

How Government Programs Ruined Childhood

An op-ed in Sunday's *New York Times* entitled "We Have Ruined Childhood" offers disheartening data about childhood depression and anxiety, closely linked to school attendance, as well as the disturbing trend away from childhood free play and toward increasing schooling, standardization, and control.

"STEM, standardized testing and active-shooter drills have largely replaced recess, leisurely lunches, art and music," says the writer Kim Brooks, who is the author of the book, *Small Animals: Parenthood in the Age of Fear*.

While many of Brooks's insights are spot-on, the undertones of her article make clear that she is focused on the collective "it takes a village" narrative of childrearing. Indeed, her book praises "the forty-one industrialized nations that offer parents paid maternity leave—to say nothing of subsidized childcare, quality early childhood education, or a host of other family supports" (p. 50).

The assertion is that most parents are desperate and alone and they must rely on government programs to help raise their children. She writes in her article:

The work of raising children, once seen as socially necessary labor benefiting the common good, is an isolated endeavor for all but the most well-off parents. Parents are entirely on their own when it comes to their offspring's well-being...No longer able to rely on communal structures for child care or allow children time alone, parents who need to work are forced to warehouse their youngsters for long stretches of time.

This narrative is backwards. It was the expansion of government programs, particularly in education, that weakened the family, led many parents to abdicate responsibility for their children's upbringing, and caused them to increasingly rely on government institutions to do the job for them. These institutions, in turn, grew more powerful and more bloated, undermining the family and breeding contempt for parental authority. What may seem like a charitable endeavor to help families ends up crippling parents and emboldening the state. As President Ronald Reagan reminded us: "The nine most terrifying words in the English language are: I'm from the Government, and I'm here to help."

Brooks knows better than many of us the terror associated with granting the state more

power: Her book details her harrowing ordeal of being accused of child neglect and ordered to complete 100 hours of community service for leaving her child alone in a car for five minutes while she ran a quick errand. The village shouldn't be in charge of raising children; parents should.

So how did we get here? While the seeds of mounting state power and institutionalization were sown in the 19th century and spread throughout the 20th, it was Democratic President Lyndon B. Johnson who dramatically accelerated these efforts in 1964-1965 with his "Great Society" legislation. One of the most consequential effects of Johnson's Great Society proposal was getting Congress to pass the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) which gave unprecedented control of education to the federal government, mainly through the funding of a variety of government programs. In fact, expanding the government's role in education was a stated goal of the Great Society plan. As Johnson himself stated: "And with your courage and with your compassion and your desire, we will build a Great Society. It is a society where no child will go unfed, and no youngster will go unschooled." (Heaven forbid a child be unschooled!)

The result of Johnson's plan was the establishment and enlargement of programs such as Head Start, which was initiated in 1965 to provide government preschool and nutrition programs to low-income children. Despite billions of dollars spent on the federal Head Start program over the last half-century (the annual Head Start budget is over \$10 billion in 2019), the results have been disappointing. As researchers at the Brookings Institute noted, the most in-depth studies of Head Start show that any initial gains disappeared by the end of kindergarten. More troubling, by third grade the children in the Head Start program were found to be more aggressive and have more emotional problems than children of similar backgrounds who did not attend Head Start.

Not only are these outcomes concerning for the children involved, they also indicate how government programs can strain family relationships. Notably, it was the parents of the Head Start children who said their children were more aggressive than non-Head Start children of similar backgrounds, suggesting that parental bonds could be compromised at the same time that government early learning programs could foster maladaptive social behaviors. When parents, not government, are in charge of determining a child's early learning environment they may rely on informal, self-chosen networks of family and friends, thus building social capital in their communities, or they may choose from among various private preschool options where they retain control over how their child learns. If parents are not satisfied, they can leave. When government increasingly controls early childhood programs, reliance on family members, friends, and other private options fades. Grandma is no longer needed, and she becomes less of an influence in a child's life and learning and less of a support system for her daughter or son.

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Johnson's Great Society plan had other consequences that served to weaken family roles and strengthen government. The Child Nutrition Act of 1966 greatly expanded the National School Lunch Program, allocating additional funding and adding school breakfasts. While no one wants a child to go hungry, relying on government programs to feed children can cause poor health outcomes, strip parents of their essential responsibilities, weaken informal family and community support systems, and lead parents to hand over even more control of childrearing to the government.

Perhaps the most far-reaching impact on education of Johnson's Great Society was the lasting legacy of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act that paved the way for ongoing and amplified federal involvement in education. It was the ESEA that was reauthorized in 2001 as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) that led to the standardization of schooling through Common Core curriculum frameworks, as well as regular testing. No Child Left Behind morphed into the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, again a reauthorization of Johnson's ESEA, that tried to shift some curriculum standard-setting to states but retained regular testing requirements under federal law.

In her weekend op-ed, Brooks laments the increasing role of regimented schooling in children's lives. She writes:

School days are longer and more regimented. Kindergarten, which used to be focused on play, is now an academic training ground for the first grade. Young children are assigned homework even though numerous studies have found it harmful.

She is absolutely correct, and the culprit is increasing government control over American education through the ongoing reauthorization and expansion of federal education programs. Longer, more regimented, more standardized, more test-driven schooling is a direct consequence of the government's education policy.

The inevitable result of these expanded government powers is less control over education by parents. As parents lose this control, they cede more authority to government bureaucracies, which in turn grow more powerful and more bloated while parents get weaker and more vulnerable.

I agree that childhood is being ruined, as children play less, stress more, and find themselves in institutional learning environments for most of their childhood and adolescence. I also agree that the problem is getting worse. The solution, however, is to weaken government and strengthen families, not vice versa. Put families back in charge of a child's education. Grant parents the respect and responsibility they rightfully deserve.

Remember that the government's role is to *secure* our natural rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—not to determine what those pursuits are.

Childhood is being ruined and parents are the only ones who can save it.