

THE ROOTS OF 'PAEDOPHOBIA'

Stuart Waiton and Simon Knight

A new report, Freedom's Orphans, shows that adults are afraid to challenge children. But its proposed solutions would make matters worse argue Stuart Waiton and Simon Knight.

There is a scene in Dylan Thomas' 'Under Milk Wood' where the character Captain Cat, an old blind sea Captain, stands at his front door listening to the street. From what he can hear he can identify everybody, adults and children alike, by name. How many of us, even with our sight intact, could claim to have the same closeness with our own communities? A new report from the Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR), *Freedom's Orphans: Raising Youth in a Changing World* identifies a world where in today's Britain not only are adults unlikely to know and interact with local children and young people but are actually afraid of doing so.

The report, based on comparative interviews with adults in a number of European countries, found that whereas in Germany, Spain and Italy, over half the respondents said they would intervene if they saw a group of 14-year olds vandalising a bus shelter, in the UK only 34 per cent said they would do something. This compared most starkly with results in Germany, where 65 per cent, or almost twice as many adults, said they would try to stop the vandals.

These findings reflect our experiences in our respective fields: Stuart, a university lecturer teaching a criminology course and Simon, who manages a community project addressing concern about youth disorder. We have both also carried out our own PhD research projects into the changing nature of community perceptions of children and young people.

Part of the reason for Britain's disparity with the rest of Europe, Freedom's Orphans argues, is that here adults appear to be more nervous about intervening, worried that their actions could lead to physical violence, verbal abuse or subsequent reprisals. This fear of children and young people also appears to be on the increase. Compared to 1992, nearly twice as many people today said that young people hanging about, rather than noisy neighbours, was something they would complain about.

Where this report is useful is that rather than providing a myopic focus on children's behaviour, it looks at the role of adults in society. It asks what adults would do to stop misbehaving young people, but also analyses adult relationships and engagement with children on a day-to-day level.

Compared with other European countries for example, Julia Margot of the IPPR believes that here, 'adults are less likely to socialise with children in the evenings'¹. We don't have a culture of children hanging out where adults socialise, in bars, cafes or town centres, so are less inclined, she argues, to get used to engaging and dealing

with young people.

This certainly rings true. From occasional trips abroad to places like Spain, it is often surprising to see how children and young people are much more part of the public environment than they are in Britain. In Scotland we often find that Italian and Greek restaurants have a more relaxed attitude to children than do their local counterparts, perhaps because of the more traditional nature of family life in those countries. That's not to say that they allow children to run around as they please, but rather that they are more comfortable in relating to them and in playing a more active role to control their behaviour. This compares favourably with many Scottish restaurants where you sense a certain tension when your children leave their seats, only finally to be told that 'health and safety' regulations mean that the children must sit still.

In Hamilton, where Stuart carried out his research for his book *Scared of the Kids?*, it was also the case that those adults who were involved in running activities for young people had a far more positive view of children than many of the other adults in the area. Interestingly, in his own neighbourhood on Glasgow's south side, the only 'strange' adult who has ever stopped and talked to one of his children turned out to be an elderly scout leader. To some extent it appears that unless you have an 'official' role with children they are off-limits.

In the IPPR press release, the changes to adult-child relations, the increased fear of young people and the disconnection of generations are all put down to broad changes in the family, local communities and the economy. There are real changes in childhood, they argue, but 'paedophobia', or the fear of children, 'makes things worse'.

This all sounds reasonable enough. Society is more fragmented, we have fewer connections with society as a whole and with other individuals in particular, and childhood has to a large extent become privatised. Ironically, at a time when 'other' adults are drifting into the background, parents are spending more time with their own children than before.

However, whether or not this would necessarily result in adults becoming more frightened of young people and less prepared to engage with them remains unclear. Perhaps the other European countries under study have remained more 'solid', more traditional and therefore more spontaneously engaged with children. But this is only half the story, we also need to look at the role that policy, professionals and politicians have played in creating the culture of 'paedophobia'.

John, one of Stuart's colleagues and caretaker in a community centre, has recently been cleared in court of assaulting a teenage boy who he escorted out of a youth centre. John is now frightened to do his job and in a sense has become frightened, not of children as such, but of the laws and policies that encourage parents to 'make a claim', that see the police carry the case to court and which left John isolated as his union refused to support him.

A sociologist we know tells us in no uncertain terms that he wouldn't go near a young child today because of 'what people might think'. Nor will he meet with

female students at his university unless his office door is left open. This is paedophobia of a different sort – and not one that has been brought on simply by changes in the economy or the community.

Similarly, where has the idea that approaching young people could endanger you come from? This may have developed partly because of the growing distance that exists between adults and young people. It may even be, as the IPPR report suggests, that young people are more likely to misbehave because adults no longer intervene. But let's face it, whether the behaviour of children is worse or not, this is the impression that most people have, because for at least a decade politicians have played on people's insecurities about 'yobs' and 'neds'.

Simon manages a youth work project funded by the Scottish Executive to address concerns about anti-social behaviour and youth disorder. He found that developing real responses to issues that exist primarily at a perceptual level actually ran the risk of reinforcing those disproportionate perceptions thereby increasing community concern.

The local neighbourhood police had an interesting take on the conundrum. Evaluated by the number of telephone calls complaining about young people they received, the police would often respond to calls only to find the complaint was about children playing in the street outside their own homes. One Officer suggested tackling the *problem* by evicting the six most prolific adult callers rather than the kids who were generally well behaved.

Luckily there was scope within the project to find ways of addressing perceptions too. Various initiatives were developed that encouraged communities to re-engage at an organic level². Intergenerational work, as it was termed, pursued reestablishing connections between young and old. Doing so resulted in less suspicious responses by adults when groups of young people were observed. Encouraging adults to approach young people and take issue with them if they are stepping out of line was the next logical step. But it seems that while this sounds sensible and an approach employed during halcyon by-gone-eras, key officials have little stomach for local adults dealing with mischief making youth.

It is worth noting that if children are literally out of the control of adults due to a lack of contact, then the pressures that were brought to bare in the past through socialisation will no longer apply. With vastly reduced child/adult interaction there is no mechanism for the transmission of culturally established norms of behaviour or spontaneous force for ensuring compliance. Is it any surprise that some children are 'out of control'?

Adults intervening when young people misbehave is, quite frankly, no longer 'the done thing' – a message promoted by politicians, housing officers, ASBOs, and implied by the 'pick up the phone' advice from Strathclyde Police. For example, at a recent conference Stuart attended on the issue of antisocial behaviour, Bill Pitt (the Home Office ASBO guru who is sent round the country to promote ASBO legislation) told a story about how he saw a young man charge past an old lady to get on a bus, knocking her to the ground.

He challenged the young man about his behaviour. Asked if that meant he would suggest to other adults that they too should be more active when young people are antisocial. “No”, said Pitt. It appears that Big Bill can be active, but for the ‘unconfident community’, as he describes them, it is the state in the form of the local officials who must act.

Having started by raising the important issue of adults not being prepared to intervene to regulate young people’s behaviour, the IPPR report disappointingly makes suggestions that will make matters worse. It notes, citing rather dated research based on young people in the 1970s and 80s, that teenagers who spend more time with their friends than their parents, and those who are less likely to be involved in structured youth activities rather than unstructured youth clubs, are more likely to be involved in crime and violence. Other indicators of ‘problems’, like depression, being single or divorced, living in social housing, and having no qualifications, are also linked to children who were not involved in structured youth activities. However, all the percentages for these apparent problems were noticeably low, ranging from two to five per cent in all the above examples. It is also unclear whether this takes account of other obvious ‘causes’ for these differences, like class.

The conclusion the authors draw is that the solution is an increase in structured activities. They propose that all secondary-school children should be forced to participate in at least two hours of structured extracurricular activities per week, with parents who refuse to sanction this being fined.

Ignoring the authoritarian aspect of this proposal for a moment, it is wrong to assume that this will do anything to overcome the problems of crime and behaviour in society, even if some kids do benefit from such activity. This proposal not only does nothing to solve the problem of the disconnection between adults and children, it makes it worse. It not only ignores the wider problem of deactivated adults, but potentially further endorses the existing belief that relating to other people’s children is not the business of other adults but of experts. It also endorses the notion that young people who are out unsupervised are a potential problem, or at least they will be in the future, thus enhancing, rather than challenging, the ‘paedophobia’ they are concerned about.

It seems that the authors of *Freedom’s Orphans* are as frightened of community adults taking action in their own area as some people seem to be of children.

Ironically, with the increasing suspicion towards adults who volunteer to work with young people, it is hard to know who will ‘be allowed’ to staff all these structured youth activities proposed by the IPPR. In the past local children would be considered the responsibility of the whole community not a select few officially sanctioned and vetted adults. In fact, at a national conference that we organised in 2005, Frank Furedi noted that shared childcare was the basis of community.³

Simon has interviewed over 100 older people about their own childhood relationships with adults. Ken’s (1939) reminiscences are common to many; “Well I was always brought up to be respectful, of everybody. I don’t specifically remember other people necessarily having to discipline me. But if they had of done,

then I would have just treated it like everything else. You would have expected it to happen. My mother presumably would have been happy for anybody to discipline me, 'cause it would have been less for her to do." This level of adult solidarity, that permits communities to 'consume their own smoke', without recourse to state officials, is impossible to legislate for. The spontaneous nature of these interpersonal relations can only ever be informal.

Additionally, by promoting the idea that children are better off either with their parents or at least being with other adults in a structured environment, rather than with their friends, this report runs the risk of de-socialising and even infantilising young people further. Children are already more inclined to be what some have termed 'cotton-wool kids'. Spending more time with their parents and in supervised adult company than ever before, and a decreasing amount of time freely engaging with other young people, will only exacerbate that trend.⁴

This is not to argue that young people should have the 'right' to roam free, but rather that for the development of communities we need children to become more public, not less so, and adults to see young people not as someone else's problem but as public property.

The authors of *Freedom's Orphans*, like the present government, are blind to the potential within ordinary adults actively to engage with young people, preferring instead a 'state' solution, with the further regulation of young people (and non-participating parents) as the answer. But this approach ultimately helps to undermine the process of socialising young people, which must involve free engagement between adults and children.

A final note in relation to the fear that exists of young people today. It is wrong for people to think that most young people, even those behaving badly, will attack you when you intervene. A few will, and many more may tell you where to go. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't intervene, rather it makes it all the more important that we should. Other adults may not back you; some parents will defend their children rather than support your actions. But it is only in the process of trying to resolve this ourselves that we can help develop the communities we live in.

REFERENCES

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3. See, Cotton Wool Kids, conference bulletin, Generation: Youth Issues.
4. James Youniss makes a very useful contribution to this discussion, see Youniss, J (1980). Parents and Peers in Social Development- a Sullivan-Piaget Perspective. London: University of Chicago Press
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