

“Getting Noticed: Middle Childhood in Cross-Cultural Perspective”  
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## **Abstract**

Although rarely named, the majority of societies in the ethnographic record demarcate a period between early childhood and adolescence. Prominent signs of demarcation are: for the first time, pronounced gender separation in fact and in role definition; increased freedom of movement for boys while girls may be bound more tightly to their mothers; and heightened expectations for socially responsible behavior. But, above all, middle childhood is about coming out of the shadows of community life and assuming a distinct, lifetime character. Naming and other rites of passage sometimes acknowledge this transition, but it is, reliably, marked by the assumption or assignment of specific chores or duties. Because the *physiological* changes at puberty are so much more dramatic, the transition from middle childhood is more often marked by a rite of passage than the entrance into this period. There is also an acknowledgement at the exit from middle childhood, of near-adult levels of competence—as a herdsman or hunter or as gardener or infant-caretaker.

## **Keywords**

Childhood Stages

Middle-Childhood

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Children's Work

## **Introduction**

In Jean Piaget's influential theory of human cognitive development, the period from 5 to 7 years is marked by a major transition from pre-operational to concrete operational thinking (Piaget 1963). From a historical standpoint there is a great deal of evidence that this age range also marked a major transition in children's social standing, in particular that a 7 year-old could be held legally and morally accountable for his/her actions (White 1991: 13).

Anthropologists have been involved in the analysis and examination of Piaget's theory through the use of Piagetian measures with children never exposed to western institutions such as schooling (Lancy 1983) and by searching through the ethnographic archive for evidence of a socially marked transition during this period. Unlike the transition to adolescence, associated with the evident biological markers of menarche and puberty, and often accompanied by an initiation or rite of passage, the transition to middle childhood is associated with neither biological nor community-wide events. However, in a landmark study, Rogoff and colleagues (1975) probed a sample of 50 societies available in the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF) and found widespread evidence of a transition in children's lives. Markers included: the assignment of chores and acknowledgement of the child's sense of responsibility; awareness of gender differences and segregation by sex and; the emergence of rule-governed play. In a follow-up essay, Rogoff noted the need to expand the transition period under consideration finding societies where children were assigned chores at 3 (Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 2001: 3-5) while in others, such as San foragers, children remain dependent and subordinate well beyond 7 years (Rogoff 1996: 276-7).

Further impetus to study middle childhood as an important stage in children's development arises from advances in our understanding of the evolutionary basis for transitions in the life course. Until fairly recently, the only feature of the human life course that provoked theoretical interest was the extended period of juvenility. But Bogin (1999), among others, has called attention to discontinuities in development unique to our species. Infancy begins at birth, ends at weaning and is characterized by rapid growth, deciduous tooth eruption, transition to upright posture and independent locomotion. During childhood or early childhood, growth is more moderate, the child continues to need provisioning, and the first permanent molars and incisors erupt. The substantially slower rate of growth diverts energy to the growth of the brain which achieves nearly 100 percent of its adult size by seven years (Bogin 1999). In the juvenile or middle-childhood stage the brain ceases to grow but undergoes steady reorganization. Cortical maturation is now seen to begin around the age of six (Gogtay et al 2004). Continuing changes in dentition allow the child to masticate and consume the full array of adult foods. The onset of adrenarche (increase in the adrenal production of the neurosteroid DHEAS) and a modest increase in growth referred to as the "mid-growth spurt" occur at about the same age suggesting important somatic changes as well (see Campbell this volume). However, adrenarche demonstrates wide variability in the age of onset (Del Giudice, et al 2009: 3) and we will see this variability reflected in cultural markers of middle childhood. The end of this period

is also reliably signaled by the onset of puberty or gonadarche and the development of secondary sexual characteristics, including pubic hair and (in girls) the appearance of breast buds, a marked growth spurt, and a loss of gray matter volume (Bogin 1999; Gogtay, et al 2004).

### **A Note on Methodology**

Our approach parallels that of MacDonald (2007) who describes her review of the ethnographic record on learning to hunt as a “cross-cultural synthesis” leading to an analysis that is, of necessity, “...qualitative, as the relevant evidence from the ethnographic literature is either anecdotal or generalized and includes limited quantitative data (p. 390).” We also draw on the ethnographic record, in this instance to flesh out a more complete picture of the cultural processes that complement the now well-documented biological events of middle childhood. In addition to the cases examined by Rogoff et al (1975), we include ethnographic material from the ensuing 30+ years. However, we have also elected to examine a wider age range in order to elucidate more fully the characteristics of this particular stage. This survey grew out of a comprehensive review of the ethnographic record pertaining to childhood (Lancy 2008). In that review, approximately 1350 published and unpublished reports were used and, since publication in late 2008, an additional 200 sources have been found and added to the corpus. The material is comprehensive with respect to geography and subsistence patterns. From a review of this material, we were able to tease out a number of themes related to middle childhood and these are illustrated with representative anecdotes from the literature. Where there is significant deviation or variation around a theme, we will point that out. Fairly early in the survey of cases, we detected what became the major theme for the essay, namely that middle childhood was all about children “getting noticed.”

### **Not Getting Noticed**

To appreciate why the idea of parents’ paying/not-paying attention to their children seemed salient from our literature review, we reproduce several telling observations:

- Lepcha childhood is...a time of obscurity, of being unimportant; children are not taken much notice of and their tastes are little consulted [Gorer 1967: 314].
- In the Middle Ages, children were generally ignored until they were no longer children [Crawford 1999: 168].
- [Fijian] children of any age should be obedient, quiet and undemanding in the presence of adults [Toren 1988: 240].

Obviously, one cannot completely ignore one’s children or they’ll starve but note the distinction made in these two cases that we find quite representative. Gusii [Kenyan farmers] mothers respond promptly to their infant’s distress signals but largely ignore other kinds of communication (i.e., babbling). Nor do mothers look at or speak “...to their infants and toddlers, even when they were holding and breast-feeding them...”(LeVine 2004: 154,156). Bonerate [Sulawesi maritime traders] mothers are quick to nurse and calm a fussy baby, but “...do not establish eye contact with their nursing babies [who] are nursed quickly, without overt emotional expression either from the mother or from the child” (Broch 1990: 31).

We build our argument regarding middle childhood as a transition from children being largely ignored to a period when they are much more on adult radar by starting with infancy.

### **Invisible Babies**

Our survey yielded a portrait of infancy that suggests babies should be, effectively, invisible. This invisibility is achieved through various means. First, post-partum seclusion is fairly common and cases can be found in every region of the world. In the rural agrarian community of Gapun in Papua New Guinea, mothers are isolated in a birthing house for 6 months (Kulick 1992: 94). New Yuqui [forest forager] mothers and infants are isolated in the forest and visitation is restricted because they believe that the baby is dangerous to members of the community until it can hold up its head. The mother is the only person

protected from the infant's *mana* (Stearman 1989: 89). Aside from protecting the baby from infectious diseases, keeping it inconspicuous and out of sight is often necessary to protect it against the magic and machinations of jealous and vengeful neighbors (Johnson 2000: 187).

Second, the infants are often tightly confined for months. In fact, the practice of attaching the infant continuously to its mother is so common, scholars refer to the child being “weaned from the back” (Maretzki 1963: 477) or infants may be confined in a cradle-board or similar device. The Navajo employed cradleboards in 4 graduated sizes which kept the child tranquil and out of its mother's way (Chisholm 1980). Among the Roma, the infant is “... wrapped in a muslin envelope, so tightly that she could not move her arms and legs, the whole parcel, which was called the *kopanec*, was then fastened with pins and talismans to ward off ‘evil eyes’” (Fonseca 1995: 44). In a rural Iranian community, a baby “happily moving arms and legs in its mother's lap may be said to be tired and strapped back into a cradle—a happy (*rahat*, at ease) baby is quiet in voice and body” (Friedl 1997: 100). In the high Andes, babies are almost constantly confined to a “manta pouch,” which functions to reduce the baby's metabolism and need for energy (Tronick et al 1994: 1009-10). The consensus of opinion is that all these strategies for keeping the infant quiet and immobile serve to reduce the labor of childcare (Lee 1996).

Third, communities delay—by our standards—the conferral of personhood. It follows that, if babies are largely hidden from view and kept in a quiescent state, they might be seen as “non-persons.” Among Wari forest foragers “... babies of both sexes are called *arawet*, which translates literally as ‘still being made’” (Conklin and Morgan 1996: 673). Naming and the community's recognition of the child are often delayed until the child's viability is assured (Lepowsky 1985: 79). Among the strife-torn Korowai [forager/horticulturalists] of Western New Guinea this may not be until the child is 18 months (Raffaele 2003: 69). And an “... Ayoreo [forest forager] child is not considered a complete human being until the time he can walk and talk” (Bugos and McCarthy 1984: 510).

While invisible babies may be the rule, there is a significant minority of societies where this is certainly not true. In a few societies, such as the Beng (Gottlieb 2004) and the Balinese (Covarrubias 1937) infants receive considerable attention because they are seen as the reincarnation of deceased kin with the potential to serve as intermediaries. Among foragers, particularly in Central Africa (see Boyette, this volume), infants are held, uncradled and unswaddled, a great deal by a large cast of allomothers. So they are certainly not invisible but the attention they receive is still somewhat limited as they are rarely played with or spoken to in motherese (Hewlett 1991; Hewlett et al 2000).

The next stage in many folk theories of child development corresponds to our notion of “toddler” or, more formally, “early childhood.” The child is mobile and talking but it occupies a marginal position on the periphery of adult society, even in the societies that do lavish attention on infants.

### **Early Childhood**

From Weisner and Gallimore's landmark review of the literature, we can identify two very important processes which are indicative of the first major transition, following birth, namely “sib-care” and “toddler rejection” (1977:176). They found that a very high proportion of infants and toddlers had been turned over to older siblings as their caretakers (1977: 170-3), a finding also consistently reported in more recent ethnographies (but absent in reports from forager studies in Central Africa: Hewlett, et al 1998: Tronick et al 1992). Another important element in this period is the “mother-ground,” described by Lancy (1996: 84-7) as an open area in the village or farm where young children can play while being casually monitored by adults working or resting nearby (see also Hill and Hurtado 1996: 222).

Numerous examples of “toddler rejection” can be identified in the literature (Levy 1973: 454) Illustrative cases follow.

- When the [horticulturalist Kwoma] child is no longer an infant, “...his mother gives him a little bag which she has netted for him and his father the betel-chewing accoutrements to go with it. They tell him that he has become a little man. He now turns to the play group and spends his time playing games with other children, roaming in the forest” [Whiting 1941:38].

- With the arrival of the next sibling, *dénanola* (infancy) is over. Now, play begins and membership in a social group of peers is taken to be critical to the forgetting of the breast to which the toddler has had free access for nearly two years or more. A [Mandinka farmer] mother [says] “Now she must turn to play” [Whittemore 1989: 92].

This rejection is usually triggered by the need to wean the baby in anticipation of the next birth. A pregnant Luo [farmer] woman “is supposed to stop breastfeeding, since it is believed that...the milk will be poisonous to the nursing baby and will cause it to get the illness *ledho* (Cosminsky 1985: 38-39). A few societies also mark the transition to early childhood with some ceremony, such as the “first haircutting”(Fricke 1994:133).

These child-care practices and rites of passage call attention to the child’s new independence from adult care and supervision. The following examples illustrate the very marginal role children are expected to fulfill.

- Another important way in which Tongan children show respect is by remaining on the periphery of adult activities [Morton 1996: 90].
- Ganda [farmer]...children over two years of age...sit politely, with their feet tucked under them out of sight, listening to the talk of their elders and speaking only when spoken to. If any young child becomes rambunctious and draws attention to himself, he is told to sit properly [and] be silent [Ainsworth 1967: 12].
- In a Mayan [farming] community...children are taught to avoid challenging an adult with a display of greater knowledge by telling them something [Rogoff 1990: 60].

The transition from infancy to early childhood is not marked by greater attention being paid to the child by adults—as happens in modern society when children of this age are now taught and supervised by adult baby-sitters, soccer coaches, pre-school teachers as well as their parents. On the contrary there seems to be the attitude that the weaned child should make fewer demands than the infant (Ritchie 1957: 83-5).

### **Opportunities to Learn**

The out-of-sight, out-of-mind toddler is not entirely in a holding pattern. The notion that children are productively exercising their freedom from adult supervision to learn their culture is quite widespread. Now mobile, possessing some understanding of social etiquette, and attached to the play group, the child becomes responsible for learning the culture. Parents and other adults busy with subsistence activities or mothers with a new infant do not see themselves as teachers. Rather, the child is expected to explore, observe and absorb (Lancy and Grove 2010).

- [On Truk Island, with an economy based on fishing and gardening, there is no]...training of children in our sense [Bollig 1927: 96].
- During this period there is no formal training [among the Mbuti Pygmies], but boys and girls alike learn all there is to be learned by simple emulation and by assisting their parents and elders in various tasks [Turnbull 1965: 179].
- [There]...is remarkably little meddling by older [Inuit] people in this learning process. Parents do not presume to teach their children what they can as easily learn on their own [Guemple 1979: 50].
- By age six, Meriam [Torres Straits] children have become fairly efficient reef foragers. The learning process involves little or no direct adult instruction [Bird and Bird 2002: 291].

Another area where children are noted as appropriately orienting themselves towards adult models is in their play. While adults are generally indifferent or even opposed to children’s play (Fry 2005: 68), they do

take notice of children's first forays into the realm of skilled work. For example, a Yanomamö boy at age five "plays with a small bow and a reed-like arrow that his father or brother has made for him" (Peters 1998: 90). "Touareg boys who will eventually learn to herd camel, first care for a young goat that they treat like a playmate" (Spittler 1998: 343). A young Conambo girl "plays with clay, making coils, pinch pots, and miniature animals" (Bowser and Patton 2008: 110). Through skill-oriented play, the child can demonstrate maturity and persistence to potential mentors or to those who assign chores.

However, more active involvement in the household economy may actually be discouraged. Clumsy children might waste precious food if allowed to participate in grain processing (Bock and Johnson 2004: 15); they must be prevented from messing up planted rows in the garden (Polak 2003: 126) and; rambunctious boys threaten to scare off the prey during a hunt (Matthiasson 1979: 74) or fish during a fishing expedition (Broch 1990: 85). Although we see the belief that learning during early childhood should be child-initiated, attempts by the child to solicit *instruction* or recognition from adults will likely be rebuffed (Lancy 1996: 149-53; Edwards 2005: 91; Morton 1996: 90; Reichard 1934: 38). The child may still not be considered sufficiently mature to benefit from guidance (Gladwin and Sarason 1953: 414).

### **Lacking Sense**

In a monograph focused entirely on childhood, Broch finds little evidence that the Bonerate (maritime traders from Sulawesi) think of children developing through a series of fixed stages, nor do they clearly define transitions from infancy to adolescence. Nevertheless, they, like many other people, differentiate between a child that has "...wisdom or knowledge of social norms and values...[and one that is] *bodoh* (stupid)" (Broch 1990:15). There is considerable unanimity about the child's lacking a quality we can translate as intelligence or common sense until much before the age of 5 and sometimes later (Harkness and Super 1985: 223) viz:

- The Punan Bah [forager/horticulturalists] see little point in any systematic teaching of small children, due to the belief that only from the age of about five when their souls stay put, will children have the ability to reason [Nicolaisen 1988: 205].
- An Ayoreo child is not considered a complete human being [until attaining]... *aiuketaotigui*, which means 'understanding' or 'personality' [Bugos and McCarthy 1984: 510].

The child's lack of sense is also cited to excuse them from misdemeanors that would be chastised in an older child (Maretzki 1963: 481; Read 1960: 89).

- When the [Sisala-Ghanaian farmers] child reaches the age of six years [he should display]...'sense' or 'knowing things' (*wijima*)...he is expected to know the difference between right and wrong and to begin assuming minor responsibilities [Grindal 1972: 28].
- The [Javanese-rice farming] child before he is five or six is...said to be *durung ngerti*, 'does not yet understand,' and therefore...there is no point in...punishing him for incomprehensible faults [Geertz 1961: 105].

To this point in its development, the child has been largely on auto-pilot. With the notable exception of training in kin terms and manners (Lancy 2008: 125), there is little need to adjust the child's trajectory. However, this *laissez faire* strategy may be adjusted in the face of children's nascent sexual identity.

### **Middle Childhood and the Onset of Gender Differentiation**

A rather surprising number of societies treat children as asexual. The infant's genitalia are manipulated to soothe it to sleep (Friedl 1997: 139; Geertz 1961: 102), young children may remain nude or scantily dressed (Kent 1993: 490) and sex play may be tolerated (Nimmo 1970: 253; Williams 1969: 102). One signal therefore of the transition to middle childhood—if it hasn't occurred earlier—is the requirement that children be clothed and limit interaction with the opposite sex (Lawton 2007: 46).

At around the age of six, there begins a distinct sexual segregation of roles, and, in the case of male [Berber] children, the close physical contact with the mother begins to end. Accession to this age-status is marked by the child being given a pair of under-drawers (*serwal*) to wear under his *jellaba*, and a small skullcap for his head [Hatt: 1974: 139].

The names assigned to children change, among Dusun farmers, boys are called “without loincloth,” girls “without a skirt” until 5 years and, then, “child man” or “virgin” (Williams 1969: 86). Segregation in play may be imposed and reinforced by hazing (Henderson 1970: 107). This transition often occurs earlier for girls than for boys (Barnett 1979: 6; Geertz 1961: 102)

A number of factors come into play here including segregation by sex and brother-sister incest avoidance (Cohen 1964: 160, 184). In many societies, boys have grown up in close proximity to women with little contact with men. Hence, abrupt steps may be taken to remove the boy or at least distance him from the feminine realm and place him more firmly in the masculine realm (Herdt 1990: 376; Hill and Hurtado 1996: 223; Ottenberg 1989: 49; Tuzin 1980: 26). For example, Tongan [farmer] boys “are eager to move into the boys’ huts, to be associated with the older boys, and to experience their comparative freedom” (Morton 1996:112). Even, in the absence of an official change in the child’s residence, girls become more tightly bound to their mothers, accompanying them everywhere while boys are expected to roam widely, only returning home for nourishment and rest (Watson-Franke 1976: 194). Friedl refers to boys in an Iranian village being “turned out in the morning like cows” (1997: 148) and in an analysis of observational data from six societies, it was noted that:

During middle childhood, boys aged 5-7 reduced contact and interaction with their mothers and other adult females, and were observed at greater distances from home than were girls... [exercising their greater] freedom to wander and play [Pope-Edwards 2005: 87].

We can identify four elements in the gender segregation that marks the onset of middle childhood although not all receive equal emphasis in every society. There is the acknowledgement and response to the child’s becoming aware of sex; there is the recruitment of girls as mother’s helpers while boys continue to play and/or are assigned gender-appropriate tasks (Bloch and Adler 1994: 167; Ember 1973: 426; Weisner 1996: 309) there is the wider range of permissible territory available to boys (Wenger 1989: 100) and last; the formation of same-sex, voluntary peer groups (Harkness and Super 1985: 223). Girls “get noticed” before boys do because of their greater perceived usefulness and because of their heightened vulnerability. This is an illustrative case from Iran:

Children...are well informed of goings-on in Deh Koh [village], a source of intelligence for their relatively house-bound...relatives...Girls are considered much better at such intelligence gathering than are their brothers, but...their radius of movement shrinks rapidly, for propriety’s sake [Friedl 1997:7-8].

Sex and gender are bound up with other, more subtle signs of change in the child and its status. A greater focus on the world of work, a willingness to act responsibly and persistence in the face of obstacles are all attributes that recommend a child to its appreciative elders.

### **Becoming Useful**

Outside of foraging societies, ethnographers consistently report that parents see children as an investment (Kramer 2005: 168; Ember 1983) from which they expect an eventual return. “Defective” children may be culled (Hill and Hurtado 1996: 3), if the birth occurs too soon after the birth of a previous child or if a parent dies (Wilson and Daly 2002: 307), or if the birth of another child puts a strain on family resources or the environment (Dickeman 1975). The Tapirapé foragers from central Brazil only allow three children per family; all others must be left behind in the jungle. Seasonally scarce resources affecting the entire community, dictate these measures (Wagley 1977). One indication that little return is expected before middle childhood is the perfunctory mortuary treatment accorded children who expire before the age of 5 (Gorer 1967: 302).



However, by as early as age 3-4, in some cases, girls are considered sufficiently mature to mind their infant siblings. They are, however, expected to deliver them to the nursing mother at the earliest sign of distress (Lancy 1996: 146; Rogoff 1996: 286). Fetching firewood and water are also considered well within their capability (Broch 1990: 27) and from age six, Berber girls “learn to prepare an entire family meal unassisted” (Hatt: 1974: 139). Girls, said to develop “sense” earlier than boys (Friedl 1997: 297), begin to yield a return quite early, especially in agrarian societies (Grindal 1972: 28; Harkness and Super 1985: 223). In evolutionary terms, the contribution of a daughter’s labor to her mother’s fertility has been frequently noted (Crognier and Hilali 2001), including the documentation of prayers in traditional Japanese society for a female first-born to aid in caring for the, hopefully male, later-born children (Skinner 1987 as cited in Harris 1989: 218).

The play to work transition is elongated for boys (Blurton-Jones et al 1997: 291, 304, 306; Edwards 2005: 87; Wenger 1989: 98-9). They may be assigned a goat or chicken to care for but the goat is more pet than project (Raum 1940: 200; Spittler 1998: 343). Charged with keeping birds from the rice crop, boys accomplish this chore with the aid of games of tag or slingshot practice (Lancy 1996: 186; Harkness and Super 1986: 99). Shepherds find ample opportunity to play while supervising the herd (Harkness and Super 1985:223). And young hunters with scaled down bows and arrows exhibit behavior that suggests play not work (Peters 1998: 90-91). This relative freedom may be curtailed, when, in the absence of a sister of the appropriate age, a boy may find himself conscripted for child care or other “women’s work” (Ember 1973: 425-6).

However, the most likely “first chore” for a boy will be an errand (Lancy 1996: 76; Wenger 1989: 98). From delivering messages or items of food or property in the complex village exchange to making small purchase or sales in the market (Lancy 1996: 156; Read 1960: 43), boys perform a vital function. Busy adults rely upon child couriers also because they are indemnified from the accusation of questionable motives (adultery, sorcery, theft) that might be attributed to their parents (Lancy 2008: 238). Aside from tending livestock, running errands and “fetching,” a boy or girl might also be nudged over the threshold into middle childhood by assigning them their own garden plot. Among the Kwoma (PNG horticulturalists) parents set aside an area of the garden for the child to work on their own. Any produce from this mini-garden is “put in a separate bin in the family storehouse as the child’s private property” (Whiting 1941: 46-47). A four-year-old Bamana boy in Mali may have...

...already grasped the meaning of sowing and is able to perform the various movements...he is entrusted with an old hoe as well as with some seeds so that he can gain some practice in this activity. However...he has to be allocated a certain part of the field where he neither gets in the way of the others nor spoils the rows they have already sown [Polak 2003: 130].

Gardening is only one among several domains where very detailed studies of children’s acquisition of adult competency are available. These include, hunting (MacDonald 2007), herding (Read 1960; Spittler 1998), canoe-making (Wilbert 1976), weaving (Tanon 1994), and ceramics (Bowser and Patton 2008). Taken together, these accounts reveal a graded *chore curriculum* (Lancy 2008: 235-42). That is, each of these domains can be broken into subtasks which range in difficulty. With very high motivation to emulate older, more expert models, children reliably observe, copy and practice these sub-tasks leading, gradually, to mastery with remarkably little adult intervention. These studies of children carrying out productive work also affirm Weisner’s observation that “children care for other children (under a mother’s or other adults’ management) within *indirect chains of support*” (1996: 308, emphasis added). For example, when a Bamana 4-year-old is struggling to harvest his share of the bean crop, he will be aided by his 8 year old brother (Polak 2003), not his father who does, however, come to the aid of a 12-year-old son to demonstrate a particularly tricky technique involved in planting a row of sorghum (Polak ND).

Like our academic curriculum, whose structure is used to arrange children into developmental levels, e.g. “pre-schooler,” “first-grader,” the chore curriculum functions similarly, as the following examples (Fajans 1997:87) attest.

- A [Giriama-farmer/pasoralist] girl, from about 8 years until...puberty, is *muho ho wa kubunda*, a child who pounds maize; a boy of this age is a *muho ho murisa*, a child who herds [Wenger 1989: 98].
- Among the *Tchokwe*, children are identified through the roles they assume... *tchitutas* are girls and boys around the age of five to seven, whose role is to fetch water and tobacco for the elders and take messages to neighbors. *Kambumbu* are children (especially girls), seven to thirteen years of age, who participate actively in household chores and help parents in the field or with fishing and hunting [Honawana 2006: 41-42].

### Getting Noticed

If children have been ignored because of their immaturity, it follows that the eventual display of “sense” should attract attention. For Fulani pastoralists: “It is when children begin to develop *haYYillo* (social sense) that adults in turn change their expectations and behavior” (Riesman 1992: 130).

The Abluyia mother in western Kenya uses evidence that a child has the ability to give and receive social support and assist others as [evidence of the] child’s more general intellectual development level, much as an American parent might use literacy skills such as knowing the alphabet or numbers or displaying verbal facility to show how grown-up or precocious his or her child is [Weisner 1996: 314].

The child’s behavior in all these endeavors, including the play precursors, will be scrutinized, albeit, casually. Children are considered intelligent when they take initiative to carry out useful services. For the Kipsigis [Kenyan farmers], the child is said to have sense when they can not only take care of themselves but can undertake certain routine chores—watering the cows, sweeping the house—without supervision (Super and Harkness 1986: 558-59). A child who has demonstrated such initiative around the house may be tested by being sent on a distant errand or be given a complex message to deliver. A study in several Guatemalan villages showed that children could be reliably ranked on the basis of this native theory of “IQ” (Nerlove and Roberts 1974: 265).

The transition from dependent to contributor is usually quite smooth but the ethnographic record shows the use of carrots and sticks at this juncture. Children in the Murik Lakes region of PNG, can contribute to subsistence in various ways including the harvesting of clams.

- “The mother or older sister with whom the clams were gathered announces...that the younger girl’s share must be counted...By responding enthusiastically to children’s efforts to help with work, mothers encourage a strong association between work, recognition, and being fed” [Barlow 2001: 87].
- “Hopi girls who’ve learned to grind corn with a nice smooth rhythm are “shown off” to visitors” [Hough 1915: 63].
- “When an [Mbuti] boy kills his first “real animal,” he is immediately acclaimed as a hunter...[and honored by cicatrization]...an operation performed...by one of the ‘great hunters’” [Turnbull 1965: 257].

The stick is also in evidence, however. A Sebei [Ugandan farmer] mother condemns a “lazy” daughter who isn’t up to the mark by saying “I hope that you have stomach pains and dysentery” (Goldschmidt 1976: 259). A Kwoma [PNG-horticulturalist] child is rewarded for industry but also scolded, beaten, hazed by peers and denied food for any sign of laxity (Whiting 1941: 56, 72). Mothers threaten to withhold food from Bengali girls who allow play to interfere with the completion of chores (Rohner and Chaki-Sicrar 1988: 33, 80). Even among the very *laissez faire* Aka [Central African] foragers, children who evade responsibly are denied food by their mothers (Boyette 2008).

The intervention by adults to redirect the child from the path of play to the path of work is one of the clearest indicators of an important transition in the child's development. Indeed, parents who fail to curb their 5-7 year olds and demand compliance and cooperation are ostracized by the community (Einarsdottir 2004: 95; Lancy 1996: 76). If this is seen as a critical period for learning to act responsibly, the child will only succeed if provided opportunities to be useful. So parents must assign chores at the appropriate level and intervene forcibly, if the child shows a failure to mature on schedule. This is a very clear statement of that philosophy:

Giriama [Kenyan farmers] attach importance to providing children with duties that teach responsibility and mutuality. In their view, a mother who does not expect her children to help is remiss, even neglectful. A child so treated would inevitably emerge as an adult with few prospects and without the respect of the community [Wenger 1989: 93].

With or without adult guidance, children in middle childhood are expected to be independent, self-sufficient and useful; providing a significant portion of their own caloric needs. In Tanzania, Hadza children as young as 4 gather, haul back to camp, and process nourishing Boaobab fruit as a snack (Blurton-Jones et al 1997). In the Sudan, children capture birds with nets and consume or sell their catch. However, bird trapping was done "for its own intrinsic value and not for economic gain or to provide household subsistence" (Katz 1986: 48). Children can now survive on their own if their parents die (Weisner 1996: 301) and, with the HIV/AIDS epidemic, many are in that situation (Henderson 2006). But a more likely fate, historically, is that the child is fostered, an extremely widespread phenomenon (Alber 2004: 33; Barnett 1979: 54; Morton 1996: 60). And 5-9 appears to be the preferred age for fostering a child (Weisner 1996: 301). At this age the child has the emotional maturity to separate from its natal home; has learned proper modes of speech and interaction and; can make a significant contribution to the economy of his new home.

### **Leaving Middle Childhood**

As we have seen, the onset of middle childhood varies depending on the child's potential contribution to the household. Girls are thought to be useful at an earlier age than boys and children can make significant contributions to herding and gardening at an earlier age than to foraging (Draper 1997: 223). Even in a single family, there will be variability depending on the make-up of the household, its relative affluence and the nature of the domestic economy. The *exit* from middle childhood is, however, more reliably demarcated. Puberty, especially first menarche, almost always sets in motion activities designed to pave the way to adulthood. In a very few societies, middle childhood segues rather directly into adulthood. In Berber society, individuals marry at puberty and marriage equals adulthood (Davis and Davis 1989: 59). Inuit [Arctic foragers] girls "would often be married and performing many adult roles even before reaching sexual maturity" (Condon 1987: 67). But these cases are rare according to the Schlegel and Barry (1991: 19) survey of adolescence.

In the Rogoff and colleagues (1975) study there were two points in the life cycle where a transition was evident and the second fell at or around puberty. In approximately half of the societies in the ethnographic record, adolescents must pass through an initiation process (Schlegel and Berry 1980: 698). In Markstrom's encyclopedic review of initiation rites for girls in North America, first menses is followed by a dramatic change in the girl's life. Threatened by the power of menstrual blood, many societies confine the young woman for years and/or require her to cover her head in public (2008: 79). "Enclosed" (for up to five years among South American Guajiro farmers-Watson-Franke 1976:204) maidens are subject to what amounts to a lengthy indoctrination where older women exhort the initiate to prepare herself for child-bearing and diligently doing women's work (Schlegel and Barry 1980: 78).

Seclusion might be equally motivated by concern for the unmarried girl's honor or virtue (Geertz 1961: 56; Henderson 1970: 109; Peters et al 1990: 247; Whiting et al 1986: 287). For example, among the Khmer [Laotian farmers], "the sheltering of girls...*coul plup*, or 'entering the shade'...occurred at first menses and involved seclusion...in a darkened room...The longer a girl stayed in seclusion, the more desirable she became and the greater the bride price she could demand" (Smith-Hefner 1993:145-6).

Aside from seclusion, the gravity of these moral lessons is reinforced by physically punishing ordeals such as fasting and avoidance of desirable foods (Herdt 1990: 376), long-distance running (Leighton and Kluckhohn 1948: 56-57), circumcision (Harkness and Super 1985: 222; Spencer 1970), clitoridectomy (Fernea 1991: 45), cicatrization (Hauser-Schaublin 1995: 40) and bloody beating (Tuzin 1980: 78).

With a few exceptions, particularly in New Guinea (Strathern 1970), the girl's rite of passage is often more substantial in duration and extent than that for boys. And girls may be initiated earlier as well (Broch 1990: 130). In lieu of formal initiation, the transition for boys may be marked, primarily, by a change in residence from the natal home to a men's house or dormitory (Wagley 1977: 149).

Where male initiation occurs, it shares many attributes with the process for females. Again we see the sometimes abrupt removal of the child from its family (Gilmore 2001: 209), seclusion "in the bush" (Yoshida 2006: 223), and exposure to frightening, masked figures (Ottenberg 1989: 187) or to familiar persons dressed or behaving in novel ways. Boys aspiring to manhood should voluntarily harden themselves by exposure to stamina-enhancing privation such as going without sleep and bathing in cold water (Hugh-Jones, 1979: 110).

In spite of the ordeals, youth seem eager to leave childhood and may lobby their families to put forward the resources and social capital needed to underwrite the initiation rites. An undoubted reason for this eagerness is that youth desire to close the gap between biological and social maturity and begin sexual relations and family formation (Biersack 1998: 74). But families, in turn, may resist doing so. Gusii [Kenyan farmers] parents may demur, demanding "evidence of *okongainia* ... which means... being willing and able to do the work of an adult woman... and perform these duties without having to be ordered" (LeVine and Lloyd 1966: 167).

Another physiological change with social consequences is the adolescent growth spurt (Lepowsky 1998: 128), peaking at 14 for girls and 16 for boys (Eveleth and Tanner 1990). Youth, especially males, may be expected to demonstrate their maturity and responsibility through a conspicuous increase in food production and sharing (Broch 1990: 138; Hugh-Jones, 1979: 111). An Mbuti is considered to be no longer a boy when his hunting prowess captures "real animals," e.g. large game that can be legitimately shared with the whole band and not just the immediate family (Turnbull 1965: 214). In agricultural societies, adolescents participate in communal labor. Baining adolescents "are called upon to contribute to collective work parties, where a big job is done in one day" (Fajans 1997: 93). Adolescent "clubs" on Palau [maritime foragers/ horticulturalists] were frequently conscripted for public works projects (Barnett 1979: 32-3). One of the principal duties of the Kwoma adolescent is to assist in clearing new garden sites by climbing trees and lopping off branches (Whiting 1941:70)—a service which younger males are restricted from performing hitherto because it is "man's work" (Whiting 1941: 45).

Where the assumption of clothing and modesty accompanied the transition to middle childhood, outright sexuality comes into play at the end of middle childhood. On Chuuk [maritime foragers/ horticulturalists] pubertal youth are "childish adults" who are preoccupied with "lovers' liaisons... and their attention is seldom deflected long from the planning, discussion, or pursuit of such liaisons" (Gladwin and Sarason 1953: 93-4). Among the Barasana, an Amazonian foraging society:

At initiation, there is a passage from the asexual world of childhood to the sexual world of adults... Young men are given over to personal display... They also paint their faces each day with red paint... and stick sweet-smelling herbs under their G-strings and under the bracelets of black beads they wear on their biceps. The smell of these herbs is said to attract women [Hugh-Jones 1979:110].

Dongria [East Indian horticulturalists] *daweng* (unmarried boys) are expected to "hunt girls" (Hardenberg 2006: 73) and, among the Uduk pastoralists of the Sudan, young men go on "...hazardous courting expeditions [or]... 'weasel-crawling'" (James 1979:136). These nighttime patrols tend to lead, eventually, to a legitimate union and household formation. However, there are cases where the rites of passage that mark adolescence may be followed by further barriers to full adult status. Youth must demonstrate not only the endurance tested in the initiation but responsible behavior (Silberbauer 1970: 236). On Java, "circumcision

is only a boy's first step toward maturity, the period of irresponsibility contin[ues because]... he cannot marry until he can support a wife" (Geertz 1961:120). Even then, adulthood may not be conferred until, "with the birth of the first child [Warao] adolescent ... behavior terminates [and] he has successfully entered the world of adults" (Wilbert 1976: 327).

### **The Disappearance of Middle Childhood**

The themes we've identified and the examples drawn on to illustrate them are taken, almost exclusively, from pre-modern societies. Much has changed but space limitations preclude a through review. Fortunately, one is available (Lancy 2010) which we can quickly summarize. In a word, a contemporary survey reveals the extreme *elasticity* of childhood. In the developed countries, childhood has become dramatically longer. Anxiety about the child's success in school has promoted an attitude that insists on early cognitive stimulation of the infant, notwithstanding the lack of any demonstration of efficacy. Walt Disney Corporation recently sent refunds to *millions* of parents who'd gullibly purchased "Baby Einstein" videos, for example (Lewin 2009). We see a blurring of the distinction between the infant and child stages, brought about, for example, by the use of gestural language ("baby signs") to communicate with preverbal children (Acredolo and Goodwyn, 2002). Schooling effectively begins now in early childhood. Gender differentiation may be less marked in middle childhood due to deliberate restructuring of female roles and expectations, especially sports participation. While middle class and/or religious conservatives strenuously suppress or delay emerging sexuality (Lancy 2008: 169), ever younger girls are choosing to dress, use make-up, and vamp like an adult (Thorne 1993: 148). Then we have "children" remaining at home and continuing as dependents well into their twenties as they finish their education and launch careers. Scholars now label them "emergent adults" (Arnett 2004). It is becoming increasingly difficult to detect any significant cultural demarcation of the period from 6 to 9.

In developing countries, infancy and childhood has, arguably, gotten shorter, e.g., "...in Brazil childhood is a privilege of the rich and practically nonexistent for the poor (Goldstein 1998: 389). The demise of the post-partum taboo leading to shorter inter-birth intervals means early weaning and an end to infancy. Parents respond to mandatory schooling by enrolling the very young, planning to remove them once they're useful (Kramer 2005; Montgomery 2001). Overpopulation and economic stress have created new conditions whereby children are expected to make an economic contribution at an earlier and earlier age (Bass 2004; Kenny 2007; Montgomery 2001). Children employed in the village at least may continue to develop under the aegis of kin while millions of children, globally, are now employed, often in near slavery, away from home (Chirwa and Bourdillon 2000; Marguerat 2000). A parallel group, suffering similar privation, loss of familial support and unspeakable violence are street children (Kovats-Bernat 2006; Márquez 1999). Less numerous, but still a significant body, are the child soldiers who can be found wherever there is simmering conflict (Honawana 2006; Rosen 2005). Where poverty flourishes, middle childhood as a distinct, culturally constructed period, has almost ceased to exist.

### **Discussion**

While pregnancy, birth, weaning, puberty and paternity all provide highly visible scaffolding to support the construction of rites of passage (van Gennep 1908/1960), no such architecture graces middle childhood. It is thus all the more remarkable that so many ethnographic accounts record subtle indicators of a change in the child's trajectory. Prior to middle childhood the child is attended to as necessary for its well-being but adults are rarely reported as playing with, conversing with, fussing over or teaching their offspring. Instead, they may be—at the first opportunity—turned over to the care of less productive or lower ranking caretakers such as siblings, grandparents and wet-nurses. At the onset of middle childhood, expectations change and the child now attracts notice. Chief among these is the expectation that the child, at around 5-6, will exhibit *sense* or the capacity to pay attention, follow directions and take initiative. Aside from the fact that this enhanced mental facility renders the child *useful*—it can be entrusted with the care of livestock and younger relatives—it also carries the expectation of gender awareness. The child now must insure that its behavior conforms to gender stereotypes while properly concealing the physical signs of its sex. In appearance and behavior, there is now a sharp divergence in the lives of girls and boys. The former are particularly constrained by rules of modesty and these are associated with territorial constraints. That is, while boys enjoy increased freedom of movement and access to realms unsupervised by adults, girls are

more tightly bound to the domestic sphere and are either working in tandem with their mothers or serving as her junior surrogate.

Middle childhood is, perhaps, the most intense period of learning in the lives of children. Girls are learning to care for babies, keep the domicile and its contents clean, prepare meals and to provision the family with food, wood and water. Boys, in spite of their apparently carefree existence, may be acquiring crucial environmental knowledge, the essentials of animal husbandry and skill in market transactions. Children of both genders begin the process of learning complex craft production associated with their gender. Most of the chore curriculum essential for survival in the particular society may be acquired during middle childhood. By and large this corpus of knowledge and skill is learned without much direct adult intervention as children are manifestly eager to observe and emulate the behaviors of their seniors. *Failure* on the part of the child to “self-apprentice” may be tolerated within limits. But, once the child enters the stage of middle childhood, it is expected to know right from wrong especially with respect to the management of its own behavior. Furthermore, the bar will get incrementally raised during this period, heightened competence should be accompanied by increased diligence and output—play will no longer be tolerated. Harsh words, denial of food and care and physical punishment are all considered legitimate means to alter the child’s trajectory and force it to conform to these heightened expectations.

In a very few societies, the transition from middle childhood to adulthood is seamless. The child has gradually become sufficiently competent in subsistence practices to provide for itself and a family. Middle childhood ends once family formation begins. However, in the majority of societies there is a gap between the age at which the juvenile is sufficiently competent and emotionally mature to undertake the establishment of an independent household and the production and care of offspring. In effect, puberty arrives too early. Hence, elaborate mechanisms are set in place, including seclusion, dormitory-like residence, fosterage, and lengthy initiation rights (colloquially called “bush schools”) to keep youth in a holding pattern. Because of its unmistakable physical correlates, the onset of puberty reliably signals the end of middle childhood. However, the existence of terms like “child man” in Dusun (Williams 1969: 86) indicates that a residual of childishness is to be expected. Hence, the end of middle childhood may not be the end of childhood.

The last point we would make is that the various markers of the onset of middle childhood we have enumerated all seem tied to a shift in cognitive functioning. There is an evident sensitivity to the expectations and needs of others—critical in child-minding and errand running. The child displays other indicators of “sense,” including lengthened attention span, greater language facility and persistence in completing tasks. It is a willing *student*. There are manifold signs of awareness of appropriate behavior vis-à-vis sex and gender which goes along with increased complexity in peer relations and rule-governed play. On the other hand, the exit from middle childhood, is signaled more by markers of physical maturity—including secondary sexual characteristics, a growth spurt, voice change, increased sexuality and augmented strength and endurance.

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