KIDS GROWING UP SCARED

by J. Adler

Once, they were the envy of the world, an exuberant array cruising on their fat-tired Schwins the carving streets of ten thousand subdivisions, sending a chorus of gleeful yelps toward the heavens that brought in predictable succession Christmas, birthdays and summer vacation—American kids! There was no higher state to which anyone could aspire, not even Nikita Khrushchev, who on his 1959 tour of the United States discovered that the second most powerful man in the world couldn't have what millions of American kids took as their birthright: a day at Disneyland. Unless you were black and people spat at you when you tried to go to school, or mentally handicapped and shut away in a misery-drenched state home, or you had the bad luck to go flying seatbeltsless through the windshield of your family's car in an accident, life was pretty good and expected to get better, unless Khrushchev got mad enough to drop an atom bomb on your head. Surely no one could have foreseen that at the very time the threat of nuclear holocaust had been lifted, one of that baby-boom horde—Sally Jablon, 46, who grew up in suburban Long Island—would send her two boys out to play on the utterly placid streets of West Newton, Mass., only to have them return a few minutes later, alone. None of the other parents on the block would let their children out of the house.

Something precious has gone out of American culture, and we don't know how to get it back. We may not even realize our loss until we leave the country—like Tufts professor David Elkind, an authority on child development who visited a small town in Canada recently and was amazed to be greeted by an 8-year-old boy he passed on the street. Elkind's first thought was that the child must be retarded, because who else would talk to a strange man in public? Not even Christmas could dispel the gloom that settled over the nation as Polly Klaas was buried in California and as police from 97 jurisdictions pressed the hunt for the killer of Cassidy Senter and Angie Ousman in suburban St. Louis. It was especially glum in Deaver, where an anonymous threat to murder shopping-mall Santas forced many to relocate to the safety of fire and police stations.

But what we've lost goes beyond the fear of crime. It is the unspoken consensus that held children to be a privileged class deserving protection from adult concerns and responsibilities. Increasingly they are left to fend for themselves in a world of hostile strangers, dangerous sexual enticements and mysterious economic forces that even adults find unsettling. Your mother is on a business trip, your father is skiing with his other set of kids and your teacher has been suspended for telling a seventh-grade girl she reminds him of Veronica Lake. Now, go do your homework.

It is, perhaps, a little mush-brained to mourn the lost innocence of Petaluma, Calif., when babies in parts of Los Angeles have to sleep in bathtubs to avoid stray bullets coming through the windows. But the actual physical threat to children is less important than the perception of danger. There were almost 36 million American children between the ages of 5 and 14 in 1991, and only 519 of them were murdered. Actual mortality among children this age has dropped steadily for decades, to less than half the 1950 rate. This is because influenza has killed more children than all the kidnappers and drive-by shootings in history. But the fear of crime is almost a separate phenomenon from the real danger it poses. "I see people who are completely luratic about the safety of their children," says Michael Thompson, a Cambridge, Mass., psychologist who counsels children at private schools. Newton police were surprised to hear that parents were keeping their kids inside to play in their town, where the only murder in recent memory involved an expatriate Soviet physicist who killed a mathematician. "We don't have any of these types of crimes here," said Lt. Robert McDonald—"not that it couldn't happen."

The fear can be measured statistically: more than half the children (and 73 percent of the adults) questioned in a recent Newsweek/Children's Defense Fund poll said they were afraid of violent crime against them or a family member. And it shows up in behavior. Parents don't just keep an eye on children in the mall; they keep them leashed, to better tug them back from potential molesters. "I used to think it was treating your children like a dog," says Mayumi Miles of West Los Angeles, the mother of a 2-year-old. "But after my friend's child was kidnapped [at an amusement park], I think they're a good idea." (The child was returned.) Once, just houses and cars had alarms, but after a burglary at their home in Del Mar, Calif., Roger and Lisa Cole put alarms on the entire family, including the babysitter. At the first sign of danger, they can pull a pin and summon witnesses to whatever befalls them. Even 2-year-old Jacob has an alarm on his stroller, although he doesn't go many places except the park and the beach. "The beach is not always a safe place," warns Roger, a research psychologist.

- No one can blame parents for wanting to keep their children safe, but neither has anyone counted the psychic cost of raising them in a state of perpetual hypervigilance, ready to pull the alarm pin on any uncle who thoughtlessly ventures a tender pat. Disease still kills more children than stalkers. But disease is an impersonal, statistical disaster, not something you're personally responsible for avoiding when it sidles up to you in the playground. For that matter,

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even a decade ago it didn’t occur to most sixth graders that they might someday wind up in an early grave if they didn’t practice how to use a condom.

“I can’t imagine having to be a child in this kind of world,” says Julie O’Connor, a mother in Canoga Park, Calif., where children have been warned to be on guard against a serial attacker known as the Valley Molester. Her 5-year-old son once fled the yard at the sight of nothing more sinister than a car coming down the street. “One of the ways to help our own children is to prepare them,” O’Connor says. “I have taught them how to scream at the top of their lungs if someone grabs them.” The civic life of the town revolves increasingly around programs centered on child safety. If you’re willing to be screened and fingerprinted by the police, you can put up a Safe House sign in your window, so that children will know it’s OK to ask to use your telephone or bathroom. Or you can enroll in the Safe Corridor project and wear a special hat that entitles you to walk other people’s children home from school.

When trouble comes to Canoga Park, it can hardly be expected to spare Brooklyn, N.Y. As many parents have discovered, almost as soon as children set out alone, they become targets. Cautious parents provide them with the rustiest three-speed bikes they can find, for the same reason that adults don’t wear good jewelry on the subway. And the ideals that led parents to live in an integrated neighborhood in the first place are subverted when the child learns to run away from the kids from the project.

In Cambridge, Mass., 12-year-olds Daniel Skidmore and Max Hoffman roam freely through Harvard Square until dark, subject only to the requirement that Daniel call home every three hours. They are inured to the routine annoyances of urban life, content to share a table at a diner with a mentally ill man quietly muttering to himself. Daniel sometimes donates part of his 85 allowance to the panhandlers he sees in Harvard Square, because he knows that life is unfair and “you can have a degree in law and still not get a job.” Max refuses to part with any spare change on the ground that it might go to buy booze.

Naturally there are children who would happily exchange their actual lives for the chance to sit next to a mental patient in Cambridge, or even be mugged in Brooklyn. But this is America. A generation ago, crimes directed specifically against children were virtually unheard of. Obviously they occurred—since so many people who are now adults recall being abused as children—but they were neither talked about nor, generally, prosecuted. In the decade of the 1950s, Newsweek can exactly five stories on child abuse, all on isolated incidents, none involving sexual assault. That is one fourth the number that appeared last year alone. Certainly no children’s books took incest as a theme—or adult sexuality divorce, crime, poverty or racial tension. No one wants to return to a world in which children suffered alone and in silence. But by definition, knowledge spells an end to innocence. A 6-year-old who learns about good and bad touching has taken the first step toward sexual sophistication. A 12-year-old bombarded with warnings about strangers, priests, friends of the family and fathers may begin to wonder why the burden of avoiding abuse has to fall so heavily on her—or, to put it another way, why can’t these damn grown-ups control themselves?

Of course, many societies got by for a long time without believing that children have a special right to happiness just because they’re children. Nobody gave much thought to sexual innocence until houses began to have more than one room. Anyone who thinks kids in Brooklyn have it tough should reread the “Little House” series. This nation was settled by families in constant danger of being killed in the Indian wars, carried off by wild animals or swept away by one natural disaster or another. Their descendants went on to fight two world wars and survive the Depression.

The special status of childhood was an invention of the Progressive Era in the late 19th century, and even then it took hold primarily among the middle class. It has always been tacitly recognized that wealthy, famous people might be too busy pursuing their own interests to concern themselves overly with their offspring—Joan Crawford, say. At the other end of the social spectrum was Huck Finn’s notoriously dysfunctional family. It’s a minor irony that the iconographic American boy was the offspring of an abusive, alcoholic father.

But the middle-class family was essentially a form of social organization devoted to the nurturance of children. Its “security” and “safety” resided on the vigilance of an army of moms, whose presence in the home was taken so much for granted that schools could be built without lunchrooms. We all know what happened to that assumption, of course. Half of all marriages now end in divorce. Three quarters of married women with children 6 to 17 were in the labor force in 1992, as were nearly three fifths of those with children under 6. Yet even if we wanted to go back to the days when women rarely worked outside the home, it is no longer an economic possibility for most families. Without taking sides in the debate over whether full-time mothers could be satisfactorily replaced by universal, high-quality day care, the fact is that too many kids today have neither.

What they have instead is what Elkind calls the “permeable” family—children half out the door, the outside world clamoring at the windows with its dangerous and seductive allure. Such families are founded not on the rock of marriage but on the shifting sands of consensual love, an agreement between partners that can be dissolved when it no longer meets their needs. Often there is no parent at home most days, so children are left to themselves—to fix their own meals, set their own hours for television and homework, arrange their social lives. Says Elkind: “We see children as competent for these things, even though there’s no evidence that they are, because we need children who can handle day care, before-school programs, after-school programs, the things they see on TV. So we’ve
revised our perception of childhood in line with our needs.

We can't all be rich, but anyone can be as self-centered as Donald Trump—that is the lesson of the last 25 years. "Decisions aren't made on the basis of what's best for the child, but what can the child tolerate," says James Garbarino, president of (Chicago's) Erikson Institute for Advanced Study in Child Development. "With infants, it's how soon can they go to day care so the parents can go to work. With 8- or 9-year-olds, it's how soon can they come home alone? It's all designed to make the participation of adults in the work force easier."

Garbarino sees childhood besieged on three fronts: sexual, economic and political. The first is well, everyone knows what it is. Any 10-year-old with a remote control now has access to depictions of concupiscence beyond the imagination of King Farouk. Half of all children spend part of their lives with single parents, forcing them into the uncomfortable role of seeing their parents as sexual actors, people who date, romance and change partners. This is not always as cute in life as it is made out to be in "Mrs. Doubtfire."
The absence of parents from the home has greatly facilitated the sexual self-expression of children too young to drive. By the time they're 15 or 16, says Holly Shaw, an expert on adolescent trauma at Long Island Jewish Medical Center, they're sick of sex. "There's nothing sadder than an adolescent saying that's all we do, we don't talk anymore."

The second way in which society affects childhood is the relentless push for children to consume what adults want to sell them. Kids once collected baseball cards out of hero worship and bought toys to play with, today a book called "Kiplinger's Money-Smart Kids" recommends them as collectibles with the potential to appreciate. There is nothing new in greed, of course, but before there was television to inflame it, children's frame of reference was limited to neighbors who were probably in roughly the same economic bracket. "Now," Garbarino says, "you're competing with the whole country. You're comparing yourself to people at the top of the ladder. People who didn't feel poor are forced to see themselves that way."

And the third is concerned with security. This can encompass both safety and the broader right of children to wait until adulthood to confront some of the unpleasant truths of the world. Television, as social critic Neil Postman points out, makes accessible to children the secrets that adults once preferred to keep to themselves: that the world is a dangerous place, that politicians lie, and most breakfast cereals either taste good or are good for you, but not both. Children can no longer retreat to a kid-size world in which no danger loomed bigger than the schoolyard bully. The shock of the Polly Klaas case—that a stranger could invade a house full of children, abduct and murder one—was compounded by accounts of how the police helpfully dug the kidnapper's car out of a ditch. "I sometimes wonder if they can really do their job," says Jablon's son Alex Silver, 14. He has reason to be concerned: he was mugged at knifepoint in Harvard Square a few years ago.

Visiting a class of third graders in a middle-class Chicago suburb recently, Garbarino discovered that the leading topic of concern was kidnapping. They knew all about Polly Klaas and the two English boys who murdered a 2-year-old. Virtually every one of them knew someone in the family or neighborhood with a gun. And of these 8-year-olds, their little heads stuffed with the details of crimes so horrible they would appall a Barbary pirate, how many regularly came home to an empty house? Garbarino asked for a show of hands: a third of the class. It gets dark early in the Midwest this time of year. Long before many parents are home from work, the shadows creep up the walls and gather in the corners, while on the carpet a little figure sprawls in the glow emanating from an anchorman's tan. There's been a murder in the Loop, a fire in a nightclub, an indictment of another priest. Red and blue lights swirl in urgent pinwheels as the ambulances howl down the dark streets. And one more crime that never gets reported, because there's no one to arrest. Who killed childhood? We all did.