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Essay based on W.A. Corsaro's Book: The Sociology of Childhood

Do children have right for freedom? -
Social Problems of Children's and Children as a Social Problem

Foreword

This essay is based on W. A. Corsaro's book and more specifically on part four (pages 190-252). When I red the book I found history and culture of childhood very interesting, but even more interested I was about Professor Corsaro's Bogeyman syndrome and his analyze of child protecting culture that is got more and more room in western countries (Europe and USA). I found it also very sad and very true. For because of protecting children and their families many true problems are unnoticed. This is my first essay ever in English, so hopely I make my points clear.

Over-protection of Children and the Bogeyman syndrome

Professor Corsaro shows in his foreword's for chapter 9, that fear has begun one of the most important parts of rising a child. Adults are afraid of children's safety, they worry threats children can face everyday life like madmen on the street, car crashes, media, drugs, neighbors who wish to harm their children. Modern media shows ongoing dramatic news, sadly true, that frightens parents. Of course adults wish the best for their beloved children, but like Professor Corsaro points out, it's not only good for children, when they are locked out of surrounding world. Only because adults feels themselves unease while they cannot entirely control children's life.

When few children got poisoned candy or drug needle in their basket during Halloween in USA, the fear of Halloween sadism spread over whole country. In fact here in Finland has been talked about safety of children who wish to collect candy week before Eastern dressed as witches. Media has significant role of spreading the information about threats and it have great power of rhetoric. When special groups of adults, even reliable NGO's, who say they only want best for children, join the crusade against these cultural phenomenons and also use their rhetoric to prove their mission, it's hard to tell how and why they are wrong. So Halloween in USA and "Palmusunnuntai" in Finland has fallen victims to the Bogeyman syndrome. It's maybe hard to think those nice and positive things about these happenings that are – or at least have been - part of our culture, if you need to be worried and protect your child against the treat Palmusunnuntai brings with it.

The problem, I believe, is not in protection of children. Is it forgetting children and only focusing to bring out the possible threats and possible dangers. Media do have an important role in the bogeyman syndrome. Professor Corsaro describes three points about media's roles:

1) Many danger that surrounds children seems to be beyond control of caring adults and children need to face them alone, because parents are working outside of home and can spend lest time with their children.
2) These dangers are dramatized and sensationalized by the press and media, even the parents could protect their children of facing them
3) These dangers are no more problems of only poor or low-income families. Everybody needs to prepare themselves to face them in ever-changing social environment – the Bogeyman syndrome.

In low-income societies, the one Finland was too before and right after the Second World War, there was no time being worried about threats that we see media in these days. Children faced dangers in they everyday life and many died by accidents on farm, diseases or other physical illness. When reading about history of childhood (in previous chapters), I believe every child has been loved and the death of child has always been grief for their families. Somehow the death as part of life has been accepted before. Nowadays, when medicine can help and save most children and laws has made for protecting the children; adults have more time to be worried and afraid of exceptional threats. And when media makes money via those threats filling every information channel, there is no other way than be worried.

Because adults are tired of being worried they started blaming the victim. They ask, why can't children be more careful, why they can't grow up faster, why they want to argue about rules and try to do things that can harm them (like climbing on trees or playing dangerous games in the playground). Children are treated as an out-group, group that has no right of say their opinion or decide their own matters. Children become social problem, because they don't' want to stay silent in the safety box. In Finland there is plenty of talk about how expensive schooling is. Like it was children's fault that they need teachers and school buildings and some of them even need special education. It's a pity that somehow children have understood they are a problem to society. In many school rules, which children have made by themselves are articles starting: "Children are not allowed..." or "Children must not...". I would be excited if found only single article starting "Children can enjoy..." or "Children are allowed to..."

True problems of children

I share an opinion with Professor Corsaro that when gossiping about unusual and exceptional dangers, people do forgot the true social problems of children. They maybe aren't so dramatic and surprising, so their value in media is lesser, but they do exist and their victims need help. I have picked up two true problems that Professor Corsaro discusses that are common here in Finland too.

Changing family structures:

Being a working mother is not supposed to be a problem if a quality in non-parental child care and early childhood education is high and fair to all children. Unfortunately that is not so even all western countries. Finnish daycare system is said to be good and equal to all children, but researchers have found quality problem from Finnish kindergartens. In other countries daycare systems vary and in some countries there is no such system, so children spent their day alone (or with siblings) home or streets. Even in Finland some parents use media as a babysitter and children spent their time alone with TV and internet while parents are outside the house or working at home. Media can be cheap and attractive nanny, but there can be also problems with it.

 If child's mother needs to go back to work when the child is still very small, there can be problems with the trust and safety the child felts towards the mother. Professor Corsaro points out the effect of maternity leave in different countries. In Finland we have pretty good maternity leave system, but it is not so in other counties even in EU. There has been conversation about the costs of maternity leave and I share the opinion it's not right that mother's employer paid all the costs. There is also been some public gossiping about the length of maternity leave because mother can be job-protected leave up to 3 years. It's hard to say when child is ready for non-parental childcare and it's quite sure that all children are not ready at same age. It also important to discuss the group-size in public kindergarten's because infants and toddlers need smaller groups than older children.

Even after she has found a good daycare place for her child the mother can have long days and stressing job and the sensitivity and responsiveness towards child is decline. Maybe mother should have change to have shorter days at work when their children are still very small. For child is important to have an adult truly present at home and also at kindergarten, therefore families do need more time to spent together as a family and children has right to take part, participate their life in family.

Of course the father too has an important role in family and it has become more common that fathers stays home to caring child. I don't think it be any different to child whoever parent is the main responsible as long as the child gets his/hers safe and intimate attachment relation as an infant.

The number of single-parent-families, especially single-mother-families, has stayed quite same here in Finland. During last decade about 20% of families with children have been single-parent-families (source: Tilastokeskus), but still the image about "family" contains mother, father and 2-3 children. Divorce is the main reason for family break ups and Professor Corsaro discuss about it in several chapters of the book. As a part of family children are part of divorce too and it has consequences for them. Professor Corsaro present a research where researchers have found two types of disorders that can be results of divorce: externalizing and internalizing disorders. First ones are disorders children act out, like aggression, lying or disobedience. It's easier to for adults to respond that kind of behavior even the responds can be negative to child. Internalizing disorders like depression or withdrawal are harder to notice and it's not so easy to react on those. Child could be left alone when she/he should have help and support. Small children also blame themselves for parents divorce and feel guilty about it. Upset parents are keen in their own problem and don't have time to talk with children. Parents can be in high level of conflict with each other, which scares and worries children.

In Finland divorcing families can have help in many different areas of everyday life. Sometimes I feel that children have still been forgotten in the divorce process. In kindergartens and schools teachers and nurses don't "have time" for conversations with child and if child behaving badly (having those disorders I mentioned before) he/she got punishment. In Finnish culture there is not enough room for ill feelings especially when they are mental. Child can get plaster if he cuts his finger, but who would bandage wounds in little heart? For child going for psychologist is not the best solution. Better it would be, if child could have safe and known adult other than own parents (like own teacher, godmother or kind neighbor) to talk with.

Poverty:
Professor Corsaro talks about poverty in developing countries, where the problem is bigger and poor people are really poor. I'm going to stay in Finland and I found few issues about poverty in families with children that are being visible in recent past in media. I will shortly introduce them.

Some Western countries family/maternity leave is still unpaid or, like in Finland, it money you get for maternity leave is lower than your normal salary. That means child's mother needs to go back to work very soon, even the child still need breastfeed, safety and shelter. In Finland public daycare in kindergartens is high qualified, but still the groups are too large for small child under 1 year old. Public media argues whether or not the society should pay all the cost from having and raising a child, but in western countries you need to be rich enough to can afford a child. Having a child is

expensive business and media itself is magnifying the problem by insisting that happy child should have all that money can give. It can't be for children's best if parents work 10 hours per day only to get enough money for the family life. Maybe it's telling something our values. The quality of childhood is not always bad in families where parents need to work hard and long days, but the parent's stress; worries about future and rush of weekdays might endanger children to insecure feelings and sorrows. According to Tilastokeskus poverty of families with children has increase during past few years in Finland too. With poverty there can be other treats and dangers that child have to face: Low-income family may need to live in poorer sections of cities, where children meet different dangers in streets. Daycare and later school is maybe not as qualified as better parts of city, because school building and learning equipments are old and best teachers don't want to come low-qualified schools and kindergarten. Poverty brings learning problems, when divorced families child have disorder (as I suggest chapter above) or parent's have problems with alcohol and there can be violence in home. Teachers spend their time by solving those problem and quality of teaching lowers. So poverty brings a cycle of problems even if child has place to life (shelter) and enough to eat (food).

Violence and victimization of the child

Professor Corsaro asserts that fears of children's safety and adult lack of control of everyday life are reasons of victimization of the child. Modern world is full of accidents and threats that are shown by media in our living rooms everyday. Because children are so dependable about adults and they are smaller they end easily victims of victimization. Some parents end up using violence towards their children for one reason or another. One reason can be according to Professor Corsaro that parents feel failing of protecting their children from threats surrounding them, so they end up using violence by themselves. The social approval also accepts (light)violence as part of parenting a child. The Convention of the Rights of Child forbids all violence (physical, psychic...), but still for some reason it is allowed to discipline a child by shouting, slapping, pulling hair or penalty isolation. When using these types of violation it often contains forms of victimization. Adult's blaming children behaving so badly that they need to be punished by violence.

There are also other forms of violence, so bad they can leave physical injuries or even cause death. Some form of violence – like abuse of children - cause mental injuries and scars never fully heal. These forms of violence are strongly disagreed by society. Violence inside of family especially child abuse, is a victim of Bogeyman syndrome. The fear of it lingers in air and everyone knows it exist, but because it exist only inside of closed doors, adults feel they can't protect children from it. Like I explain in first chapters of my essay, the true problem, children who are victims of violence, is

forgoten. Media, Political rhetoric like NGO's and even parent talks about protecting some children, outside the real world, while the issue should be protecting OUR children here and now, everyday in our everyday life.

Protecting a child, offering a safe, happy childhood needs lot of will, not only talking, from adults. It's not always easy being an adult, and even in Finland parents are left alone to raise a child. And because media often shows parenthood in a sweet pink atmosphere without any problems and ill feelings, many parents feels themselves failed when they cannot offer child a perfect childhood.