Getting Noticed: Middle Childhood in Cross-Cultural Perspective

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Abstract

Although rarely named, the majority of societies in the ethnographic record demarcate a period between early childhood and adolescence. Prominent signs of demarcation are: for the first time, pronounced gender separation in fact and in role definition; increased freedom of movement, for boys particularly; and heightened expectations for socially responsible behavior. But, above all, middle childhood is about coming out of the shadows of community life and assuming a distinct, lifetime character. Naming and other rites of passage sometimes acknowledge this transition, but it is, reliably, marked by the assumption or assignment of specific chores or duties. The transition from middle childhood is more often marked by a rite of passage than the entrance into this period. Much more clearly we see an acknowledgement of adult levels of competence—as a herdsman or hunter or as gardener or infant-caretaker. While the individual is no longer considered a child, full adult status may, nevertheless, be withheld until marriage, or the birth and survival of a child. Lastly, we will consider the impact on middle childhood of new arrangements precipitated by economic restructuring, overpopulation, the HIV/AIDS epidemic and civil war.
Invisible Babies

- Birth Huts
- Seclusion
- Cradleboard
- Swaddling
- Manta pouch
- Silence=well-being

Navajo infant
[Among the Punan Bah] “…the baby is…hardly considered human [the] child is like an unripe fruit, it must ripen, only then will you know the taste of it.” (Nicolaisen 1988)
On Vanatinai Island “it is not customary to name a child until a few weeks after birth, and the ritual presentation by the mother’s family of [gifts]…to the father’s kin…does not take place for about six months…these delays assure that naming and…exchanges are only performed for children who are expected to survive” (Lepowsky 1985: 79).

“Wari’…babies of both sexes are called arawet, which translates literally as ‘still being made’…newborns are waji, connoting immaturity (Green, unripe fruit is oro-waji). An infant receives a personal name about the time when [mother and child] begin to emerge from seclusion and interact with the wider community” (Conklin and Morgan 1996: 673)

“The [Javanese] child, before he is five or six, is said to be durung djawa, which literally means ‘not yet Javanese.’ It implies a person who is not yet civilized, not yet able to control emotions in an adult manner, not yet able to speak with the proper respectful circumlocutions appropriate to different occasions.” (Geertz 1961: 105).
Lack of Interaction

Gusii mothers are extremely responsive to their infant’s distress signals but quite unresponsive to their non-distress vocalizations (i.e., babbling). [Further that] mothers rarely looked at or spoke to their infants and toddlers, even when they were holding and breast-feeding them…They rarely praised their infants or asked them questions but tended to issue commands and threats in communicating with them” (LeVine 2004: 154, 156).
"With the arrival of the next sibling, dénanola (infancy) is over. Now, play begins and membership in a social group of peers is taken to be critical to nyinandirangho, the forgetting of the breast to which the toddler has had free access for nearly two years or more. A [Mandinka] mother [says] ‘Now she must turn to play ’ (Whittemore 1989: 92)

“As they begin to become more and more children rather than babies, and begin to be a bit irritating and willful because they are ‘thinking for themselves,’ [Tahitians] begin to find children less amusing. Instead of being the center of the household stage, the child…becomes annoying” (Levy 1973: 454).

“Another important way in which Tongan children show respect is by remaining on the periphery of adult activities” (Morton 1996: 90).

“In a Mayan community…children are taught to avoid challenging an adult with a display of greater knowledge by telling them something.” (Rogoff 1990: 60)

“Little children in Haouch El Harimi crowd in the doorways and peek in through windows of a social gathering until they are chased off.” (Williams 1968: 37)

“[Hawaiian] children are expected to function in a separate sphere that only overlaps that of adults at the peripheries” (Gallimore, Boggs, & Jordan 1965: 119).
Exercising Autonomy

Belize-playing in a tree

Laos-climber

Liberia-roaming toddlers
Getting “Sense”

“On Ifaluk Island, before the age of two, children have no thoughts or feelings; they just eat and play. Since they lack sense or morals, it is useless to get angry or to try and control their behavior. Children do not acquire adult-like intelligence—repiy—until they are about five or six years old” (Le 2000: 218-219).

“An Ayoreo (South American) forager child is not considered a complete human being [until attaining]… aiuketaotiguei, which means ‘understanding’ or ‘personality’” (Bugos and McCarthy 1984: 510)

“For Fulani (West African) pastoralists: "It is when children begin to develop haYYillo (social sense) that adults in turn change their expectations and behavior." (Riesman 1992: 130).

“For Sisala (West African) farmers, children from six years should display wijima which includes the ability to differentiate right and wrong and to do chores (Grindal 1972: 28).

“Kipsigis children aren’t expected to demonstrate ng’omnotet (intelligence) until the age of about 6” (Harkness & Super 1985: 223).

“The Punan Bah see little point in any systematic teaching of small children, due to the belief that only from the age of about five when their souls stay put, will children have the ability to reason” (Nicoliasen 1988: 205).
Discipline

“The [Javanese] child before he is five or six is…said to be *durung ngerti*, “does not yet understand,” and therefore…there is no point in…punishing him for incomprehensible faults” (Geertz 1961: 105).

“Among the Ngoni of Nyasaland…once children were recognized as having passed the young child stage…[and have] their second teeth, they themselves were held accountable for their behavior and punished more severely” (Read 1960: 89)

“The number of punishments that a Kwoma receives from other persons increases markedly in childhood…beaten and scolded by his parents and other persons…they order him to do household chores” (Whiting 1941: 56).

“Taira children pilfer from gardens, have temper tantrums, and attack each other physically, but very little enforcement takes place. ‘They are only children; we can’t expect them to know any better’ say adults” (Maretzki 963: 481).
Modesty

Ghana

Laos

Rwanda

Yemen
Getting Noticed

“Lepcha childhood is...a time of obscurity, of being unimportant; children are not taken much notice of and their tastes are little consulted. [However,] from about the age of six children should be able to assist and accompany their elders in all forms of work” (Gorer 1967: 305).

“On Fiji a child who is somewhat older (five to seven) is likely to show a marked and exaggerated shift into respect when... required to approach and address an adult” (Toren 2001: 166).

“In the view the Ijaw a pre-five-year old is on the border between the worlds of the dead (duwoiama) and the living” (Leis 1972: 48).

“During the first five or six years, Maya children of both sexes are allowed to play as they will throughout the settlement...later, under the direction of their mothers, children take charge of younger brothers or sisters...boys begin to gather firewood and to acquire experience in the use of the machete” (Villa Rojas 1945: 71).
Games with Rules

Laos-Volleyball

Gabon-Football
Play to Work Transition

“A Yanomamö boy at age five “...plays with a small bow and a reed-like arrow that his father or brother has made for him...[at] eight years of age he will own an authentic bow and arrow, a smaller version of his father’s” (Peters 1998: 90).

“Touareg boys who will eventually learn to herd camel, first care for a young goat that they treat like a playmate” (Spittler 1998: 343).

“A young Conambo girl ‘...plays with clay, making coils, pinch pots, and miniature animals while her mother builds coils into vessels’” (Bowser & Patton 2008: 110).

“At around eight to ten years old [Dioula boys destined to be weavers] start building play looms on the ground and making very narrow bands with threads saved or given to them” (Tanon 1994: 34).
Play to Work Transition

Malawi-Shelling peas

Ghana-sib-care
“Often the very first chore assigned to children is to send them on errands. Kpelle informants extoll the virtues of child messengers...[they] were always welcome in other people’s homes and aroused no suspicions. A well-behaved, polite child earns the attention of potential foster parents and praise for its family’s socialization efforts. Delivering messages and presents (and bringing back gossip!) segues easily into marketing. The ‘errand’ curriculum incorporates many ‘grades’ from carrying messages (at age 5) to marketing produce, hard bargaining and making change for customers—by age 11” (Lancy 2008: 238).
Accepting Responsibility

Yemen-fish market

Peru-tending sibs and goose
Gender Differentiation

Shibam, Yemen-hide & seek and a card game
Gender Differentiation

- “A Giriama child roughly 2 through 3 years in age is kahoho kuhuma madzi…this term…is not gender specific…A girl, from about 8 years until approximately puberty, is muhoho wa kubunda, a child who pounds maize; a boy of this age is a muhoho murisa, a child who herds” (Wenger 1989: 98-99).
- “Up to about the age of seven years, among the Fore, the activities of both boys and girls were much the same” (Sorenson 1976: 191).
- “Until roughly 7, a young Kerala boy’s place is in the women’s domain, and he will therefore lend his mother a helping hand…But thereafter…custom demands that he should no longer engage in feminine activities” (Neiuwenhuys 1994: 132)
- “After weaning, the next major transition is when the boy moves to a special bachelor’s house” (Ottenberg 1989: 49).
- “When Fulbe boys are old enough to herd, around age six to nine, they no longer sleep with their mother but next to the corral…At this age boys also no longer eat with their mother and sisters but with the me” (Moritz ND 17,18).
- “[In an HRAF survey] girls five to seven years old were observed to spend on the average half of their time doing chores; boys five to seven were observed to spend on average 15 percent of their time on chores” (Ember 1973: 426).
Gender Differentiation

Making a Shyrdak

Morocco-Q’uranic School

Kyrgyzstan
Gender Differentiation

Kyrgyzstan-riding the range

Morocco-market stall
School attendance tracks these varying views on children's readiness for various kinds of assignment. Parents may send toddlers to school because they are of no use at home. Or, they may keep 6-7 year olds at home because they don’t have sense yet. And they’ll pull 8 year olds out of school, especially girls, because they’re now mature enough to be put to work.
Exit from Middle Childhood

Malawi—initiates

Laos—Bridal Fair
Contemporary Scene: Prolonged Childhood
Contemporary Scene: Prolonged Childhood
Contemporary Scene: Shortened Childhood

Pakistan-gun factory

Yemen-checkpoint

Kashmir-Street kids

India
Tentative Conclusion

From an emic or folk perspective the transition from middle childhood involving primarily new work responsibilities and more rigid segregation of the sexes is predicated on physical maturity. On the other hand, entrance into middle childhood is governed by cognitive maturity.
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