



A View from the Middle: Life Through the Eyes of Middle Childhood

by Robin F. Goodman, Ph.D. A critique of research conducted by Sesame Workshop

What the study found

The study revealed information about the different domains of a child's world. The information was obtained by asking questions such as: "which 3 words best describe you?", "do you have any fears or worries?", and instructing them in tasks such as: "cut out a picture or draw someone famous you would like to be for one day" and "explain about a time when you helped someone." The main conclusions were:

- Children are anxious about guns, death, and violence. These themes occurred in almost 2/3 of the children's work (cited by 86% of the 9-11-year-olds and 36% of the 6-9-year-olds). The younger children (6-9-year-olds) expressed more "normal" (expected) fears such as being afraid of natural disasters or animals than the older children.
- Children are concerned that their play spaces will be taken away. This theme was evident in response to questions such "what are your worries about the

future?" More than 2/3 of the 9-11-year-olds took pictures relating to pollution and the environment and 65% were concerned their outdoor space would disappear because of development or neglect.

- Electronic media play different roles in boys' and girls' lives. The "heart of the home" was assigned to the media room by 3/4 of 9-11-year-olds. And older boys chose an electronic item as their "prized possession" while girls were more likely to choose dolls and toys.
- Girls are held sway by popular culture more than are boys. Girls most wanted to be like a pop culture icon from the music or acting world (such as Britney Spears or Christina Aguilera) while boys were more likely to choose a sports figure first and a popular icon second.
- Children yearn for relationships with engaged adults, especially extended family. The children assigned different adults very specific positive roles. Thus parents were chosen as "caretakers" and "heroes", grandparents were chosen as "wise ones" and "magicians", but aunts and uncles were also often identified as significant for these children.

Age and gender differences were also revealed. For example, 6-8-year-olds were more likely to describe themselves according to their physical characteristics whereas the older children used intelligence along with other qualities. This finding is consistent with the younger child's tendency to categorize things according to concrete attributes. Sports increased as are area of competence with increased age for both boys and girls. However, girls used attractiveness to describe themselves more than boys did at all ages.

Sesame Workshop concluded from their findings that children are feeling pressure from "adult sprawl" in four particular areas of their lives: violence, urbanization, media, and pop culture. It is possible that children this age are feeling adult pressures due in part from viewing and experiencing adult content in these areas.

Issues to consider in understanding the results

- **Mastery-and-competence**
Eric Erikson characterized middle childhood as the stage when children are most challenged by the issues of mastery and competence. This time of life coincides with the child's increasing experience in the social arena. Middle childhood is marked by the transition from the world of the family to the world of peers and school. With children's increased exposure to others, they encounter new comparisons and judgements. This combination of factors leads to the development of a critical self, with self-esteem and identity based on a mixture of subjective, personalized opinions and objective opinions received from the external world. Whereas family and experience shape certain values and attitudes, others are influenced by society. From grades to clothes, others' ideas affect children's perceptions of themselves and their areas of competence.
- **Adult-influence: sprawl**
In many ways these children demonstrate that middle childhood is an age of enlightenment. Cognitively, children this age are more capable of understanding the complex adult world, no longer able to retreat with blinders to an age of innocence. Confronted with adult concerns, these enlightened children may be overwhelmed, and may not yet have developed effective coping tools. Although some results are consistent with developmental expectations, more distressing are other results

suggesting that (1) sex role stereotyping in academic and social areas is being reinforced by society and that (2) attitudes and anxieties are being shaped by the adult world.

- **Adult-influence:protective-factors**

Children in these middle years yearn for, and when given the chance, capitalize on age appropriate resources: they seek comfort from adults. When allowed to choose anyone in their world for specific roles, "real" people rather than celebrities prove to be crucial in a child's world. Parents and other adults in a child's life are most likely underestimating their influence. In fact, parent-family connectedness and perceived school connectedness repeatedly have been found protective against various health risk behaviors such as emotional distress, suicidal thoughts, violence, use of cigarettes, alcohol and marijuana, and age of first sexual encounter for children.

- **Media**

Media are ubiquitous in life today. Consider that in 1950 only about 9% of American homes had TV sets, by 1955 the figure increased to 65% and by 1985 it reached 98%. Add to this the number of homes with a CD player (90%), with a personal computer or video-game equipment (89%) and homes with children having a VCR (97%) and media has a clear presence in family life. Interestingly, these results uphold gender differences within this media sphere, with boys prizing electronics more than do girls. Known differences between boys and girls are also reflected in their use of media. From an early age, girls tend to use more emotionally toned language and have relationships based on closeness whereas boys' relationships are based more on sameness and activity. Thus it is not surprising that girls use the internet for e-mail forms of communication and boys for games.

- **Fears**

Certain identified fears are expected, such as those of bugs and the dark. But the preponderance of fears about violence raises questions about both the cause and effect of these fears. Put in a developmental context, by age 9 or 10, children have a mature concept of death, understand its cause and significance, and can imagine the reality of their own or another's death. Thus the study findings regarding fear are reflective of an age-appropriate sensitivity to fears of death. However, the expressed concern about guns and violence are likely out of proportion to the reality for many children. Distinguishing between realistic and perceived fear is difficult. Whether realistic or not, adults must still grapple with the stress caused by a child's fears. The effect of the media on perception of danger can not be dismissed. Whereas the homicide rate decreased 33% from 1990 to 1998, network coverage increased almost 500%. Since 1975 the scientific community has become confident in the link between violence in the media and aggression yet the news is reporting a weak link.

- **Children's-work:play**

Children's concern for the environment was represented by concern about the viability of play spaces - parks, black top for basketball games. This speaks to two different issues, one, a child's need for play and two, the long-range sensitivity to improving the world. Engaging in imaginative and creative play has always been important for development. Play allows children the opportunity to be self-reliant, to work through problems, and re-charge. Concern about an at-risk environment suggests children are attentive to accumulated ecological hazards faced by society. Stepped-up efforts to educate children about everything from the greenhouse effect to recycling seem to be

having a positive impact on children and their worry about the future. Concern about the loss of play spaces could also symbolize the potential loss of avenues of recreation - perhaps representing the fear of diminished playtime as children get older and the limited leisure time used by adults.

What are the implications of the study?

The research results support growing concern that children's development is being hindered by exposure to violent and adult content. If this is the case, what can be done to help them cope with the downward drift of adult issues and objectionable media messages? Data from the children themselves offers clues for helping them deal with the normal challenges of middle childhood and the stress posed by outside influences.

How adults can help children during middle childhood

The Sesame Workshop researchers developed suggestions relevant for parents, educators, and others involved in children's lives.

- **Have children develop relationships with adults with whom they can share their fear**
Evidence from different areas of research points to the importance of adults - parents, teachers, extended family members, coaches, and mentors - in a child's life, regardless of the age of the child. Children and teens repeatedly say they want more, not less, input from their parents especially when it comes to tough issues such as sex, drugs, and violence. The Sesame Workshop results confirm that adults are respected and their guidance is valued.
- **Help children develop the tools to work through their fears**
Children's ability to articulate their fears has a positive aspect. Although it is distressing to hear children talk about fears of violence and guns, expressing worries rather than ignoring them is a helpful coping strategy. Actively expressing fears can lead to problem-solving and mastery, key skills necessary to develop at this age. The benefit of expression is enhanced when children feel comfortable voicing their concerns, whatever the topic, to a trusted adult.
- **Provide-good-role-models**
Although impressionable at this age, children in middle childhood are influenced by pop culture, media, and sports personalities. But the real "heroes" found in their everyday world of family and school have more significance to their overall development. Society may provide images of success but values and behavior are still taught and imposed by the adults who have individual relationships with children. Because adults in children's immediate world are so important, they must guard against stereotyping people or reinforcing negative and inappropriate role models. This is especially important with respect to limiting gender role definitions. Exposing children to different people, encouraging individuality, teaching acceptance of difference in themselves and others is crucial to future success and positive relationships.
- **Give-children-realistic-expectations**
Middle childhood as the age of mastery and competence necessitates that children learn to assess and accept their strengths and weaknesses. Adults can help children develop a realistic internal critic, rather than a harsh one, by helping them withstand their failings. This requires that adults expect children to do their best rather than be

perfect in everything they do. Setting goals as well as handling setbacks are useful skills to develop and reinforce.

- **Help children develop media literacy to enhance their ability to cope with "adult sprawl"**

Choosing a media-centered site as the heart of the home has various implications. Most likely it is one of the neutral spots in the home and the place where extended leisure activities happen -- television viewing, music listening, and game playing. But it raises concern about the effects of children's increasing passivity and the growing health risks, such as obesity, of such behavior. Adults must be model media users themselves in order to promote better behavior from their children. In addition, adults have the opportunity to use the media for entertainment, as a vehicle to promote discussion about tough topics, and to connect to their children. Engaging children in discussions about media and encouraging them to be critical media consumers helps them withstand and cope with what they see and hear. Differentiating between real threat and broadcast events and supporting the development of independent opinions rather than following manufactured messages helps children become more confident.