we may be experts in a subject. When we have a beginner’s mind, we can engage with others and learn from different perspectives, listening for the sake of understanding rather than defending a position. This encourages life-long learning and helps us find better ways to live in civil society. By contrast, a belief that our learning has finished can lead to dogmatism, where we become rigid and inflexible in our thinking.

Philosophy for children allows members of the group to practise beginner’s mind by experiencing – and often enjoying – the feeling that they are confused, lost and don’t know the answer (which may have seemed simple at first). This sense of the aporetic – a word from Ancient Greek meaning ‘without a path’ – is an important experience to have as it can help us to become comfortable with uncertainty. When you know that you don’t know the answer – and have experienced this before – you realize the

opportunity to learn something new, to explore different terrain and to become more engaged either in the conversation (what can I learn from others?) or in your own learning (how can I fix this problem?).

Philosophical Enquiry (with Childlike Qualities) for All

Schools are designed *by* adults and *for* children. They are set up – we are told – to prepare children for adulthood, a subject which we adults presume we know most about. And yet, in relinquishing that very expectation, we may help to prepare children (and the adults they will become) better for the world beyond the school gates.

The ability to ask our own questions, to play with ideas, and to know that it’s okay not to know are skills that can’t be prescribed and taught, since that would undermine their very independence. As educators we can only afford a space for them to happen. Philosophy for children provides just that space as a laboratory for self-expression and self-development.

In a philosophical enquiry, we are encouraged to explore and to develop an appetite for making sense of things. As adults, we should use these skills in our personal and professional lives, and support their use in wider society. Facilitators of P4C often find this happening as they learn to engage young people as well as themselves in the act of philosophical enquiry. Many now use ‘philosophy for children’ with adults in communities, academic institutions and other learning environments.

Philosophy *for children*, then, isn’t just for children. It isn’t something we ought to, or will, outgrow. Instead, it can be seen as a countercultural attempt to preserve distinctive ‘childlike’ capacities and interests, many of which are also helpful – paradoxically – for living a fulfilled adult life.

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