

Chapter 27 – On Seeing Children as “Cute”

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On Seeing Children as “Cute”

by John Holt

We should try to get out of the habit of seeing little children as cute. By this I mean that we should try to be more aware of what it is in children to which we respond and to tell which responses are authentic, respectful, and life-enhancing, and which are condescending or sentimental. Our response to a child is authentic when we are responding to qualities in the child that are not only real but valuable human qualities we would be glad to find in someone of any age. It is condescending when we respond to qualities that enable us to feel superior to the child. It is sentimental when we respond to qualities that do not exist in the child but only in some vision or theory that we have about children.

In responding to children as cute, we are responding to many qualities that rightly, as if by healthy instinct, appeal to us. Children tend to be, among other things, healthy, energetic, quick, vital, vivacious, enthusiastic, resourceful, intelligent, intense, passionate, hopeful, trustful, and forgiving – they get very angry but do not, like us, bear grudges for long. Above all, they have a great capacity for delight, joy, and sorrow. But we should not think of these qualities or virtues as “childish,” the exclusive property of children. They are *human* qualities. We are wise to value them in people of all ages. When we think of these qualities as childish, belonging only to children, we invalidate them, make them seem as things we should “out-grow” as we grow older. Thus we excuse ourselves for carelessly losing what we should have done our best to keep. Worse yet, we teach the children this lesson; most of the bright and successful ten-year-olds I have known, though they still kept the curiosity of their younger years, had learned to be ashamed of it and hide it. Only “little kids” went around all the time asking silly questions. To be grown-up was to be cool, impassive, unconcerned, untouched, invulnerable. Perhaps women are taught to feel this way less than men; perhaps custom gives them a somewhat greater license to be childlike, which they should take care not to lose.

But though we may respond authentically to many qualities of children, we too often respond either condescendingly or sentimentally to many others – condescendingly to their littleness, weakness, clumsiness, ignorance, inexperience, incompetence, helplessness, dependency, immoderation, and lack of any sense of time or proportion; and sentimentally to made-up notions about their happiness, carefreeness, innocence, purity, nonsexuality, goodness, spirituality, and wisdom. These notions are mostly nonsense. Children are not

particularly happy or carefree; they have as many worries and fears as many adults, often the same ones. What makes them seem happy is their energy and curiosity, their involvement with life; they do not waste much time in brooding. Children are the farthest thing in the world from spiritual. They are not abstract, but concrete. They are animals and sensualists; to them, what *feels* good *is* good. They are self-absorbed and selfish. They have very little ability to put themselves in another person's shoes, to imagine how he feels. This often makes them inconsiderate and sometimes cruel, but whether they are kind or cruel, generous or greedy, they are always so on impulse rather than by plan or principle. They are barbarians, primitives, about whom we are also often sentimental. Some of the things (which are not school subjects and can't be "taught") that children don't know, but only learn in time and from living, are things they will be better for knowing. Growing up and growing older are not always or only or necessarily a decline and a defeat. Some of the understanding and wisdom that can come with time is real – which is why children are attracted by the natural authority of any adults who do respond authentically and respectfully to them.

One afternoon I was with several hundred people in an auditorium of a junior college when we heard outside the building the passionate wail of a small child. Almost everyone smiled, chuckled, or laughed. Perhaps there was something legitimately comic in the fact that one child should, without even trying, be able to interrupt the supposedly important thoughts and words of all these adults. But beyond this was something else, the belief that the feelings, pains, and passions of children were not real, not to be taken seriously. If we had heard outside the building the voice of an adult crying in pain, anger, or sorrow, we would not have smiled or laughed but would have been frozen in wonder and terror. Most of the time, when it is not an unwanted distraction, or a nuisance, the crying of children strikes us as funny. We think, there they go again, isn't it something the way children cry, they cry about almost anything. But there is nothing funny about children's crying. Until he has learned from adults to exploit his childishness and cuteness, a small child does not cry for trivial reasons but out of need, fear, or pain.

Once, coming into an airport, I saw just ahead of me a girl of about seven or eight. Hurrying up the carpeted ramp, she tripped and fell down. She did not hurt herself but quickly picked herself up and walked on. But looking around on everyone's face I saw indulgent smiles, expressions of "isn't that cute?" They would not have thought it funny or cute if an adult had fallen down but would have worried about his pain and embarrassment.

The trouble with sentimentality, and the reason why it always leads to callousness and cruelty, is that it is abstract and unreal. We look at the lives and concerns and troubles of children as we might look at actors on a stage, a comedy as long as it does not become a nuisance. And so, since their feelings and their pain are neither serious nor real, any pain we may cause them is not real either. In any conflict of interest with us, they must give

way; only our needs are real. Thus when an adult wants for his own pleasure to hug and kiss a child for whom his embrace is unpleasant or terrifying, we easily say that the child's unreal feelings don't count, it is only the adult's real needs that count. People who treat children like living dolls when they are feeling good may treat them like unliving dolls when they are feeling bad. "Little angels" quickly become "little devils."

Even in those happy families in which the children are not jealous of each other, not competing for a scarce supply of attention and approval, but are more or less good friends, they don't think of each other as cute and are not sentimental about children littler than they are. Bigger children in happy families may be very tender and careful toward the little ones. But such older children do not tell themselves and would not believe stories about the purity and goodness of the smaller child. They know very well that the young child is littler, clumsier, more ignorant, more in need of help, and much of the time more unreasonable and troublesome. Because children do not think of each other as cute, they often seem to be harder on each other than we think we would be. They are blunt and unsparing. But on the whole this frankness, which accepts the other as a complete person, even if one not always or altogether admired, is less harmful to the children than the way many adults deal with them.

Much of what we respond to in children as cute is not strength or virtue, real or imagined, but weakness, a quality which gives us power over them or helps us to feel superior. Thus we think they are cute partly because they are little. But what is cute about being little? Children understand this very well. They are not at all sentimental about their own littleness. They would rather be big than little, and they want to get big as soon as they can.

How would we feel about children, react to them, deal with them, if they reached their full size in the first two or three years of their lives? We would not be able to go on using them as love objects or slaves or property. We would have no interest in keeping them helpless, dependent, babyish. Since they were grown-up physically, we would want them to grow up in other ways. On their part, they would want to become free, active, independent, and responsible as fast as they could, and since they were full-sized and could not be used any longer as living dolls or super-pets we would do all we could do to help them do so.

Or suppose that people varied in size as much as dogs, with normal adults anywhere from one foot to seven feet tall. We would not then think of the littleness of children as something that was cute. It would simply be a condition, like being bald or hairy, fat or thin. That someone was little would not be a signal for us to experience certain feelings or make important judgments about his character or the kinds of relationships we might have with him.

Another quality of children that makes us think they are cute, makes us smile or get misty-

eyed, is their “innocence.” What do we mean by this? In part we mean only that they are ignorant and inexperienced. But ignorance is not a blessing, it is a misfortune. Children are no more sentimental about their ignorance than they are about their size. They want to escape their ignorance, to know what’s going on, and we should be glad to help them escape it if they ask us and if we can. But by the innocence of children we mean something more – their hopefulness, trustfulness, confidence, their feeling that the world is open to them, that life has many possibilities, that what they don’t know they can find out, what they can’t do they can learn to do. These are qualities valuable in everyone. When we call them “innocence” and ascribe them only to children, as if they were too dumb to know any better, we are only trying to excuse our own hopelessness and despair.

Today in the Boston Public Garden I watched, as I often do, some infants who were just learning to walk. I used to think their clumsiness, their uncertain balance and wandering course, were cute. Now I tried to watch in a different spirit. For there is nothing cute about clumsiness, any more than littleness. Any adult who found it as hard to walk as a small child, and who did it so badly, would be called severely handicapped. We certainly would not smile, chuckle, and laugh at his efforts – and congratulate ourselves for doing so. Watching the children, I thought of this. And I reminded myself, as I often do when I see a very small child intent and absorbed in what he is doing and I am tempted to think of him as cute, “That child isn’t trying to be cute; he doesn’t see himself as cute; and he doesn’t want to be seen as cute. He is as serious about what he is doing now as any human being can be, and he wants to be taken seriously.”

But there is something very appealing and exciting about watching children just learning to walk. They do it so badly, it is so clearly difficult, and in the child’s terms may even be dangerous. We know it won’t hurt him to fall down, but he can’t be sure of that and in any case doesn’t like it. Most adults, even many older children, would instantly stop trying to do anything that they did as badly as a new walker does his walking. But the infant keeps on. He is so determined, he is working so hard, and he is so excited; his learning to walk is not just an effort and struggle but a joyous adventure. As I watch this adventure, no less a miracle because we all did it, I try to respond to the child’s determination, courage, and pleasure, not his littleness, feebleness, and incompetence. To whatever voice in me says, “Oh, wouldn’t it be nice to pick up that dear little child and give him a big hug and kiss,” I reply, “No, no, no, that child doesn’t want to be picked up, hugged, and kissed, he wants to walk. He doesn’t know or care whether I like it or not, he is not walking for the approval or happiness of me or even for his parents beside him, but for himself. It is his show. Don’t try to turn him into an actor in your show. Leave him alone to get on with his work.”

We often think children are most cute when they are most intent and serious about what they are doing. In our minds we say to the child, “You think that what you are doing is important; we know it’s not; like everything else in your life that you take seriously, it is

trivial.” We smile tenderly at the child carefully patting his mud pie. We feel that mud pie is not serious and all the work he is putting into it is a waste (though we may tell him in a honey-dearie voice that it is a beautiful mud pie). But he doesn’t know that; in his ignorance he is just as serious as if he were doing something important. How satisfying for us to feel we know better.

We tend to think that children are most cute when they are openly displaying their ignorance and incompetence. We value their dependency and helplessness. They are help objects as well as love objects. Children acting really competently and intelligently do not usually strike us as cute. They are as likely to puzzle and threaten us. We don’t like to see a child acting in a way that makes it impossible for us to look down on him or to suppose that he depends on our help. This is of course very true in school. The child whose teachers know that he knows things they don’t know may be in trouble. We know, too, how much schools and first-grade teachers hate to have children come to school already knowing how to read. How then will the school teach him? When we see a young child doing anything very well, we are likely to think there is something wrong with him. He is too precocious, he is peculiar, he is going to have troubles someday, he is “acting like an adult,” he has “lost his childhood.” Many people reacted so to the extraordinarily capable child pupils of the Japanese violin teacher Suzuki. And I remember the sociologist Omar K. Moore telling me that when he first showed that many three-year-olds, given certain kinds of typewriters and equipment to use and experiment with, could very quickly teach themselves to read (which they weren’t supposed to have the visual acuity, coordination, or mental ability to do), he received a flood of indignant and angry letters accusing him of mistreating the children.

Children do not like being incompetent any more than they like being ignorant. They want to learn how to do, and do well, the things they see being done by the bigger people around them.

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Next – Section Five – Chapter 28 – “10 Ways We Misunderstand Children” by Jan Hunt