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Perspectives on the value
of art and culture



Children and the Arts: A Hidden Culture

Anne Wood on how art helps
young children develop

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Anne Wood is one of the most influential figures in children's television. Born in Spennymoor, County Durham, she grew up in the mining community of Tudhoe Colliery then began a career as a secondary school teacher. She was a leading voice for children's literature before launching a career in broadcasting. In 1984, she formed Ragdoll Productions, known for such television series as Rosie & Jim, Tots TV, Brum, In the Night Garden, Twirlywoos – and Teletubbies. She is the founder of The Ragdoll Foundation (www.ragdollfoundation.org.uk), which aims to provide a space for alternative thinking, voices and practices, to seek new creative solutions and partners, and to collaborate and share knowledge. It is currently leading the Save Kids' Content UK campaign (www.savekidscontent.org.uk), which has the particular objective of safeguarding the production of UK-originated television for children.

As a cultural notion, childhood emerged in western society somewhere around the 1850s and lasted until somewhere around the 1950s when the cult of the teenager first made itself felt in the USA, and spread around the world. Now, in the 21st century, we hear children are 'growing up too fast' or that 'childhood is lost'.

It is not that children are biologically changing. Although many may be taller, more robust and have greater life expectancy than previous generations, essentially children are no different. They have the same need to explore life and navigate it successfully, which has always been central to humanity. But we are living through a period of rapid technological advance, not to say revolution; a time of immense social change. At such times, childhood is redefined.

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Children now have direct access to information about the adult world in ways undreamt of by the great philanthropists and pioneering educators of the past. Does the fear of ‘childhood lost’ come from the feeling that childhood is now constructed by commercial pressures rather than philanthropic social values?

Adults who see a contemporary crisis of childhood are most aware of the commercial dynamics that infiltrate themselves into all aspects of our lives. They fear that such dynamics are taking control. They feel the need to protect children but are powerless to act in the face of economic realities.

Those who successfully communicate with children know that children do live in the same world as the rest of us but they perceive it differently. This was first brought home to me by the children’s author Nina Bawden; but all successful writers for children know this, from Roald Dahl to Jacqueline Wilson, Michael Morpurgo to Julia Donaldson. They know which ‘monsters’ inhabit a child’s subconscious and they know the stories that will confront their fears, make them smile, build their confidence and, as one child put it, ‘make me feel happy inside’. Adults, on the other hand, may tend to project their own anxieties onto children.

As a television producer specialising in work for younger children, I have frequently heard the fear that television ‘mesmerises’ children. What does this mean; does it imply passivity? Does complete absorption in a book or anything else carry the same nuance? Probably not, because for children, this is such a readily acceptable part of their world, adults can sometimes feel excluded.

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Children who are paying close attention and are engaged imaginatively are not passive. They are taking their first steps towards artistic understanding: through experiencing art, they are creating meaning.

Young children want to become involved in the process of painting, acting, playing a musical instrument, singing, dancing, constructing or writing. These activities are central to their growing understanding of themselves – and their understanding of the world that surrounds them. Of course they can be open to commercial manipulation, which is why it is so important that all arts for children, including television and new technological developments, are publicly supported.

When I was a working-class child growing up in a small mining community in the North East of England during the War, opportunities to experience the arts were limited. Then came the Arts Council. When I was 13 or 14, it sent a quartet of singers to perform *Così fan tutte*, under the direction of the composer and broadcaster Antony Hopkins. It was life-changing for me. To this day, I am an opera fan and, thanks to the technological revolution, can see operas from across the world at my local cinema.

I recently bought tickets for my granddaughters to see *I Want my Hat Back*, a National Theatre production for young children based on the successful picture book by Canadian artist Jon Klassen. How marvellous it would have been if that production, or the equally brilliant *The Lorax* from the Old Vic, could have been relayed live to every cinema.

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In today's world, technology can be the friend of children. It puts facts at their fingertips. But there is the question of readiness. Children are developing human beings and understanding grows as experience develops. A wise Dutch teacher, when speaking about sex education, put it like this: 'When a child is very small we do not expect it to be able to carry a heavy suitcase but as they grow older we can add weight until they are ready to carry the whole thing.' So we aim to give children what they are able to accept within the compass of their understanding, emotionally as well as intellectually.

Teletubbies can now be seen as the first programme to represent the condition and concerns of very young children. The international success of the programme showed that these concerns were the same wherever children lived in the world – so children's television is capable of significant cultural achievement.

Janusz Korczak, the Polish doctor and educator who died tragically in Treblinka alongside Jewish children from the Warsaw ghetto, said: 'When I look at a child I feel two things: affection for what he is today and respect for what he might become.'

As children are rehearsing to be grown-ups, imaginative experiences enabled by the arts can help construct consciousness in ways that the rules of regulated learning do not allow. Involvement in the arts can show children that life may not be all about acquiring stuff. It can widen horizons, release tensions, encourage aspirations and offer alternative visions to each individual child.

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It is possible for teaching to be more about asking not ‘how intelligent is this child?’ but ‘how is this child intelligent?’.

It is a sad fact that the epithet ‘children’s’ seems to diminish the artform. At its best, work for children challenges categorisation. Take *War Horse* or *Harry Potter*, for example, or even *Teletubbies*. All of these translated into many different cultures across the world.

This is why The Ragdoll Foundation is dedicated to supporting the creation, appreciation and awareness of imaginative content that reflects the world from a child’s point of view. By facilitating opportunities for artistic expression involving children, we hope to make this culture wider and more visible. We believe in the power of the arts to influence what children might become.



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