

# Sunday Reader

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Section J

## INTERVIEW

### Gertrud Lenzer

Brooklyn College sociologist Gertrud Lenzer believes the academic study of children and their lives has been unwisely limited. Four years ago, she created a novel program that is being copied across the country: a children's studies undergraduate minor for students in law, political science, history, economics, arts and literature. In a telephone interview, Dr. Lenzer talked with Dallas Morning News staff writer Ira J. Hadnot about public policy and academics involving today's children. Here are excerpts:



Q: What does the spate of school shootings tell us about the lives of children?

A: This is a very troubling situation. What we are seeing in the media are individuals. But we need a much wider perspective on the issue. The question is, what is with this whole generation of children that produces these violent reactions?

In finding the answer, we should not simply put more of them in jail. That is not a solution, long-term. Their lives are complicated by feelings that they believe they have no control over — events that affect them more deeply than they directly reveal. And society is not paying attention. Children are trying to tell us things all the time. Some act outwardly. Some turn inward.

These shootings are very disturbing. They tell me that we do not know enough about children and how they see their lives. So much more education is needed than what we are currently relying on. Children do not think or reason like adults. They don't react like adults

They see their circumstances in much more fatalistic terms.

Somehow we adults have lost the ability to instill in them the belief that no matter what happened today, tomorrow will be a better day. It is a major failing when we cannot transmit hope to our children.

Q: Speaking of education, what are you hoping to accomplish through the children's studies program?

A: In a nutshell, the purpose is to bring together knowledge about children and youth from across many disciplines. We were the first academic institution to develop such a program, although the idea has suddenly become quite popular.

There was a child study movement in the late 1850s that moved into the 20th century. But that was heavily oriented toward psychology. By children's studies we Please see LENZER on Back Page.

## Lenzer champions growing field of children's studies

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are trying to stress that we would like to look at children in their totality. Many disciplines do study children and childhood, but they are fragmented. The history of childhood is a growing field of study, but that doesn't mean there is interaction with child psychology or children's literature. These things need to be brought together for the fuller view of children as a class, as a group. . . .

We want to encourage students to combine children's studies with their major field of interest. For instance, one of the law students took children's studies courses and then decided to practice family law. That is the kind of thing we hope will happen more.

What I don't want to happen is for this course of study to become a new form of identity politics. That may have worked for black studies and women's studies. But we should see the study of children as integral, not as something separate from society.

Q: Why does it seem that children lead such stressful lives today?

A: That is a tough question to answer. We all believe that this is what is happening. When you look back at children who were living stressful lives during different historical periods, you realize this is not a new condition. But there is a difference that is noteworthy. The 1991 final report of the National Commission on Children, which was really a bipartisan effort, did address this point: There are many more demands on the lives of children today.

The traditional routines of family life have been challenged by both parents working outside the home and extracurricular activities for children that leave little meaningful time for family life. Many parents are also emotionally absent from their children's lives because they are distracted by their own stresses.

Q: Does childhood differ today from 20 years ago?

A: We can definitely argue that the lives of children have changed with the two-income family. What really started to happen from the 1960s onward is that women with under-school-age children entered the work force. That in and of itself produces tremendous challenges and stresses. So, the answer is yes.

But different does not mean bad. Another way to ask the question is, why does childhood in the United States differ from the experience in other industrialized

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— Gertrud Lenzer, creator of a children's studies program at Brooklyn College

countries? . . . In some European countries, there is extended paid family leave up to two years. In many countries, there is also a national commitment to improving the lives of children and that commitment is reflected in their social policies.

If we studied these nations more and knew a little bit more about what they are doing, perhaps that would apply to making sure each American child has a good formative experience, grows up without wanting for parental involvement or being abused, gets a good education, receives a nutritious diet and has access to health care.

Q: Why do you believe our social policies have failed children?

A: We are re-inventing constantly our concern for children. If we had a historical perspective, we would see that from at least 1910, we have been having these major conferences and commissions on children and youth. They come and go in waves. We are currently in another wave, another children's movement.

If we had historical perspective, we could see that these "new" ideas are not that new. But they keep resurfacing because we haven't solved the problems that are nagging us. When we talk about children, most public officials see crime problems, abuse victims and suffering. We have knowledge about the positive experiences of childhood, the everyday aspects of being a child.

Our policy discussions should not disintegrate into victimology, which is quite a popular focus of study these days. If we knew the kinds of connections that existed, we would not be reinventing things. I believe there have been these total breaks with the past.

From the mid-50s forward, life was viewed from an increasingly scientific perspective and the social and economic thinking that leads to public policy was largely excluded from curriculums and from society. There has been a gradual turnabout, back to social thinking.

Here is something to think about: The

United States has a long policy of great involvement with children and children's rights dating to the 1800s. The Children's Aid Society was founded in 1853, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in 1875, and from 1900 to 1938 there was a strong campaign against child labor. With the dismantling of the welfare state, we may have forgotten the very practices we believed were important to champion just a century ago.

Q: Where is the United States on approval of the U.N. Rights of the Child treaty? Are America and Somalia still the only two countries out of 191 nations that have not ratified it?

A: The treaty was adopted by the U.N. General Assembly in November of 1989. After that, there has been a very fast process of countries ratifying it. I believe the U.S. and Somalia are the only two that haven't as of yet. President Clinton approved the treaty, but it must be ratified by the Senate.

There has been pressure to try to move it forward, and there have been foes who don't want ratification. There are some 54 articles in the treaty, and there are conditions and agreements countries that ratify have to abide by. Additionally, after two years the country has to do a report on the status of their work towards the treaty's goals. That report must be presented to a 10-member U.N. panel.

Q: What is the holdup here, and do you believe it will be ratified?

A: There are a lot of movements and counter-movements. There is also a misconception about the convention by those who oppose it. Members of the Christian Right have said that it diminishes the convention document, time after time it says that the primary responsibility for children is both parents, who have common responsibilities for the development of the child.

The treaty also establishes that children

should have basic rights, such as the right to an education, emotional, cultural and social development; health care, etc. If it were to be implemented in the United States, it would require a tremendous national investment regarding the well-being of children. I don't believe it will be ratified by our Senate in the foreseeable future. I don't believe it interferes with parent's rights, but the arguments in that direction have been heard.

Q: What drew you to this field?

A: There have been various things that have motivated me. One was the 1985 report on children in poverty by the House Ways and Means Committee. What came out was that . . . child poverty was on the rise and that it had increased sharply from 1978 to 1983. This greatly concerned me.

The second is that I did a seminar on children and social responsibility. It was fascinating. The students learned a great deal, and so did I. While we were digging at the other professions, I went to my own and found that we had forgotten about the children. We had stopped visualizing them as part of humankind.

They simply were not in the sociological literature. Of course, they were in education and psychology, but not in political science or economics. That observation became the underpinnings of the children's studies program. I wanted to emphasize plural for a reason. There have been child psychology courses. I wanted to look at children as a group, having their own traits and culture. I also like to combine different disciplines to discover new ways of thinking. The program is a result of that.

Q: We have been discussing learning about children. What can we learn from them?

A: When you watch what children can do, we learn a lot from them. If one really participates in the growing up of a child and watches the process alone, human development is a miracle. We can learn how the emotional, intellectual and other faculties develop.

Children know many things. They have competencies. They have their own culture and live lives that are totally hidden from adults. We can either see them as incomplete adults, which limits our interactions with them, or as developing human beings who bring new things at each stage of development.