

Creating Chances, Opening Perspectives: Effective Prevention



"Each child grows up as part of a family - loved, respected and sheltered," this is what the vision of SOS Children's Villages says in its mission statement. For some children, these rights to family ties, affection and respect are realized through an SOS family. In order to also support children's rights outside SOS Children's Villages, we have started a "strategic initiative on preventive work." In future, there will be more preventive activities with the objective of guaranteeing children's rights in their biological family.

What does "preventive work" imply? For the German educationalist, Klaus Wolf, the main task of preventive social work is to "improve the availability of resources" that families need in order to solve their problems. The foundation of preventive work has to be initiated by social structures, and may imply material support as well as the stabilisation of emotional relationships within the families or taking action with respect to education. The central question that arises is: what kind of resources do our clients need?

What resources can be activated among our clients themselves and what can SOS Children's Villages contribute in order to overcome difficulties? In this issue we have collected a few answers that reflect the different conditions of the individual regions where our colleagues have to deal with specific problems.

In the leading article, "The Future of Children: The Great Enigma," the sociologist [Gertrud Lenzer](#) focuses on the social environment of children and the changes taking place.

In "Taking Responsibility for the Children: SOS Children's Villages and the Challenge of a Strategy of Prevention," [Patricia Vargas](#), project coordinator for prevention work in Central America, outlines the position of SOS Children's Villages with regard to the issue of "preventive work".

We have asked other relief organisations about their experience with pre-

vention work. The articles "[Save the Children](#)" and "[Doctors Without Borders](#)" give "An Insight into the Work of Other Organisations."

In the "Alternative Interview," you can read about the possibilities, limitations and hazards the president of SOS Children's Villages, [Helmut Kutin](#), sees in preventive work.

In the collective article, "Preventive Work at SOS Children's Villages: A Survey of Four Projects," [Janie Telling](#) informs us about the SOS Social Centre Waterfalls/Zimbabwe, [Elfriede Seuserich](#) about the SOS Advice and Family Centre Munich/Germany, [Eva Kiecka](#) about the three SOS Social Centres in Venezuela and [Hans Peter Greunz](#) about the youth facility Tabaluga in Altmünster/Austria.

We are looking forward to receiving your feedback on this topic - as always, your suggestions, thoughts, criticism and praise are welcome! (kd)



The Future of Children:

What significance do the major socio-political changes of the last few decades have for the lives of children? How do globalisation, individualization, changes in the idea, image and structure of the family affect children? In light of profoundly changed historical circumstances which also have an impact on the conditions of children, what can be done, in the way of prevention, to contribute to improving their life chances? These were some of the questions posed by FORUM. All these questions are indeed important and significant. To find convincing answers to them, however, represents an extraordinary intellectual and analytical challenge.

Concepts such as "globalisation" and "individualization" have become shorthand metaphors for profound historical transformations which often are barely understood at all. In other words, these metaphors are frequently used as substitutes for genuine historical comprehension and analysis. This weakness is particularly evident when we try to enlist such concepts in our attempts to clarify the present and future life conditions of children both in the developed and developing world.

"Children": A Class of Their Own - Separate from Adults?

Traditionally, it has been very difficult to think of children in isolation from their parents and of the family relations into which they are born. But in the last few decades, and with increasing regularity, the interest in and concern for children appear, as it were, as separate and distinct social realities. Increasingly, academic and scholarly discourse focuses exclusively on "children." We are witnessing the develop-

ment of such new fields as the "History of Childhood," the "Sociology of Children," or "Children's Rights." Social policies are now regularly directed specifically towards children as a distinct social reality - and they range all the way from social welfare to education and to juvenile justice. Increasingly, in the industrialized world in particular, social policies target the education of children and young people as essential for domestic economies and for international economic

competition. Equally, the size and education of each society's generation of children are seen as essential for successfully competitive entry in the labour market in the future, and for their ability to support a steadily growing older generation which has left the labour market. In developed and post-industrialized societies, as a result of increasing divorce rates as well as rising numbers of single parents, children have emerged as a separate social category. In the first

The Great Enigma

world as well as the third world, large numbers of governmental, inter-, intra-governmental and non-governmental, non-for-profit and charitable organizations concentrate their efforts specifically on children and on devising strategies for ameliorating their conditions of poverty, starvation, ill health and lack of necessities for life. Children in difficult circumstances ranging from street children, child soldiers, child trafficking and prostitution to child labour and many other misfortunes which afflict them have become specialized targets of organized social benevolence. By contrast, we are wit-

nessing the rapidly expanding growth of a specifically targeted child market of goods and services. Two years ago, The Economist reported a \$155 billion market in the United States of America alone of commodities sold to and bought for children and juveniles.

What does all of this mean? Are these merely conceptual developments which differentiate children out of the social compact and into a discernible class separate from familial networks and from the adult generations? Or is it possible that there are indeed major shifts in societal realities which have





brought forth the emergence of a "children's class" which in turn is reflected and refracted in scholarly, socio-political, charitable and economic discourse, policies and strategies. Are children indeed more and more set loose from the social bonds of the past and the responsibilities of adults towards them? All indications, in fact, point in the direction that children are emerging as a distinct and separate social class.

Implications for the future
The lines of demarcation between children and adults are being blurred. Increasingly in the industrialized world we speak of the "rise of the 'adultified' child and the 'childified' adult."¹ But as a more general tendency, the traditional familial, social

and generational bonds which supply a network of responsibilities towards children have become frayed and weakened. The reasons for this ominous attenuation are numerous.

Among the poor, both in developing countries and the less-than-prosperous classes in the developed world, parents and families do not have the wherewithal to take adequate care of their children. Child poverty, child illness and general destitution in third world societies, as a rule, are simply an extension of the conditions of the parents and families of these children. The situation is not very different in the societies of the North.

Other reasons for the emergence of a separate social class of children have to do with changes in the family structure itself which have led to higher divorce rates or to changing of less stable partnerships. Increasingly, adults now tend to make decisions in which their own interests have a higher degree of priority than the well-being of their children.

Despite the slogans which often claim from political platforms that "children

are the future," observers have remarked an increasing and widespread social indifference toward children.

The targeting of children as a new market by the advertising and corporate sectors also tends to cut them loose from familial bonds. This marketed children and youth culture with all its accoutrements separates and isolates decisively the generations of the young from older generations. To be sure, there has always been a need among younger generations to distinguish themselves from older ones. The significant difference today, however, is that these distinctions are steered and guided by powerful economic interests whose goal is to enlarge the markets for children and youth with more and more subtle methods and ever greater financial success. These children and youth markets, with their fashions, idols, cultural and other kinds of merchandise are spreading rapidly around the globe.

By the same token, education of children has become itself a newly profitable market. Everywhere, especially in the industrialized world, educational policies aim at maximizing in children the growth of human capital as part of manpower training for their future entry into the labour market. Education is becoming big business. Especially in the U.S., the corporate sector has entered the highly promising education sector.

These are only a few of the more significant changes which have brought about a separate class of children and youth. In their separateness, however, also lies their increased vulnerability and the need for social intervention.

The forces which are expelling children out of intergenerational social networks need to be recognized for what they are and need to be counteracted.

Competing images of children and childhood

Such developments towards a class of children increasingly cut loose from the protective familial and social relations are in no way complete. These developments, however, have not been fully recognized because of simultaneously existing images of children in our societies at large. We are all familiar with images of the "innocent" child in need of protection; of the child endowed with human rights; the "evil" child viewed as child predator; the child as a powerful consumer and market force; the destitute child lacking all necessities for survival and development; and finally the child regarded as the next generation in the labour market who will carry the responsibilities for the younger and older generations. These varying images of children and childhood are also involved in determining action and policies on the part of parents, the adult generations and policy makers. In short, many of these contradictory tendencies with regard to children, their upbringing and their lives often lead to more social dissonances and conflicts.

Preventive Measures?
In addition to sustaining the important aid children receive from many voluntary institutions and organizations, it is also essential to step back and begin to understand the major social, historical and economic forces which increasingly render the lives of children more vulnerable and unprotected. All those who are interested in children and their well-being need to examine the root causes which have increasingly jettisoned children out of the protective familial, intergenerational and social relations necessary for their well-being and development. Unless we try to address these basic realities, our efforts to help children in difficult circumstances will remain in the realm of dealing with symptoms only. Prevention needs to start by analysing and recognizing causes to adequately respond to the impacts of the basic social and economic transformations which continue to affect our children.



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¹ Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994, p.138