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Childhood after COVID: Children's Interests in a Flourishing Childhood and a More Communal Childrearing

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Article abstract

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Childhood after COVID: Children's Interests in a Flourishing Childhood and a More Communal Childrearing

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This article brings into relief two desiderata *in childrearing, the importance of which the pandemic has made clearer than ever. The first is to ensure that, in schools as well as outside them, children have ample opportunities to enjoy goods that are particular to childhood: unstructured time, to be spent playing with other children, discovering the world in company or alone, or indeed pursuing any of the creative activities that make children happy and help them learn. I refer to these as "special goods of childhood." The second* desiderata *is to turn childrearing into a more communal practice, with lesser parental monopoly of care. For this, we need to give children access to multiple caring adults, and thus more opportunities to form secure and protected relationships.*

Introduction

Today Anton, my almost 11-year-old son, and I went through a long list of potential activities that, I hoped, could alleviate his recent spleen. In 20 months of pandemic, he has been through many phases of emotional disruption, from being surprised at the news of the surging disease, to feeling intimidated and at times scared, to complying with the demand that he go through spells of homeschooling, not meet friends in person for many weeks at a time, wear masks, put on hold all activities outside the house, and so on. He then went from compliance to protest, to outright rebellion, then on to self-pity and acceptance, and then on again to melancholia and despondency. The last phase has been the most enduring: he is mourning the loss of his relatively carefree childhood from before the pandemic, and, more than anything else, his social relationships with other children. For almost two years, the chaotic, boisterous play during recess has been curtailed, and everyday interactions between children have been censored in all sorts of ways: mask imposition, a ban on sharing food and toys, efforts to limit children's daily interactions in general, almost no class outings, and cancelled birthday parties and sleepovers. And, of course, the long spells of home confinement, due to general lockdowns or more localized quarantine when somebody in his school tests positive for corona. When I asked Anton today what it was that we could do together to cheer him up, he was blunt: not boardgames, cooking, films, or a trip to his favourite restaurant. The only thing he really wanted to do was go out and roam in the city – not with me though, but with one or several friends his age, "to explore it as children do." He has been feeling like this almost every day for a few months.

As I write these lines, Munich, where we live, is not in a strict lockdown. Nothing prevents Anton from going out and playing with other children – certainly not his parents. Nothing, except that his friends, who are also his classmates, live in different corners of the city. The past 20 months have taken away most opportunities to befriend children from the neighbourhood. He is still too young to use public

transport. And so, for many practical purposes, his life resembles that of a prisoner on parole, with hardly any interaction with peers outside school, and currently with the threat of even stricter confinement since the pandemic may take another turn for the worse.

I am opening my paper with this anecdote because it brings into relief two *desiderata* in childrearing – *desiderata* for which I have argued in the past, but the importance of which the pandemic has made clearer than ever. The first is to ensure that, in schools as well as outside them, children have ample opportunities to enjoy goods that are particular to childhood: unstructured time, to be spent playing with other children, discovering the world in company or alone, or indeed pursuing any of the creative activities that make children happy and help them learn. I refer to these as "special goods of childhood." The second – and partly as a way of meeting the first goal – is to turn childrearing into a more communal practice, with less parental monopoly of care, and to give children access to multiple caring adults, and thus more opportunities to form secure and protected relationships.

What Are Children Owed?

I understand "childhood," here, as that period of time during which we have not yet fully matured in biological, psychological, and social ways. Traditionally, many philosophers saw childhood mainly as preparation for adulthood, and judged its value entirely by reference to how well it enabled a good adulthood. Much of that view endures today, if only implicitly, in the treatment of various practical issues concerning children's rights and freedoms.[1] But a different account of childhood is available, according to which, in virtue of their developing brains and their relatively little experience of the world, children have privileged access to some important sources of value: on average, they learn faster, are more creative, curious, and inventive, and more experimental than adults. We usually think that, in themselves, curiosity, eagerness to learn, and creativity make the lives of those displaying these features better go better for them. If so, exercising these capacities is good for children not only instrumentally – for their uncontested developmental value – but also non-instrumentally, because they can make childhood an intrinsically good phase of one life, which is good above and beyond the ways in which it lays the foundations of for a good adulthood.

Like a growing number of contemporary philosophers, I subscribe to this view of childhood, which sees children as much more than mere "unfinished adults." Childhood is *the* phase of life during which we can greatly benefit from environments in which we learn in experimental ways, and fully express our creativity. Their full enjoyment is more difficult, or even out of our reach, as we grow up.[2] This is because the features of children that I mentioned above – curiosity, ability to experiment and learn, creativity – are likely to have, at least in part, a biological basis: developmental psychologists, such as Alison Gopnik, attribute these capabilities to children's vivid sensorial perception and to their lack of prefrontal control, which makes it hard for children to filter information (hence their poor executive abilities), but which also makes them more imaginative and better able to consider new possibilities than adults (Gopnik, 2009). This can explain some artists', and art critics', belief that, unless one becomes a professional artist, one is most likely to be artistically creative as a child (Feinberg, 2018). It can also explain the observation, made by philosophers working with children (e.g., Matthews, 2008), that before the onset of puberty, their philosophical curiosity and ability to formulate good philosophical question tends to be significantly higher than that of most adults.

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[1] For instance, in discussions about what schools should do for children, and whether children should have the right to vote, engage in the labour market, marry, or decide about their health care. I illustrate this claim, and the "special goods of childhood" more generally, in Gheaus (2021).

[2] For a fuller defence of this view than I can provide here, see my article "Unfinished Adults and Defective Children" (Gheaus, 2015).

If this picture of childhood is correct, then children are owed – in addition to more generally recognized goods such as safety, education, and healthy environments – the conditions for exercising their superior learning and creative abilities: they should enjoy the special goods of childhood. Such considerations have led some philosophers, such as Colin Macleod, to claim that all schools should provide, alongside academic instruction, ample opportunities to engage in artistic and athletic activities (2018), but also the adult guidance that can help them best to learn in exploratory ways, and engage in artistic and philosophical pursuits (Gheaus, 2018). Moreover, in my view, the entire organization of childrearing should ensure that all children can enjoy discovery of the world, artistic creation, philosophical pursuits, and experimentation with one's understanding of oneself. Children's access to these things should be independent of the will of particular school managers, educators, and parents.

This brings me to the second neglected issue concerning children's moral rights: children are entitled to have adults in their lives who act in a fiduciary capacity. Power over children should never be exercised in ways that set back children's interests for the sake of advancing the interests of those who hold the power; children's moral status requires that they be reared in ways that serve their fundamental interests. And, since one of children's most powerful interests is in secure caring relationships with others, this principle should rule out monopolies of care over them.[3] It is in most people's interest to ensure that all children have access to caring relationships with people other than their parents. More communal forms of childrearing could make parenting itself a less burdensome and hence more rewarding activity; help de-gender parenting and, as a result, lessen the extent of blame placed on mothers; give children additional protection against abuse and neglect, and more generally protect them from failings of care; and ensure more equal opportunities to developmentally valuable resources (Gheaus, 2011). Socializing childcare would, therefore, make for better and more fair childhoods. Moreover, it would help limit the extent of current parental rights which, like others scholars of childhood (e.g., Dwyer, 2006), I believe works against children's interests and is therefore illegitimate. The pandemic, which sadly resulted in the opposite move – towards more private childhoods – provides poignant illustrations of these claim, as I argue next.

The Pandemic: Children's Losses

The measures taken to fight the pandemic have disproportionately burdened the youngest people. Children are the least likely to suffer serious health consequences from the infection, yet they are the age group whose lives have arguably been most disrupted by public health measures. The unprecedented interruption of educational services is expected to have a large negative impact on children's learning and on their future job opportunities. Lockdowns have also led to less physical movement and healthy nutrition,[4] to elevated levels of stress,[5] and to increased domestic violence against children, which is harder to detect during the long phases of suspended daycare, kindergarten, and school attendance. Some of these effects are serious enough to amount to, or cause, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) (Hughes, et al., 2021), which in turn can lead to poor physical and mental health later in life. In lower-income countries, lockdowns, due to their economic effects, may have even resulted in the loss of more children's lives than the adult lives they have saved by protecting people from the virus (Ma, et al., 2021). No doubt much will be written about how to make up for the losses in terms of security, health, education, and future employment prospects that children have incurred during the pandemic.

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[3] For the detailed version of the argument, see Gheaus (2018).

[4] As reported, for instance, by Adams (2021).

[5] For instance, 64% of young Europeans are at risk of depression, compared to 15% before the COVID-19 crisis (Arendt, et al., 2021).

For my part, I would like to draw attention to losses that are less likely to make headlines, but which are just as real and troubling. These are losses in the special goods of childhood. I also claim that the strengthening of adults' monopolies of power and care in relation to children undermined legitimate exercise of authority over them. When considering these losses, and the question of how to compensate the children who incurred them, we should also reflect on the conditions for better childhoods after the pandemic.

Even before 2020, there were growing concerns with the fact that, in economically developed countries, children's unstructured time has been shrinking. To some extent, this is a general issue stemming from the "schoolification" of children's lives: the tendency to enrol children in school at earlier ages, and to take up more of their time with structured academic, athletic, and cultural activities that have imposed on children at the expense of free play and, more generally, of time that is not spent in goal-oriented ways (Weale, 2021). But it is also, in part, a class issue, driven by the desire by middle-class parents to optimize their children's future market opportunities by enrolling them in a large number of goal-oriented activities such as learning languages, sports, etc (Lareau, 2003). Children's objective interests in sufficient free play and unstructured time can only be fulfilled by protecting them, in a concerted way, from the attempts (usually well-intentioned) by parents and others to increase their competitiveness. Further, there has been growing concern that ever-larger numbers of children are being raised in child-unfriendly cities. Urban design, often in combination with worries about children's safety, has resulted in public spaces being less accessible to children (see, for example, Dodd, 2021).

Many of these issues have been aggravated by the pandemic. The extended periods of school closure may have resulted in less time spent on academic pursuits,[6] but not in a gain in playtime with other children and in exploration. Rather, the various restrictions on social life meant that children became even more isolated from others of their age, and their access to the world became even more restricted. And thus, their enjoyment of the special goods of childhood has diminished. Another set of burdens has been imposed on children during the pandemic by cutting them off from wider society. Sadly, but perhaps unsurprisingly, violence against children by family members has in fact increased, partly as a result of their isolation from caring relationships with adults outside the family (Pereda & Díaz-Faes, 2020). Moreover, the worsening of children's conditions as a result of this "privatization" of their lives raises distributive concerns: their well-being has been very unequally affected by the pandemic. For those with good relationships with their parents and/or siblings, the additional time with them has been one of the most important consolations for the losses entailed by lockdowns.[7] For those whose relationships with parents and siblings are not good, or who are growing up in outright unaccepting families, as well as for single children like Anton, the loss of extra-familial social relationships has been particularly corrosive to their mental health. Public health measures have most likely been, on the whole, justified; but since they burdened children more than other age groups while benefitting them less, the children living through the pandemic are owed some compensation for these losses. Compensation should come, at least in part, in the form of physical and mental health care, and educational and labour policies to restore lost learning and job opportunities. But it is important, while enacting these measures, to keep in mind the losses that children incurred in terms of opportunities for playing, enjoying each other's company, and exploring the world freely. Making up for lost months – or years – of proper schooling should not make an even greater dent in children's free time, and should not take the form of enrolling them into ever more regulated regimes of learning and working.

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[6] And, indeed, *some* children said they welcomed lockdown because they liked that so much of their time was structured! See Weale (2021).

[7] Some, admittedly anecdotal, evidence, has been published as a set of interviews by CNN (Hetter, 2021).

After the Pandemic: A Better Childhood

Doing right by children after the pandemic (to those affected by it, and to those yet to come into the world) will require, in my view, two things: giving them back their free time and their play-friendly environments – their childhoods, one may say – and ensuring their access to a multitude of caring adults.

To start with reforms that are easier to enact, I would like to also return to Macleod's proposal that all schools should provide non-academic activities – artistic, philosophical, and athletic – of the kind and quality that are often only provided to children from privileged socio-economic backgrounds. The important point here is that such subjects should be taught in ways that are not goal-oriented but process-oriented, and without seeking to motivate children by extrinsic rewards, if they are to allow for genuine exploration and exercising of creative powers.

Second, and more generally, the pandemic helped to reveal how valuable the institutions that socialize childrearing – that is, day-care centres, kindergartens, schools, and after-school clubs – are for the well-being of children and parents. It also revealed the value of having many *different* adults and institutions contribute to the rearing of each child. Sharing child-rearing responsibilities is good not merely for the convenience of the adults – helping them better carry the burdens of parenting and enjoy its perks – but, first and foremost, for the safety and well-being of children. Good childhoods are, to some extent, dependent on generous and fairly distributed public investment in these institutions. Children's access to childrearing institutions that are well-resourced, primarily in terms of educational and counselling staff, should be seen not as optional, but as a right. If so, this is a powerful reason to resist homeschooling: not only because most instances of it are likely to violate children's right to adequate education, and because it enables child abuse and neglect – as legal scholars have pointed out (Bartholet, 2020) – but also because children have a right to better access to, and more control over, the world. Moreover, if the enormous amount of power that adults collectively hold over children is to be legitimate, then its distribution ought to avoid monopolies of care. The dismantling of such monopolies requires that all children attend educational and caring institutions. But it may require more than that – namely, social practices whereby children have access to caring adults from outside their families, such as (secular forms of) god-parenting or their functional equivalent.[8]

Finally, good childhoods after the pandemic will require remodelling many urban spaces, with the aim of making cities better for children: safer and more conductive to free play.[9] This entails, most obviously, enough traffic-free areas, and adequate and sufficient playgrounds, designed perhaps by taking into account children's and parents' own ideas of what makes a good playground. But consultation with children may go even further; it may be wise to listen to them when it comes to matters of designing cities more generally. A success story that illustrates this is the Growing Up Boulder project, resulting from cooperation between the University of Colorado Boulder and the local municipality, which, in 2012, asked children about matters of urban design such as parks, transportation, and policing. Their proposals included less traffic, more walkable spaces, better access to nature (including water), less pollution and more bins (colourful), more benches, and more art (Growing Up Boulder, 2017). It is, perhaps, a good idea to make better childhoods possible by involving children themselves in their creation. Equally important is the transformation of rural spaces to ensure that children living in villages have robust access, throughout their childhood, to the kind of non-parental care that is required for eliminating monopolies of parental care.

Anton will hopefully return to the playground soon; and, also hopefully, he will claim the city itself as a playground. I care about his free long-afternoons-to-come and evenings-to-come as much as, or perhaps more than, I care about his catching up academically. But something is amiss with the fact that

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[8] I argued for these at more length in Gheaus (2018).

[9] A recent book on this is Tim Gill's *Urban Playground* (2021). See also the UNICEF-sponsored Child-Friendly Cities Initiative, available at https://childfriendlycities.org.

his access to freedom depends on my particular views and willingness to facilitate it. All children are owed the enjoyment of the special goods of childhood, so collectively we should organize childrearing in honour of this ideal.[10]

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[10] I am grateful to Lauren Bialystok for helpful feedback on previous drafts.

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