

Perspectives



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Once Upon a Time ...

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Once upon a time, in a land far less civilised than our own, there was this phenomenon called 'childhood'.

This will be the opening line in a future documentary, unless the Western world opens its heavily mascaraed eyes. Childhood is fading away each day and we are allowing it to disappear, allowing it to fade into a distant memory. It will become something we simply could have dreamt or imagined.

Childhood used to be the blissful lifestyle lived by those aged between approximately two and 11 years old. We played, explored, giggled, discovered, tried, dreamt and learnt. Childhood was an almost problem-free existence, aside from the occasional backyard experiment gone wrong. We learnt what was right and wrong, how to spell and to spread your wings and fly. Your memories from being a child are some of the best of your life, because at that time things were uncomplicated. The majority of your life was what you wanted it to be. Naturally your parents controlled aspects of it, but what is left of childhood now is controlled by many, many more people.

The toxic combination of the media, enormous companies, Hollywood and celebrities, society, peer pressure and older generations has damaged the lives of these young people beyond repair. Behaviour that was once associated with the 'Terrible Teens' is now normal among pre-teens. Eight-year-old girls are wearing make-up, owning mobile phones and dating through primary school! They no longer read fairy tales,

instead they clutch at *Cleo* and *Cosmo*. They desire money and fame and go out and get bikini waxes. Hospital wings are being filled to capacity with girls under 10 years old being treated for anorexia and other eating disorders. They are beginning to party, drink, smoke and in some extreme cases, abuse other substances.

Writer James Baldwin once said, 'Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them'. They want to grow up and think that by mimicking behaviour associated with older generations that that is how to do so. They can only learn from adults. Are we ever conscious of those little inquisitive eyes that follow us everywhere we go? They absorb every movement, every gesture and every mood. Their exposure is much more prevalent. The influences that surround and target them are inescapable. They may desire to be 'grown up' so therefore imitate what you do, but are you a worthy role model? Can you portray and teach valuable lessons? Imagine the life lessons that would go unlearned if there was no childhood, if you had gone from being a toddler to a 'tweenager', to a teen, then straight into adulthood. These children will be skipping a vital step in their lives. How can one become an adult without knowing how to be a child? Simply because something is not compulsory doesn't mean it should be skipped.

It is not only us in the West who are facing the extinction of childhood. It is occurring in countries all over the world. You have child soldiers, slaves, prostitutes and drug couriers. The indisputable fact of the matter is that childhood is dying out. Will the world actually have a future without childhood? What use will the next generation be? They may be able to text at the speed of light and apply make-up and fake tan to perfection, but in the scheme of things they will be utterly useless 'skills'. Don't even get me started on the way they 'talk'. 'Oh my god, this global warming is like, ruining my hair. Will someone just like turn it off?' Not to be a drama queen, but unless we save childhood we have no hope.

We didn't see it happening. It's as though they were slowly dimming the lights, so gradually that we did not notice

until it was nearly pitch black. It began with Barbie and progressed on to teen stars as role models. That is the childhood I remember, the days of dressing up Barbie at least 10 times a day and knowing every word of 'Spice Up Your Life'. This has progressed as years passed and we now have Bratz and MyScene dolls and songs such 'Gimme More'. The pre-teen years are now all based upon sex appeal. Society's teaching is that beauty is fake, it is all created by products. The horror movies were almost spot on; the plastics are going to rule the world.

Reflecting back on my childhood as I am fast approaching adulthood makes me smile, yet feel sorrow at the same time. Imagine never experiencing childhood, the feeling of being so carefree, so *young*. You learn from the past, but if you have no lessons to learn from, where does that leave you? If life without childhood is all you've ever known then you will always be missing something. Childhood is one of life's greatest experiences, always has been. I'd love to say 'and always will be' to complete the cliché, but I can't. Writer and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel said, 'Once you bring life into this world, you must protect it. We must protect it by changing the world'. Come on power-rangers; let's change it while we still can.



Catherine Ross wrote this in 2008 when she was in Year 11 at Melbourne Girls' College in Victoria.