

Reflections on Janusz Korczak and Today's Children by Elia Johnson

During the last presidential election, one of the phrases that seemed to be thrown around a lot was the idea of the future, more specifically the role of children in that future. Often one hears the phrases, "children are the future," "they are leaders of tomorrow," and more often now, "how will today's children cope with a future, in terms of, economy, foreign policy and environment, which have been so directly influenced by the choices of the previous generation." Though these are valid concerns, and valid statements, they remove children from the present; putting their worth and agency into some far off distant future, instead of recognizing children as valid, important members of today's society.

What struck me so strongly about Janusz Korczak's writing and beliefs, was that he emphasized the present, the importance of communicating and understanding children in their present state. He writes: "children are not the people of tomorrow, but are people of today" (*Loving Every Child*, 19). If we begin to think about children, not as leaders of tomorrow, but as opinionated people of today, we can begin to treat them with more respect, because we understand that they have opinions, goals and ideas.

In the orphanage that Korczak took charge of, children, with the involvement of adults when necessary, ran everything. The children held their own court, where adults as well as children were responsible for their actions. The children created their own newspaper, and had their own stores. In this environment, Korczak showed them that they were valid members of society and he cultivated their ability to behave with responsibility and maturity. This idea is so foreign to today's society, where children are taught that they have very little agency and their opinions and beliefs are not valid compared with adults. Not only are we not paying attention to what children are telling us they need, but also as a society we are extending this age of non-agency well past adolescence.

My junior year of college I volunteered with a program called "America Reads," which is designed to help children from inner cities schools improve their reading, writing and reading comprehension. The program runs from 3-6 everyday after school and the children I worked with were in second grade. All the children were from the surrounding Harlem area and most were struggling with their reading and writing and it was our job to design lesson plans to help them improve those skills. Now these children have been in

school from 8:30 until 3:00pm, they have been sitting and learning for hours under bad lights and eating (from what I saw of the afterschool cafeteria food) non-nutritious food, and yet we were all baffled by the fact that they did not want to sit quietly and do more academic activities. What the children wanted to do was run, to play and to be creative, to interact and enjoy being eight years old. Children tells us through their behavior, or outbursts what they want, what their bodies need and most of the time we do not listen to them, perhaps because we have forgotten what it is like to be a child ourselves. Korczak never forgot what it was like to be a child, or how difficult it is to grow up and how important it is to let children do it in their own way.

“ She grows and grows. Days and nights, asleep or awake, happy or sad, mischievous or contrite, she grows and grows. One day she needs to run, she feels like wrestling, conquering; another time she would rather hide away and dream and give herself over to melancholy. One day she may desire something passionately and the next day feel quite disheartened.

We should have more respect for the mysteries and fluctuations of the hard business of growing up!” (Loving Every Child, 63).

The orphanage Korczak created, taught children that they have “intrinsic value,” and that they could express the same agency, maturity and responsibility as adults. In his orphanage he taught them the skills they would need to either get a job outside of the orphanage or to continue their education at a university. What I think is most important is he taught them that they have the skills and knowledge to be productive members of society and that they had the same skills as the grown-ups around them. The ability to be responsible and held responsibly for their behavior; the ability to write and read critically in order to produce a newspaper, and the ability to discuss and hear their peers views on current events. In this orphanage children were treated as equal and as intelligent as adults. Now compare that with schools and most common child rearing practices of today. First of all most parents, teachers or any adults assume absolute authority, something is bad or wrong because they say so, and little or no explanation is given. Until the age of 18, children have few rights, they have little or no say in the decisions about the outcome of their future. We continue to show children that we do not trust their judgment or think of

them as rational people. I think the biggest lesson we can take from Korczak is that we need to show children that we trust them, that we understand the difficulties of childhood and that we are willing to treat them with respect, honesty and agency.

The last point that is important to me is what Korczak says about raising “easy” children. In the past 10 years the amount of children diagnosed with ADHD and other learning and emotional disorders has skyrocketed. We prescribe medications to children for everything and the age at which we do so has gotten younger and younger. If a child misbehaves frequently or is loud and hyper, we often jump to conclusions that there must be some chemical imbalance, something that is diagnosable. Korczak writes, “The entire present day upbringing is set on having an ‘easy’ child, consistently, step by step, it strives to lull, squash, and destroy all that goes into making of the child’s willpower and freedom, his back-bone and the forcefulness of his demands and aims. ‘Well-mannered, obedient, good-natured and easy’ with no thought given to the fact that inside he will be will-less, and helpless in the affairs of life” (Healers and Heroes, 145). Now this was written some 60 years ago and yet it still rings true. As a society we seem so obsessed with having things be easy, we forget the importance of struggles and difficulties. We are simply drugging our children into oblivion, hoping to make someone’s life easier when really we are sucking the spirit right out of them.

Since Freud we have understood the importance of childhood on psychological development. Almost every theory in psychology points to the staggering importance of our childhood experiences on later life psychological well-being. Many of the issues we face as adults stem from our childhood experiences and most therapy deals with righting those perceptions or coming to some better understanding of what they might mean. If we know how important childhood is in terms of development, is it not time to change the way we treat children? Adulthood does not exist without childhood, we cannot simply skip steps, and therefore we need to start paying attention and changing our views and attitudes towards this extremely critical time of our lives.

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< Elia wrote these reflections after reading Janusz Korczak’s “Wisdom for Parents” and a chapter about Janusz Korczak in the “Healers and Heroes” by Clif Cleaveland, MD. Elisa

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