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**Childhood in Crisis: Myth, Reality or Cause for Concern?  
Perspectives from Children, Parents and the News Media**

**by**

**Jane Cox**

**Canterbury Christ Church University**

**Thesis submitted to the University of Kent at Canterbury  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**2005**



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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the notion of 'childhood in crisis' in the United Kingdom. My background reading revealed that this notion centred on multiple expressions of concern about the condition of contemporary childhood. Such concerns were based on an *adult* perspective of what childhood should be like and thus what constitutes a 'good' childhood. The firm commitment to the inclusion of children's views in this study derives from an emerging, passionate, interest in children's rights, particularly their participatory rights, whilst studying for my Early Childhood Studies degree in 1996-99.

This study recognizes that childhood is affected by social context. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory is utilized to provide a framework for examining the construction of childhood in different social contexts in order to consider the question at the heart of this study: Is childhood in crisis? A number of (predominantly) qualitative data collection methods were used for this study. Findings are based on: a) the perspectives of children (aged 9-11 years) and their parents in two contrasting socio-economic areas of southeast England (the microsystem); b) the perspectives of the news media through an analysis of national and local news items (the exosystem); and c) literature review of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Children Act 1989 (the macrosystem).

The thesis concludes that the notion of 'childhood in crisis' is a myth as the emphasis on the singular childhood is problematic. My findings from the children and parents revealed that multiple realities existed with regard to 'childhood' and 'crisis', thus making a notion of 'childhoods in crises' more appropriate. Findings from the news media suggested a 'crisis of representation'. A number of possible recommendations are offered for consideration in striving to achieve the 'good' childhood in the United Kingdom.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

During my time as a PhD student there have been many people who have provided me with support in a variety of ways and I would therefore like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the support that I have received from them.

I would firstly like to thank my research supervisor, Professor Tricia David, for her support and belief in me throughout my research. In addition, her care and consideration for me, as a student and as an individual, has been greatly valued. I would like to thank Professor Tony Booth, who has made some valued comments about my work. I have appreciated the support given to me by Early Childhood Studies colleagues at Canterbury Christ Church University. In particular I would like to thank Estelle Martin and Dr Guy Roberts-Holmes for their guidance, friendship, support and encouragement. Further thanks to Guy for reading through and commenting on my work. I am also indebted to the Early Childhood Studies undergraduates at Christ Church, particularly those on the research courses, as my involvement with them has played an important part in helping to clarify and develop my thinking. I am grateful for the funding I received for this research through the Templeman Studentship awarded to me by Canterbury Christ Church University College.

The people with whom I have had the most contact throughout my time as a PhD student have been my immediate family. I am therefore extremely grateful for the support and encouragement provided by my two sons, Neil and David, and also my husband, Martin. They have ridden the PhD rollercoaster with me, experiencing the highs as well as the lows, the triumphs as well as the struggles. I know that they, like myself, often wondered whether *the* thesis would ever be finished! Thanks to other family members for their interest, care and concern, especially my Mum. I would also like to thank my next-door neighbours, Sheila and Charles, not only for the numerous cups of coffee but also for their friendship and support throughout.

This research would not have been possible without my participants. I am therefore extremely grateful for the time given to me so generously by the children, parents and teachers involved in this study. The time I spent with the children was, quite simply, one of the most enriching experiences of my life, and their faces will be etched in my memory for many years to come! It is to these children, as well as to my research supervisor, Professor Tricia David, that I would now like to dedicate this thesis.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCING THE THESIS

My interest in the study of childhood can perhaps be traced back to a conversation I had with my paternal grandmother in 1976. At the time I was just seventeen years of age and had acquired an interest in history. I probed my grandmother for information about her childhood, but was surprised to find that she could remember very little. I decided to jot down some of my own childhood memories onto a piece of paper, with the intention of writing them up more fully in the near future. That writing did not happen. Although I subsequently moved house twice I kept the piece of paper, for it seemed to serve as an important link with my past.

The birth of my sons, in 1988 and 1990, gave me a keen personal interest in issues relating to children. As a result of my involvement with the speech and language therapy service in connection with my younger son, I decided to forge plans for a career as a speech and language therapist working with children. In 1996 I therefore applied to Canterbury Christ Church University College (CCCUC) to undertake a first degree in Social Science and Early Childhood Studies and was subsequently accepted. As an Early Childhood Studies student I was encouraged to reflect on my own childhood in order to examine contemporary childhood. Through these reflections, often in groups with other students, I quickly came to realise that childhood is an individual experience and, therefore, there are many childhoods. These reflections also served to highlight the very subjective nature of childhood and so it is important to remember that *'our own remembered childhood and perceptions of what childhood experience does and should incorporate cannot be disentangled from those that we study'* (Fletcher and Hussey, 1999: 2). I therefore learnt that critical reflexivity and intersubjectivity are important requirements in the study of childhood. I was strongly influenced by the holistic philosophy of the Early Childhood Studies course and through this became aware that studying childhood required a multi-disciplinary approach in order to make sense of the diverse factors impacting on children's lives. My growing respect for children and childhood led to a passionate interest in children's rights, particularly their participatory rights.

My own emerging interest in the study of childhood needs to be viewed alongside the rapid growth of interest, since the early 1990s, in degree courses in the United Kingdom (UK)

that are dedicated exclusively to the study of children. At CCCUC (CCCU from September 2005) student numbers on the joint honours degree programme have continued to grow and new courses have also emerged, such as the Foundation Degree in Early Years and, in 2004, the single honours degree course in Early Childhood Studies. These exciting developments bear testimony to what we (adults) can learn about young children and their lives.

Whilst my Early Childhood Studies degree was a significant factor in my desire to continue to learn about children, it is important to trace the more specific underlying influences for my decision to change my planned career path as a speech therapist and to instead apply for a PhD studentship.

Reflecting on all the reading undertaken for my first degree, I was particularly influenced by the work of Scraton (1997a), which introduced me to the notion of ‘childhood in crisis’. A number of ‘crisis’ situations – for example, juvenile crime, the family, education and mental health – are examined in Scraton’s edited text. However, whilst Scraton (1997b) draws the conclusion that the ‘crisis’ is not one of childhood, but of adultism (the perceived superiority of adult knowledge), this is perhaps not surprising given his comments in the acknowledgements, which state that the book represents

*‘a critical review and analysis of the contemporary mainstream debate which has sought to exclude and marginalize children and young people, their views, experiences and aspirations’* (Scraton 1997a: xvi).

That children’s voices had been excluded from debate about ‘crisis’ situations in their lives seemed, to me, to be a very significant omission. Indeed, children’s voices have often been absent in past debates about childhood, for the study of childhood has usually been undertaken from an adult perspective<sup>1</sup>. My growing respect for children and childhood left me with a feeling of injustice about this situation. After all, as Shamgar-Handelman (1994: 249) states, *‘To whom does childhood belong?’* I felt uneasy that Scraton and his colleagues, knowing at the outset that children’s voices had been excluded and

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<sup>1</sup> I recognize that in recent years there has been a shift towards including children’s views in research. See, for example, the Economic and Social Research Council’s programme, ‘Children 5-16: Growing into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century’.



marginalized, did not seek to redress the balance at some point in the text. I have come to the conclusion that debates about childhood that do not include a child's perspective should be questioned for their ethical credibility. Therefore, any discussion about 'childhood in crisis' should, I consider, include a child's viewpoint. Adults' assumption that they are best placed to pass comment on the experience of childhood is an assumption that, I feel, needs to be challenged. Scraton's text instilled my commitment to social justice (see Griffiths, 1998) and a desire to redress the balance.

Scraton's (1997a) text also introduced me to the academic debate surrounding the abduction and murder of two-year-old James Bulger in 1993 by two ten-year-old boys. Indeed, Scraton (1997a) sees the event as the catalyst in sparking the 'crisis' in childhood for which, Davis and Bourhill (1997) argue, there is no comparative analysis of adulthood. What was particularly troublesome about the Bulger case was the intense media coverage, which Franklin (1996) assessed as marking a watershed in public perceptions of childhood innocence. Jenks (1996a: 120) supports this view, arguing that the Bulger case may well have '*depotentiated the ideological role which 'childhood' has traditionally played in public perceptions of children*'. Children were considered to be out of control and the press extended the 'evil' character of the two boys to embrace all children and childhood in general (Franklin and Petley, 1996). As such, Jenks (1996a) concluded that it was not just two boys on trial for murder but the whole of childhood. The Bulger case became a metaphor for children's 'lost innocence' and the triumph of 'evil' over 'good' (Scraton, 1997b).

The extent to which numerous writers, within both academia and journalism, have used the killing of James Bulger as a means for understanding childhood troubled me deeply. Where, I wondered, was the wisdom in using a rare incident to analyse contemporary childhood? My initial reaction was that it was time to move on, but the killing of James, which has undoubtedly been a tragic event of major significance, means that I am unable to leave it behind. The Bulger case told me something about the nature and values of the British press. Further, through my reading of tabloid and broadsheet newspapers I had become increasingly concerned about the ways in which children were portrayed. What seemed particularly noticeable was a strong visual element, and hardly a week appeared to pass by without readers being exposed to pictures and/or stories of dead, dying, injured, malnourished or missing children. I began to wonder how news media representations of

children were being internalized by children and parents and, consequently, what effect this might have on the experience of childhood. Further, I wondered what role the news media might play in generating any perceived notion of 'childhood in crisis'. Indeed, in the *Express*, Swift and Gallagher (1998) referred to the 'death of childhood'; in the *Sunday Times*, Millar *et al.* (1998) questioned whether the 1990s would witness childhood's end; and in the *Daily Mail*, Waterhouse (1999) considered that children in the UK were growing up without knowing what childhood is. Curiosity led me to question: what is happening here?

The influences that I have outlined above played a central role in shaping my small-scale research project – 'Valuing children and childhood: perspectives from children, parents and the press' – in the final year of my Early Childhood Studies degree. The study included a questionnaire, distributed to 116 parents (response rate 52%) of children in Years 3 and 4 (aged 7-9 years) at a junior school in southeast England. One particular finding from the questionnaire left me wanting to find out more: in reply to the statement 'Childhood is in a bad state – I am concerned for the future of childhood', 60% of the parents either 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed'. Such a high recording left me feeling curious as to the nature and extent of parents' concerns about children and childhood.

The opportunity to explore my emerging interests and concerns arose when I was awarded a PhD studentship at CCCUC in 2000. In this thesis I intend to explore the notion of 'childhood in crisis' in order to consider whether it is myth, reality, or cause for concern. Thus the research question at the heart of this localized study is: Is childhood in crisis? In order to answer this question I consider that I need to explore how childhood is constructed from multiple viewpoints and why it is constructed in the way that it is. As a *starting point* for this thesis I *tentatively* define 'childhood' as '*the state of being a child; the time of being a child*' and 'crisis' as '*a crucial or decisive moment*' (Chambers Concise Dictionary, 1991). My study is strongly influenced, but not dictated, by the relatively new paradigm for thinking about children within the discipline of sociology; this views childhood as a socially constructed phenomenon, which varies according to time and place (see James and Prout, 1990). The socially constructed child cannot, therefore, be isolated from its specific, local context (James *et al.*, 1998). From a social constructionist perspective, children are viewed as competent reporters of their childhood experience and worthy of study in their own right. This study thus makes a firm commitment to the



inclusion of children's views. In doing so, the aim is to discover how children themselves construct childhood and whether, from their perspective, 'childhood' is in 'crisis'. However, utilizing Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory I intend to examine the constructions of childhood in three different social contexts of the system:

- at the micro level through an examination of the perspectives of groups of children and parents at two junior schools in southeast England;
- at the exo level through an analysis of national and local news media samples;
- at the macro level through *literature review* of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989) and the Children Act 1989<sup>2</sup>.

This examination will enable me to consider the extent to which the constructions of childhood in the various levels are congruent or divergent and also the ways in which the different levels interact with each other.

The study adopts a qualitative (interpretivist) approach to research since the aim is to discover and make sense of the constructions of childhood held by children, parents and the news media. With regard to the specific research strategy to be employed for this study, my initial thoughts centred on case study and ethnography. My reservation about the use of an ethnographic approach, which is discussed in Chapter Four, led me to adopt a case study approach. This provides the opportunity to use a range of methods for my investigation. However, as the study progressed I began to collect ethnographic data in my fieldwork with the children. My news media analysis is also underpinned by an ethnographic approach. Thus, whilst case study is the main research strategy, this study can also be seen to make a contribution towards 'an ethnographic approach' or of providing 'a partial ethnographic account' (Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford, 2001: 193).

Although my exploration of the notion of 'childhood in crisis' focuses on children up to the age of twelve years, the children participating in the study are aged 9-11 years. It is not my intention for this study to explore the same issues as Scraton's (1997a) text, as a number of these issues apply to limited numbers of children in limited circumstances. Instead, my intention is to consider issues that might apply to children generally. As such,

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<sup>2</sup> Although a new Children Act came into effect in 2004 my focus is on literature relating to the Children Act 1989, as this was the Act in force at the time of my fieldwork.

the study is therefore also influenced by the ideas of other writers, who appear to speak of ‘childhood in crisis’ in different ways – for example, ‘the hurried child’ (Elkind, 1981); ‘the disappearance of childhood’ (Postman, 1982); and ‘children without childhood’ (Winn, 1983). These writers – as well as more recent authors, such as Hymowitz (1999) and Furedi (2001) – can be seen to be expressing concerns about the condition of contemporary childhood. The case that I intend to explore in my fieldwork is the condition of contemporary childhood within two school communities in southeast England.

Mayall (2002: 25) comments that *‘Our adult views on children and childhood will be influenced by our own experience of childhood’*. The very notion of ‘childhood in crisis’ challenges my own experience of childhood. Indeed, this appears to be a further motivating factor for this study and is one that I perhaps did not recognize fully at the outset. During the course of my research, however, I have spent much time thinking and writing about my own childhood. At long last I was able to return to the piece of paper mentioned in the opening paragraph of this chapter and fill in the missing gaps in the ‘stories’ of my childhood. This process of reflexivity proved to be valuable for helping me to recognize the beliefs, values and assumptions about childhood that I brought with me to this study. These were shaped by a childhood that was White British, ‘middle class’ (I believed) and lived out in a south London suburb at a time when outdoor freedom appeared to be unproblematic. I was the youngest of five children, with both parents present. I was a ‘tomboy’ – my friends were mostly boys and I loved nothing more than to play football with the boys at school or at the local park. I would describe my childhood as a time in which I felt happy, loved (unconditionally), secure, and as a time in which dependency on my parents felt safe and comforting. My parents showed faith in me and made sacrifices in order for me to have a ‘better’ life. My childhood was also, however, marked by a feeling of powerlessness and an awareness of parental authority. Relationships with family members and friends were, on reflection, very important to me. My paternal grandmother was a particularly positive influence in my childhood years and beyond. Nana (as she was known to her large family) was ‘working class’ and was widowed in her early 60s. She lived in council accommodation and, in material terms, was relatively poor. However, Nana was so rich in other ways – she was the hub of the family and her selflessness and generosity shone through. What little money Nana had was rarely spent on herself. Nana’s strong family values live on in me. I do not wish to give the impression that I consider my

childhood to have been the 'ideal' childhood, but simply that it was *my* childhood and these experiences cannot, therefore, be denied.

Graue and Walsh's (1998: 211) comment that writing is '*strategically undertaken to tell a particular story to a particular audience*' invites me to consider *how* to tell my story and *who* my audience is. Janesick (1998) states that the qualitative researcher needs to find the most effective way to tell the story. I find Alastuutari's (1995, cited in Silverman, 2000) suggestion of the 'mystery story' an enticing one. Within this thesis I therefore seek to gradually immerse the reader in the story whilst I search for clues to solve the 'mystery'. The task is likely to be easier if the subject matter has instant appeal. Here, I consider that I am aided by the predominantly sociological approach of this thesis for, as Brewer (2000: 13) argues, '*Sociology is unique among academic disciplines ... in having a subject matter of interest to most ordinary people*'. As Brewer further points out, lay members of society spend time discussing issues at the centre of sociology, such as the family, community, education, social class and the state, amongst others. Children, as members of society, are also likely to be a topic for discussion, especially given the comment by Cahan *et al.* (1993: 192) about '*the ubiquitous presence of children in our everyday worlds*'. Childhood also has '*universal importance as part of every human being's past*' (Konner, 1991: 406). I am hopeful that these facts will help to make this thesis intrinsically interesting for many people and therefore consider that the audience for this thesis is potentially very wide.

However, *how* a thesis is written will also, to some extent, determine the audience. The way in which this thesis is written is intended to make it as inclusive as possible. The diverse factors impacting on children's lives add complexity to this study of childhood and I have therefore tried, in my writing, to make the subject matter as accessible as possible. As such, I consider that this thesis has the potential to be read, and understood, by a wide range of people. I can therefore be seen to have listened to Silverman's (2000: 212) concern that '*for some researchers, the hardest thing to grasp is that writing should always be tailored for as big an audience as possible*'. However, whilst this study makes a firm commitment to listening to, and hearing, children's views, I acknowledge that this thesis is unlikely to be read by children themselves.

This chapter has revealed to the reader some of the values, beliefs, experiences, assumptions, concerns and possible biases that I bring with me to this study – I address these throughout in order to minimize such bias.

The remainder of the thesis is divided into seven further chapters:

*Chapter Two* explores the way in which childhood is defined by examining it from a range of theoretical perspectives. The chapter has two key aims: a) to gain an understanding of what childhood is – this seems an important prerequisite for exploring the notion of ‘childhood in crisis’; and b) to identify the conceptual framework for this study. The chapter includes literature review of the UNCRC and the Children Act 1989.

*Chapter Three* explores the academic literature, to set the scene for my study of contemporary childhood in southeast England. The aims of the chapter are: a) to examine the relevant issues that contribute to the general notion of ‘childhood in crisis’; and b) to look for clues that will help to guide the fieldwork.

*Chapter Four* presents my stance as a researcher and also the methods and methodology for the study. The chapter seeks to provide the reader with sufficient information to follow and understand my research choices and decisions, their relevance to this particular piece of research.

*Chapter Five* reveals the findings from one of the social contexts (page 5 refers) that are to be explored empirically in using Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory as a framework for this study. The chapter examines the constructions of childhood at the micro level through the perspectives of children. Further, the chapter considers whether, from the children’s perspective, ‘childhood’ is in ‘crisis’.

*Chapter Six* provides a further focus on findings in the micro level, this time examining the constructions of childhood through the perspectives of parents. The chapter also considers whether, from the parents’ perspective, ‘childhood’ is in ‘crisis’.

*Chapter Seven* moves on to a different social context by examining the constructions of childhood at the exo level through a documentary analysis of national and local news

media. Again, the chapter considers, this time from a news media perspective, whether 'childhood' is in 'crisis'.

*Chapter Eight* pulls together the findings from the study – at the micro level (children and parents), exo level (news media) and macro level (literature review of the UNCRC and the Children Act 1989) – in order to consider whether for my case study – the condition of contemporary childhood within two school communities in southeast England – the notion of 'childhood in crisis' is myth, reality or cause for concern. Possible recommendations arising from the study are presented. The chapter also evaluates the research process and makes recommendations as to possibilities for future research that would help to develop the study.

**CHAPTER TWO**  
**TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF CHILDHOOD**

**INTRODUCTION**

In this chapter I intend to explore the way in which childhood is defined. The purpose of the chapter is twofold. Firstly, through my exploration I aim to gain an understanding of what childhood is. This is necessary, for if I am to explore the notion of ‘childhood in crisis’ an understanding of childhood seems an important prerequisite. Secondly, through this exploration I aim to identify the conceptual framework to be employed for this study.

The structure of this chapter has been influenced by the holistic philosophy of my Early Childhood Studies degree (page 1 refers). Through this I became aware that the study of childhood requires a multi-disciplinary approach in order to understand the diverse factors impacting on children’s lives. Such an approach appears to find support from Frønes (1994: 146-7), who states that:

*‘Childhood can be analysed from a number of different perspectives, and each perspective will lead to different interpretations ... A full description of childhood needs to be based on a series of perspectives that represent different ways of interpreting the phenomenon’.*

The disciplines of education, politics, history, developmental psychology, sociology and others, all give rise to a range of theoretical perspectives that will help to illuminate the ways in which childhood can be envisioned. The working definition of childhood, as held by members of UK society, also merits consideration. In adopting a multi-disciplinary approach the chapter thus seeks to provide a holistic framework within which the whole child is valued. The inclusion of children’s views was considered to be an ethical necessity for this study (pages 2-3 refer). It is through a consideration of the operational value of a range of perspectives as a means for defining childhood that the conceptual framework for this study is exposed. The process of considering the operational value of various perspectives appears to find support from Matthews (1994: 26), who argues that:

*'Theoretical models have the virtue of suggesting connections we might not have made without them. But as long as we have alternative models, each useful in its own way but none clearly and obviously superior to all the rest, we should be on the lookout for what a given model may encourage us to overlook, or misunderstand, as well as for what that model may help us understand better'.*

## **DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY**

Within developmental psychology the discipline of biology has made a major contribution towards understanding the process of growth and development in children. Darwin's theories in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which highlighted the role of biological processes in human development, have been influential in promoting a view of the 'biological child' (see Morss, 1990). Further, Bogin (1998) argues that *homo sapiens* is the only living species to have a childhood stage of biological development. Developmental psychology, which dominated the study of childhood for much of the twentieth century, views childhood through an evolutionary model (Prout and James, 1997): the child maturing into an adult represents a progression from simplicity to complexity of thought and from irrational to rational behaviour. The predetermined goal for this model is adulthood; childhood is thus conceived as the 'not-yet-ness' of adulthood, the absence of adult qualities (Archard, 1993). Adulthood is thus viewed as the desired end state and on reaching adulthood, development is generally considered as being complete. Within developmental psychology the work of Jean Piaget (see, for example, 1929, 1932, 1952, 1963) has had a particularly powerful and lasting influence on the way in which childhood has been conceptualized. Piaget argues that there are a number of ordered and predetermined stages in child development and all children progress through these stages, at certain ages, on the way towards logical competence – adulthood. Although the theories of Piaget and others – such as John Watson, Sigmund Freud, Lev Vygotsky, Burrhus Skinner and John Bowlby – have offered great insights into childhood, Morss (1990) highlights the fact that the central assumption within developmental psychology is that change is seen as being fundamentally progressive and unfolding through maturation.

Whilst the discipline of developmental psychology undoubtedly has an important contribution to make towards knowledge and understanding about childhood, there are



significant limitations in its operational value for defining childhood. The emphasis on the individual implies that children are the same wherever they are (Mayall, 1994). For Woodhead (1999: 4) this standardized view *'insufficiently represents the experience of children in families, schools and other settings'*. Social and political forces, economic circumstances and cultural influences are thus undermined, leading Mayall (1994: 118) to conclude that such a view *'blinds us to the personhood of children'*. Theories of child development are culture-specific, largely offering a Euro-American perspective, and thus have limitations for thinking about childhood worldwide (Woodhead, 1999). Further, Qvortrup (1994) argues that such a framework reduces children to the status of 'human becomings', as opposed to the status of 'human beings' that adulthood offers. Since children are valued for their *future* potential, the past and present of childhood are undermined. Children are viewed as half-empty containers (Oldman, 1994) and as passive learners. This serves to highlight their incompetences and what they lack, rather than valuing their strengths, what they do know and can do. Such a position heightens children's dependency on adults and this, Englebert (1994) argues, leads to a childhood characterized by protection and exclusion. Developmental psychology's commitment to the isolable child has thus, on occasions, led to *'exaggerations and significant omissions'* (Kessen, 1991: 34). All these views are supported further by Burman (1996), whose overall assessment of the field of developmental psychology is that it is to be criticized for its narrowness and for the universality implicit in its definition of childhood. However, for the purpose of my study, a major limitation of developmental psychology for defining childhood lies in its adultist approach (see Oakley, 1994), for it relies on the perceived superiority of adult knowledge. We therefore learn about adult perspectives of childhood and not those of children.

### **WORKING DEFINITION**

According to Calvert (1998: 67), *'Members of any society carry within themselves a working definition of childhood, its nature, limitations and duration'*. This working definition does not originate from a specific discipline and within the UK is represented by the modern Western vision of childhood into which a number of disciplines feed. This vision is summed up by Goldson (1997: 1), who states that:



*'The dominant and prevailing representation of childhood conceptualizes an idealized world of innocence and joy; a period of fantastic freedom, imagination and seamless opportunity'.*

Archard (1993) observes that Christianity has made a significant contribution to the conception of childhood innocence. Within this view children are seen as being nearest to God and adults as furthest away. Children are of nature – they come into the world pure and innocent but are then corrupted by adult society. The notion of original sin, however, means that it is possible for children to be born evil. Within this view children require the influence of society to secure their 'correct' behaviour. The working definition of childhood also contains a strong subjective element since childhood is *'simultaneously our fond, adult rememberings of a time past and the immediacy of our own children's lives'* (James *et al.*, 1998: 59). Nostalgia is thus a significant characteristic of this model.

An historical perspective offers further insight into the working definition of childhood. While recognizing that there are still a variety of ways in which children in the UK do work, the legal exclusion of younger children from the workforce in the latter part of the nineteenth century brought about a gradual change in attitudes towards children. Zelizer (1985) notes that the economically 'worthless' but emotionally 'priceless' child has created an essential condition of modern Western childhood: an idealized and romanticized state in which children are 'sacralized' (see James *et al.*, 1998). The notion of 'unconditional love' has emerged as an important characteristic of the modern Western view of childhood. Jenks (1996b: 14) argues, however, that whilst adults (predominantly mothers) 'sacrifice everything' for their children, they, in return, are expected to experience the 'best time of their lives'. Within the modern Western view of childhood the child's body is seen to be sacrosanct, with *'any violation signifying a transgressive act of almost unimaginable dimensions'* (James *et al.*, 1998: 152). A link can be made between the modern Western view of childhood and developmental psychology concerning the notion of children's dependency on adults: adults are givers, children are receivers; adults are protectors, children are protected; adults are mature, rational and strong and children are immature, irrational and vulnerable (Goldson, 1997). This conception of adult-child relations is deemed necessary if the modern Western view of childhood is to be sustained.

No discussion of modern Western childhood would be complete without a reference to play. In Winn's (1983) view play is perhaps the single great dividing line between childhood and adulthood. Work is viewed as the polar opposite of play and is thus something only adults should engage in (Archard, 1993). Hill and Tisdall (1997) argue that children's removal from the workforce was partly based on a presumed right to 'play', rather than doing paid work. Sutton-Smith (1979) suggests, however, that adults use play as a means to control children – we expect them to play in certain ways and to play with certain things. What society makes accessible for children to play with will therefore determine how children play.

Although the modern Western childhood offers some advantages – such as being a period free from responsibilities and a time for play, opportunities, development and learning – this idealized childhood has an important limitation in that it neglects children's own competencies as they are reliant on adults to provide the idyllic childhood. For many children the reality may be different from the ideal. It does not tell us about, for example, children who are unhappy, or abused, and about those children who are abusers themselves (Ennew, 1986, cited in Hill and Tisdall, 1997). Further, the dependency on adults within this model has two effects: nostalgia for time past means that childhood is either envisioned as timeless, and children are thus in a time warp (James *et al.*, 1998), or else children are viewed as 'human becomings' – due to their need for protection in order to ensure their safe passage into adulthood – rather than as 'human beings'. As such, it provides no clear means for defining childhood past, present and future, and children are not valued as persons in their own right. The vision of childhood within this framework is also historically and culturally specific (Jenks, 1996a) and thus does not allow for childhood to be embraced worldwide. Finally, a further important limitation of this model is that it is based on what adults perceive the desired state of childhood to be – it does not offer a child's perspective.

## **POLITICS**

The state has an important role to play in the collective valuation of childhood (Archard, 1993) as it is through policy and legislation that the state assumes responsibility for conveying its vision of childhood to society. Part of this vision concerns the relationship between children, parents and the state. In the UK the state's relationship with children is protectionist; the state is responsible for identifying the needs of children and finding the

most effective ways to meet them (Makrinioti, 1994). Politicians are thus charged with the responsibility of acting in children's 'best interests'. The state's relationship with parents is to make responsibility for children primarily a family affair (Näsman, 1994). The state also has responsibility for legally defining the age at which childhood ends, with children in the UK reaching the age of majority at the age of eighteen years. However, some confusion arises in that legal thresholds recognize different ages at which 'children' are allowed to participate in 'adult' activities (Hill and Tisdall, 1997). Age is therefore a central feature of the politicization of childhood as *'it is through reference to concepts of age that the daily life experiences of children are produced and controlled'* (James and Prout, 1997: 235). Whilst Mayall (1996) has claimed that children in the UK have been low on the political agenda compared to other 'advanced' industrialized countries, Smith (2000a) notes a shift in this trend following the change of government in 1997. This, he observes, has led to a number of initiatives focusing on the needs of young children, access to education, the impact of social exclusion, tackling child poverty, children's rights and participation.

A consideration of the operational value for defining childhood through the discourse of politics reveals some important limitations. Whilst defining childhood through the term 'needs' has considerable strength in that it conveys an obligation for such needs to be met (Hill and Tisdall, 1997) it is, nonetheless, based on adult understandings of what the needs are perceived to be and how they should be met. Such an approach allows for the possibility of a shortfall between the perceived needs and the resources allocated to meet the needs. Questions arise as to whose needs are being met: is the concern for children's needs, in the present, or for society's needs, thus identifying children as an investment for the future and as 'human becomings'? Further, Woodhead (1997: 63) comments that the term 'needs' *'conceals in practice a complex of latent assumptions and judgements about children'*. Children are, once again, viewed within a position of dependency – in this instance on both the state and the family; they are perceived as being incompetent, irrational and vulnerable, and therefore in need of protection. Children's young age identifies them as being different. They are in an 'underdog' position and thus subordinate to adults (Näsman, 1994). In this way James *et al.* (1998) argue that children are reduced to a minority status that conveys a notion of powerlessness and victimization. The failure to recognize children's experiences and competences reveals assumptions and beliefs about the perceived superiority of adult knowledge. However, two major pieces of legislation –

one that is international, and the other national – have the potential to reposition children and it is to these that my attention now turns.

### ***The 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)***

Woodhead (1997) describes the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) as being one of the most powerful globalizing influences. It can be viewed as a universal attempt to give states responsibility for children's lives (Näsman, 1994) and has now been ratified by most of the world's nations. John (1996: 4), citing the work of Van Bueren (1996), refers to the UNCRC as '*an important indicator of the climate of the times; a manifesto indicating what, in an ideal world, a child's life should be like*'. In this way, the UNCRC can be seen to convey its vision about what it considers to be the 'good' childhood. Through the three principles of provision, protection and participation, the UNCRC seeks to address children's rights in all aspects of their lives. An important element of the philosophy behind the UNCRC is that children are seen to have the same inherent value as adults (Franklin, 1995), as evidenced particularly by the need (Article 12) for states to make a firm commitment to listen to children. The UNCRC provides a benchmark for measuring the effectiveness of a state's policies relating to children (Franklin and Franklin, 1996) and was ratified by the UK in 1991. States are required to submit a report to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child at periodic intervals, in which they outline the progress they are making in implementing the UNCRC.

It would be productive to consider how the UK is faring. Lansdown (1996) notes that the UK's first report, submitted to the UN Committee in 1994, involved no prior consultation. Scraton (1997b) attributes this to complacency by the Conservative government in assuming that it had already met many of the requirements of the UNCRC. The UN Committee was very critical of the UK government, particularly for effectively authorizing parental violence towards children within the home. The Committee also expressed serious concern about a range of other issues, such as the level of child poverty, poor health, homelessness and the low age of criminal responsibility (10 years old in England). The Labour Government's report in 1999 involved wide consultation, including that of children and young people. However, when the Committee issued its report on the UK in 2002 it made 78 recommendations for improvements, including a ban on smacking and a reform of juvenile justice. In 2004 the Chairman of the Committee continued to voice '*grave concern*' about the violation of children's rights in the UK (Carvel, 2004). Whilst the

language of children's rights is undoubtedly gathering force in the UK, particularly with regard to the child's right to be heard, Lansdown (1996) argues that the old adage, 'children should be seen and not heard', retains considerable influence<sup>1</sup>. To this can be added the claim of Hill and Tisdall (1997) that many parents are antagonistic about children's participatory rights because of the threat they are seen to represent to their authority.

The UNCRC undoubtedly has some major strengths. It provides a positive vision of childhood in which children are empowered, with Van Bueren (1996) commenting that it has been a catalyst for reform. The notion of rights implies a legitimate claim, thus emphasizing equality, dignity and respect (Hill and Tisdall, 1997). The UNCRC thus proposes '*a radical shift in the status of children in society and in the structure of relationships between adults and children*' (Lansdown, 1996: 9-10). In breaking through the paternalistic and protectionist constructions, which had served to highlight children's position as powerless dependents (Woodhead, 1997), children can at last be envisioned as 'human beings'. From the perspective of my study on 'childhood in crisis' the important role that the UN Committee plays in exposing the violation of children's rights reveals the way in which it is concerned with addressing 'crisis' in children's lives. However, since children did not participate in drafting the UNCRC (Boyden, 1997) this would be 'crisis' from an adult perspective. The UNCRC has further weaknesses. Although the UNCRC does give children rights, they are still dependent upon others to fulfil those rights, leading Shamgar-Handelman (1994) to argue that the more obligations others have towards children, the more dependent children will be on these others. Further, Lansdown (1996) questions whether by offering children more control it will actually deny them the right to enjoy their childhood. It is also important to understand that rights cannot be conferred, for they can only apply to those who understand, claim and exercise those rights (Alderson, 2000). Since the UNCRC is predominantly Western in its outlook (Boyden, 1997; Freeman, 2000) it is possible to conclude that one particular vision of childhood has been exported as the 'correct childhood' (Jenks, 1996a). As such the UNCRC can be criticized for its failure to acknowledge the global diversity of childhood. Finally, a major limitation

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<sup>1</sup> In 2004, however, the Government forged plans for a Children's Commissioner in England (the first post was taken up in March 2005). The main function of the Commissioner, who operates independently from the Government, is '*to promote awareness of the views and interests of children across society and in both the public and private sector*' (Harvey, 2004: 4). The aim is to ensure that children's views influence legislation, policy and practice. At the time of my writing it is perhaps too early to assess the effectiveness of the Commissioner's role.

of the UNCRC is that it is only enforceable if it is incorporated into national law, and this has not happened in the UK.

### ***The Children Act 1989***<sup>2</sup>

This Act (HMSO, 1989), which came into effect in 1991, can be viewed as the UK's response to the UNCRC, but was perhaps also triggered by child abuse tragedies in the UK in the 1970s and 1980s. The Act aimed to forge a new balance between the rights of children, parents and the state (Franklin, 1996) and is based on the notion that children's needs come first. David (1993:14) regards the Act as '*an important and unprecedented piece of legislation which is intended to alter radically the way children are treated in British society*'. The Act substitutes parental rights with parental responsibilities. In situations where parents fail to fulfil their responsibilities local authorities have responsibilities to provide support. A strong feature of the Act is the emphasis that is placed on the partnership that is required between parents and professionals in the task of meeting children's needs. A key principle of the legislation is that the child's welfare is paramount and the child's voice must be heard when courts are involved in making decisions about children's lives.

A major strength of the Act is that children's marginal status is cast aside so that the 'child' is '*positioned as a social and political actor, a person with opinions, a decision-maker*' (James *et al.*, 1998: 69). Children can, therefore, potentially be envisioned as 'human beings'. No longer are they to be viewed as the property of their parents – such a view '*fosters an inability to see children as individuals with feelings, and they then become objects on which to vent one's anger, insecurities or sexual aberrations*' (David, 1993: 16). However, whilst the UK continues to allow the 'reasonable chastisement' of children within the home it is not possible to break completely free from the view of 'children as property'. A limitation of the Act is that in providing only for children who are 'in need' it fails to acknowledge that all children have needs (Pugh, 1992) and, further, the concept of needs is reliant on the allocation of resources to meet those needs. However, the main limitation of the Act, identified by Lansdown (1996), is that it only relates to a limited number of children in limited aspects of their lives (those who are in a situation of conflict and thus for whom 'crisis' might be said to exist in their lives), thus failing to recognize the

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<sup>2</sup> As mentioned in Chapter One, although a new Children Act came into effect in 2004, my focus here is on literature relating to the Children Act 1989 as this was the Act in force at the time of the fieldwork for this study.



diversity of childhoods. Children's right to participation is not, therefore, a principle that extends to all children in the UK. Further, children's participation is dependent upon the willingness of others – adults – to permit their involvement.

### ***Closing comment on the UNCRC and the Children Act 1989***

The UNCRC and the Children Act 1989 define children in two ways. Firstly, in that they involve issues of protection and provision and position children as dependent on others, they can be seen to offer a definition of children as 'weak, poor and needy' (Moss and Petrie, 2002). Secondly, in that they involve the issue of children's participation and thus show recognition of children's status as citizens with rights to be listened to, and heard, they also provide a definition of children as 'rich, competent and powerful' (Moss and Petrie, 2002). Whilst it is possible that these might be thought of as providing contradictory definitions, they can also be thought of as demonstrating different possibilities that exist for defining children (as well as adults); children (and adults) may be 'weak, poor and needy' *as well as* being 'rich, competent and powerful'.

## **EDUCATION**

In England the 1870 Education Act promoted the idea of education for all children and, in doing so, created a 'national childhood' (Goldson, 1997). Children were grouped in schools on the basis of their age and through the process of schooling childhood became institutionalized and standardized. Levine and White (1991: 18) argue that the introduction of compulsory education '*marks one of the most radical shifts in the parent-child relationship in human history ... fundamentally altering the way we think about children*'. As mentioned previously, the gradual removal of children from the workforce into schools in the latter part of the nineteenth century marked a change whereby children were no longer seen as an economic asset but as an emotional investment. Through compulsory schooling the state could be seen to exert control over children's lives. For society, children became an 'investment for the future', thus ensuring both the politicization of education and childhood and the school as an agent for socialization. As a result, Wagg (1996) argues that compulsory education has become one of the defining characteristics of modern childhood. The 1988 Education Reform Act has been another very influential piece of legislation in shaping childhood in England. This saw the introduction of the

National Curriculum, Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs)<sup>3</sup> and league tables for school results. These measures have served to reinforce and enhance an education model that is linear and hierarchical (Mills, 2000), whereby children are expected to acquire certain knowledge at certain ages. This model has therefore been influenced by developmental psychology theories (page 11 refers).

In seeking to identify the operational value of an education model for defining childhood it was with some surprise that notes from my reading revealed that it was limited in that it appears only to provide a one-dimensional approach – one that is forward looking. It is possible that my own views about education and childhood, as a result of my experiences as a parent and undergraduate, caused me to be selective, thus it is important to recognize their possible influence on this study. Since the implementation of the National Curriculum in 1988, education policy and reform has been driven by the aim to raise standards in literacy, numeracy and science. This has led to an increased emphasis on these aspects of the curriculum at the expense of other areas, most notably music, art and physical education. What message does this convey about children and childhood? There is a danger that in concentrating on the end product we are focusing *only* on the ‘human becoming’. The child is viewed as an empty vessel to be filled with specific knowledge, that which is thought to be most beneficial to the economy. This provides no place for the ‘human being’ in our theorizing and the view of children and childhood is thus limited. Time future takes firm precedence over time present. There is perhaps a need to re-examine our beliefs as to what education is for: should it meet the needs of the individual in the present, the needs of society for the future, or both? Perhaps there is a need to reconsider the intrinsic value of education, as opposed to the extrinsic value that tends to dominate education in contemporary UK society. Although it would be possible to cite many academic references to support my views (see Chapter Three – pages 44-7), on this occasion I will allow my comments to stand alone.

## HISTORY

The insight offered by an historical perspective as a means for defining childhood has been strongly influenced by the work of Ariès (1962). The key point made by Ariès is that in medieval times the idea of childhood did not exist and so childhood must therefore be a

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<sup>3</sup> The SATs involve tests in English, mathematics and science, undertaken by children in Year 2 (aged 6-7 years), Year 6 (aged 10-11 years) and Year 9 (aged 13-14 years).



modern invention. Such a view encourages a belief in human progress (Cox, 1996), an assumption that is clearly challenged by the notion of 'childhood in crisis' that my study seeks to explore. De Mause's (1974) psychogenic theory adds strong support to the work of Ariès in suggesting that historical analysis of childhood reveals a humanizing journey from infanticide, cruelty and neglect to one of love, care and attention (see Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers, 1992). Such an analysis does, as James *et al.* (1998) argue, need to be challenged given the exceptional persistence of child abuse in modern Western societies. However, what these major works and others reveal, when placed alongside the notion of 'childhood in crisis', is that *'at any historical moment childhood will be constructed around a complex interplay of competing social, economic and political priorities'* (Goldson, 1997: 4) and that, at any one time, one version of childhood is seeking dominance (Cox, 1996). An historical perspective also helps to reveal the subjective element of childhood: since comparisons between different eras are closely connected with each other (Qvortrup, 2000) a study of childhood therefore *'has to be a study of ourselves: why we are what we are, as seen from what we were, and how we came to be'* (Konner, 1991: 6).

The use of history as a means for defining childhood has, like all other perspectives, some strengths and weaknesses. An historical perspective is useful for revealing recurring patterns that will help in understanding the present. Hultqvist and Dahlberg (2001: 6) lend support to this view, arguing that we need *'a continual critical scrutiny of the past, not for the sake of the past but for the sake of the present'*. An examination of the past will thus help in the examination of the present and this, in turn, may be of use in helping to make some valid comments about the future. Time past, present and future can therefore all receive consideration within an historical perspective. Further, since all other disciplines carry their own history there is considerable merit to be found in Goldson's (1997: 4) view that historical analysis

*'has formed the foundations on which to build critical analysis and to challenge prevalent ideologies and academic orthodoxies in relation to understanding children's experiences of childhood'*.

An historical perspective therefore seems to have a valid contribution to make to my study. In seeking to consider further the operational value of an historical perspective, valuable

insight is offered by Jordanova (cited in Goldson, 1997: 13), who draws attention to the fact that either *'the past is often idealized and the present depicted as a decline'* or, conversely, *'the past becomes barbaric and exploitative [and] the present enlightened'*. It is therefore important to take into account who the author is, and what their needs are, since children's history of dependency and powerlessness has meant that an historical perspective tells us more about adults' views of childhood rather than those of children themselves. It is also prudent to remember that *'history is not absolute truth; rather, it is interpretation'* (Rhodes, 2000: 164). Questions therefore need to be asked about the extent to which adult constructions of reality have misrepresented the historical child (Suransky, 1982).

## SOCIOLOGY

A sociological approach to the study of childhood began with the concept of socialization. This supports a biological perspective on childhood – children are of nature and through the process of socialization they learn how to participate in society, thus marking a transition from the asocial child to the social adult. Developmental psychology theories have thus made a significant contribution to socialization theory. In children's early years socialization is often confined to the family. The concept of 'familialization' is thus central to the concept of socialization in that it:

*'denotes the official and conventional way by which childhood is approached and conceived ... The family prevails as the social unit with reference to which childhood is conceptualized. The term familialization refers to the fusion of childhood into the family institution to such an extent that it becomes an inseparable unit ... Children by nature belong to their parents; their natural and physical milieu is the family; they are reflected in their parents' social status, set of values, and modes of conduct characterizing the family'* (Makrinioti, 1994: 267-8).

The strength of this concept leads Oldman (1994) to argue that 'familialization' is the most salient characteristic of childhood in Western societies. Socialization taking place after the early years is attributed to, for example, school, the media, peer groups, religion and leisure organizations, although these aspects are not considered to be as powerful as the

family. Hughes (1999) argues, however, that the peer group is a major socializing force in middle childhood, as it is from peers, rather than parents or teachers, that children are believed to learn about the cultures of childhood. The process of socialization offers a structural view of childhood and the task then becomes one of positioning childhood within the social structure, but without really investigating underlying assumptions about childhood (James *et al.*, 1998).

An evaluation of the sociological perspective as a means for defining childhood reveals significant weaknesses. Children are viewed as passive recipients of culture, thus promoting the belief that culture is imprinted on the child (James and Prout, 1996). The concern is with the goals and means of society itself, whilst the individual child is seen as a microcosm (James *et al.*, 1998). Children are therefore viewed either as incompetent, or as incomplete and thus as 'empty vessels', to be filled by a process of socialization in which the emphasis is on the time future of children. Children are thus always in the process of *becoming* human beings (Blitzer, 1991). Further, as Oldman (1994) argues, an over-emphasis on the child in the family de-emphasizes other features of childhood. Children's own experiences are marginalized and are therefore deemed less important than those of adults (Saporiti, 1994); the child is subsumed within the family and is thus '*invisible to the sociological gaze*' (Mayall, 1996: 2). For Furedi (2001) this serves to confirm a one-sided view of the parent-child relationship; the parent acts and the child merely reacts. Children are not viewed as independent social actors but as objects, thus highlighting their dependency and vulnerability. Since the process of socialization is concerned with what adults do to children, sociology offers only an adult perspective on childhood; it does not allow for a child's perspective, thus denying the personhood of children. Equally, the concept of socialization fails to take into account the possibility of intersubjectivity, that is, the shared experience of individuals acting together, forcing Mackay (1991: 28) to conclude that it '*is a gloss which precludes the explication of the phenomenon it glosses i.e. the interaction between adults and children*'. Waksler (1991a: 21) extends this view by arguing that the concept of socialization

*'could never encompass the entirety of children's experiences, for children do more than 'get socialized' ... In particular, it leaves out both what children are doing when others are socializing them, and when others are not. It neglects the world that children design*

*by themselves for themselves. It fails to examine children's ideas and activities as their ways of being in the world'.*

However, in Thurtle's (1998a: 85) view, the great strength of a sociological perspective lies in the potential it offers for changing the way we think about children and childhood:

*'The use of sociological perspectives is the way in which the reader can begin to question beliefs and values that seem common sense or natural, so that consideration can be given to the social influences acting upon an individual and children can be viewed within the context of their social setting'.*

It would now be helpful to review the material presented so far.

### **REVIEWING THE SITUATION: 1**

In seeking to identify what conclusions might be drawn at this point, many of the perspectives examined so far reveal a persuasive deficit model of childhood: it is a transitional process on the way towards the desired end status – adulthood – in which the child's status is viewed as one of 'becoming', rather than one of 'being'. This leads to a picture of children being viewed as less than adults, and thus reduced to a position as 'other'. Developmental psychology theories have been a powerful influence in shaping and sustaining this definition of childhood. Indeed, the view of children as 'other' is needed in order to sustain these theories. Drawing upon Foucault's (1980) work on power and power relations it is possible to see how the dominant position that developmental psychology has held in the UK for much of the twentieth century has been built upon particular understandings about children. The taken for granted assumptions within developmental psychology have, from a Foucauldian perspective, provided a *dominant discursive regime*, or *regime of truth*, about childhood. Such was the strength of this way of thinking that (for many years) it remained unchallenged and embedded itself in professional thinking and practice (Moss and Petrie, 2002). In doing so, it inhibited critical thinking and prevented alternative understandings of childhood from emerging. In seeking to address the issue of power relations, Foucauldian theory draws attention to the need to challenge dominant discursive regimes. Therefore, a new connection is required for progress to be made in extending the way in which childhood can be defined. Alanen (1994: 28) states that:

*'There is no reason to argue against childhood's being a stage in individual development and a period of preparation for adult life and, therefore, a condition of relative vulnerability. But participation in the sense of being and acting in society does not begin first when a defined age limit or degree of adulthood has been reached'.*

This suggests that old knowledge need not be thrown out in favour of any new knowledge that might arise, but rather that some form of synthesis needs to be achieved whereby existing knowledge can be interwoven with any new knowledge to form a fresh approach. The different perspectives discussed thus far have revealed a common thread of a focus on the 'human becoming', in which childhood is characterized by incompetency, incompleteness, vulnerability and dependency. The outcome of this is that we only get to hear what adults think about childhood, thus promoting a belief in the superiority of adult knowledge. Children have therefore been objects, rather than subjects, of study. In confining childhood to 'time future', children's personhood is not acknowledged and the operational value for the perspectives discussed so far can therefore be said to be conceptually weak. They only form part of the debate and a different approach, a new way of 'seeing', is required in order to fill the gap left by the absence of children's 'being'. Only when this step has been taken, and the gap filled, will the holistic approach, outlined at the start of this chapter, be achieved. The final outcome will be a clearer view of an appropriate means for defining childhood that will provide the conceptual framework for this study.

### **A NEW PATHWAY IN SOCIOLOGY**

Studies of childhood, such as those by Ariès (1962), de Mause (1974), Sommerville (1982), Walvin (1982) and Pollock (1983); the authors of absorbing childhood autobiographies, such as Thompson (1945) and Lee (1959); Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory; Hardman's (1973) work on the anthropology of children; and the model of respect for children and childhood that is inherent in the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989), have been some of the factors in stimulating a new paradigm for thinking about children and childhood. The central feature of this 'emergent paradigm' (James and Prout, 1990) is that childhood is understood as a social construction. In theorizing childhood as a social construction two key points can be identified in James and Prout's

(1990) groundbreaking work on the sociology of childhood. Firstly, children are viewed as competent social actors, worthy of study in their own right. They are perceived not just as receivers, but also as 'doers', as 'human beings', as active participants in co-constructing their own experiences, those of others around them, and the societies in which they live. Secondly, childhood is viewed as a status, as a distinct social category, thus offering the opportunity to see how childhood interacts with other elements in society. With such an approach in place, children become the unit of analysis and childhood a variable of social analysis, one that can be considered alongside other variables, such as adulthood, gender, class, (dis)ability and ethnicity. The picture that emerges is that childhood is affected by social, political, economic and cultural factors, is constantly in flux and thus changes over time and place. Childhood is therefore considered to be a product of its time and multiple interpretations bring with it the need to think about childhoods rather than childhood. Thus Selwyn (2000: 139) acknowledges that

*'each child's experience and perception of their own lives will be very different. Every child shares something called a 'childhood', but each child's experience of it is in some way unique'.*

As such the 'socially constructed' child needs to be viewed as a local, rather than a global, phenomenon (James *et al.*, 1998).

In considering the operational value of this relatively new paradigm, Qvortrup (2000: 84) recognizes a limitation in that

*'the risk we are running at present, if we restrict our efforts to merely accounting for children's particular lives, is to underline an assumption that there is little that is common to the many childhoods'.*

However, this new pathway within sociology carries great operational strength. It represents a conceptual leap, a move away from the search for the universal child and the taken-for-granted meanings attached to such an approach, to one in which children and childhood are to be studied in context. In challenging the finite model of previous theorizing, children are positioned within a competence paradigm (Hutchby and Moran-



Ellis, 1998), in which they are respected and valued for what they are capable of in the present rather than for their future potential. Thus the child no longer has to be approached from an assumed shortfall of competence (James *et al.*, 1998). Conceptually freed from their dependency on adults, particularly within the family, the way has been paved for accessing children's own views and experiences of childhood, on which children are seen to offer a different perspective, a different way of 'seeing'. Their views and experiences are to be valued for their own intrinsic importance (Lee, 2001a). In acknowledging children's presence as co-constructors the way is also paved for considering the possibility of intersubjectivity. Further, since the active 'being' child is not static, ideas about the past and future need not be abandoned (James *et al.*, 1998) at the expense of the present. Time can therefore take a central place in understanding childhood. Finally, and of particular value for my study on the notion of 'childhood in crisis', is the point raised by Aubrey *et al.* (2000), that once we become aware of how childhood is constructed in different societies, or at different times, so questions can be asked about why children are treated in particular ways and what this tells us about the society in which they live.

## **REVIEWING THE SITUATION: 2**

The comment by Prout and James (1997: 26) that *'different discursive practices produce different childhoods, each and all of which are 'real' within their own regime of truth'* leads to a conclusion that the disciplines of developmental psychology, politics, education, history, sociology, as well as the working definition of modern Western childhood, are all social constructions in themselves. Each has its own particular knowledge, its own way of 'seeing' (albeit, as highlighted previously, that developmental psychology has often been a dominant force permeating the other perspectives), and each can take its place alongside the sociology of childhood in contributing to the total mosaic of understanding about children and childhood. In theorizing childhood as a social construction the sociology of childhood provides the final piece in the jigsaw. Within a paradigm reflecting respect and equality, children take their place alongside adults in the construction of childhood. A holistic framework has been put in place – one that allows for a past, a present and a future, as well as for the possibility of intersubjectivity.

## **CONCLUSION: THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

The purpose of this chapter was to explore how childhood has been defined within a range of perspectives and, in doing so, to identify the conceptual framework to be employed for

my study. A strong underlying influence for this study was my uneasiness concerning the way in which children's voices have so often been absent in past debates about issues to do with their lives (pages 2-3 refer). The task, therefore, has been to find a means for incorporating children's views. The state of 'being', within a social constructionist approach, provides the appropriate means for conducting this study.

As mentioned previously, a social constructionist approach highlights the plurality of childhood. This plurality is evident in Moss and Petrie's (2002: 15) statement that:

*'While children in this society share some characteristics in common, any particular child, or group of children, occupies a social position that derives from, for example, gender, age, ethnicity, skin colour, disability status, poverty and wealth: social and physical characteristics that relate to powerful systems of control'.*

They proceed to comment that:

*'Any particular child has a specific social identity. Like adults, different children have different perspectives on childhood, connected to this identity, and specific social contexts in which they live their lives and the matters that concern them immediately'*  
(Moss and Petrie, 2002: 15).

Thus the way in which individuals construct childhood will be affected by certain social contexts. The issue of *social context* began to emerge in the 1980s as a critical response by those who were becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the traditional, biological, scientific study of children that had produced the universal model of the child outlined earlier in this chapter (pages 11-12 refer). The American psychologist, Urie Bronfenbrenner, was a prominent figure within this new line of thinking. Bronfenbrenner's thoughts were influenced by his work experiences in the 1950s and 1960s in different countries, such as Russia, China and Israel. These increased his awareness of the way in which environmental influences produced detectable differences in human behaviour



across and within societies, particularly with regard to the way in which children were raised.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) provides a framework for understanding children's development as well as a valuable analytical tool for researchers to investigate such development. It stresses the importance of studying the varied environments in which people behave and suggests that if we want to change behaviour we have to change environments (Cole, 1979). In applying Bronfenbrenner's theory the varied environments must include those beyond an individual's immediate situation. The way in which the individual *experiences* these environments is considered to be of particular importance. Bronfenbrenner views the ecological environment as a set of nested structures, each contained within the next, like a set of Russian dolls. This has been presented diagrammatically by a number of authors (see, for example, Boushel *et al.*, 2000) as a series of concentric rings to represent the different levels in Bronfenbrenner's theory. Bronfenbrenner considered these levels to be influential in shaping children's development. This was not, however, to be seen as a one-way process, since a significant feature of the Ecological Systems Theory concerns the evolving interaction between the developing child and their multiple environments. The innermost level is the microsystem: this is the immediate setting containing the child – such as the home, the school, the neighbourhood – and thus with which the child has face-to-face contact. Equally important are the relationship behaviours found in the microsystem. The next level is the mesosystem: this looks at the relations between the single settings constituting the microsystem. The third level is the exosystem: this involves settings in which the child does not have face-to-face contact but which have an indirect effect on the child's microsystem. The outermost level is the macrosystem: this relates to wider cultural influences that have a significant effect upon the other levels. A final consideration is the chronosystem (see Bronfenbrenner, 1986): this does not relate to a specific context but to the time frame in which the child's development occurs. Bronfenbrenner was critical of his own theory, feeling that it led to an over-emphasis on social context, which de-emphasized biological forces. This led him to revise his theory; within this the basic elements and imperatives of the Ecological Systems Theory remained, but were strengthened and extended by scientific evidence and scientific argument (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). Bronfenbrenner has continued to modify his theory, which has resulted in a Bioecological

model being produced (see, for example, Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 1994; Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998).

In order to explore whether childhood is in crisis I intend to apply Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory by using it to examine the childhoods being constructed in different social contexts. This will entail adopting Bronfenbrenner's (1979) framework and using it to explore the childhoods being constructed in bounded research contexts in order to consider the ways in which the different levels of the ecological system interact with each other and are congruent or divergent.

A necessary accompaniment for the conceptual framework will be an interpretivist research approach in which the aim will be to make sense of the constructions of childhood from the point of view of all of the social actors involved in my study. This will require a process of

*'understanding meaning, for grasping the actor's definition of a situation ... The inquirer must elucidate the process of meaning construction and clarify what and how meanings are embodied in the language and actions of social actors'* (Schwandt, 1994: 118).

Within this interpretivist approach the view of the child I hold is as a *'subjective, contextual, self-determining and dynamic being'* (Greig and Taylor, 1999: 37).

This chapter has explored a range of perspectives for defining childhood. Richards (1998: 132), in pulling together the threads of an edited text exploring biosocial perspectives on children, argues that

*'different perspectives are not going to give us a picture of the whole, rather they will tend to emphasise the differences between the perspectives and the lack of common ground'*.

Whilst I agree with this to a certain extent, I would also argue that it is important to maintain a sense of the whole for, as Morss (1990: 230) reminds us, we cannot *'easily do*

away with the influence of presuppositions, assumptions, and other kinds of theoretical baggage'. Further, as Graue and Walsh (1998: 26) argue:

*'The danger of theory is that it can function like a set of blinders, restricting what one sees and how one sees it. A dominant theory can become hegemonic, dictating not only how to see the world but also what to look at and what not to look at. If one relies completely on a single theoretical perspective, one's inquiry is unlikely to challenge it, for theory not only explains findings but also shapes findings'.*

The comments of Morss (1990) and Graue and Walsh (1998), can be applied just as easily to the way in which childhood is defined within a social constructionist perspective as they can within a developmental psychology perspective since, for example, assumptions about children's competence cannot necessarily automatically replace assumptions about children's incompetence (Buckingham, 2000). Attempts to try and define childhood 'once and for all' might close down my way of thinking and seeing. It therefore remains important to enter my research with an open mind. In this way I should be more receptive to taking on board the way in which childhood is constructed within the different research contexts, thus allowing me to remain critically reflexive as to what I see, hear and feel. Therefore, whilst a social constructionist approach provides part of the desired conceptual framework for my study, I will not let it dominate it, as I cannot assume that others will have the same perception of childhood. So, although a social constructionist approach provides the desired holistic framework (page 10 refers) in that it values the whole child, I feel it is important to maintain a sense of an even wider holistic picture, one which encompasses the wide variety of disciplines that contribute to the understanding of children and childhood. Such an approach finds support from Saporiti (1994: 210), who argues that *'rather than reject traditional knowledge about children, it should integrate it into a new conceptual framework'*. This approach fits comfortably with the holistic philosophy of my Early Childhood Studies degree, which emphasizes the need for a multi-disciplinary approach in order to understand the diverse factors impacting on children's lives. It also seems to support Foucauldian theory (see Foucault, 1980), which draws attention to the need not to do away with power but to see how power operates and the effects it has.

Keeping an open mind will therefore enable me to consider the possibility of the existence of various ‘truth claims’ and, from these, to raise questions about the findings.

### **SUMMARY**

This chapter has explored the ways in which childhood is defined within a range of perspectives. In doing so it has enabled me to identify the conceptual framework for this study. It is one that relies, predominantly, on a social constructionist approach (whilst keeping an open mind about alternative perspectives), but also incorporates an adaptation of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory. Through this chapter I have gained a deeper understanding of how childhood is defined. This was an important prerequisite for the next chapter in which I seek to explore the notion of ‘childhood in crisis’ in the academic literature.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESEARCH METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

#### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to present my stance as a researcher and to provide a rationale for the methods that were employed for this research. Whilst the central focus will be on the methods used for the fieldwork, several factors – ethics, reflection and reflexivity – do, in fact, permeate the entire research process. The chapter also provides detailed information about the fieldwork process and discusses the issue of validity. In designing this research on contemporary childhood the view of children that I held (as discussed in Chapters One and Two) was an important factor for, as Christensen and Prout (2002: 481) argue, *'It influences the choice of methods (including the researcher's role), the analysis and interpretation of data as well as ethical practice'*.

All research requires a commitment to ethical issues. Whilst certain issues will receive attention within a specific section on ethics, I feel it is important to outline at the start of this chapter that ethical issues are pervasive (Brewer, 2000). I view ethics as an ongoing process – ethical issues require consideration at the outset of any research and continue throughout the research process, into the writing-up stage and beyond. I regard ethics as being about respect, behaviour and attitudes. Fine and Sandstrom (1988), commenting specifically on research with children, argue that respect needs to be a distinct methodological technique in itself as adults often do not show children respect. However, the notion of respect should be seen as a sound principle to be applied to all research participants. It will therefore be important to demonstrate in this chapter how respect has been applied in my research; at times this will be explicit and at other times implicit. My firm commitment to the inclusion of children in this research is based on my belief that it is an ethical necessity (pages 2-3 refer), as I consider that debates about children and childhood should include a child perspective. However, knowledge about children and childhood has, in the past, usually been based on an adult perspective. My research design has therefore been influenced by Lee's (2001a: 133) view that *'the closer a methodology takes us to the goal of children's unmediated speech, the more ethically adequate that methodology will be'*.

## EMERGING ISSUES

At this stage in the thesis it is helpful to summarize some of the key points that have emerged from the opening chapters and to then consider how these have influenced both my personal approach to research and the fieldwork within this study. Significant emerging issues are:

- childhood, and the study of childhood, is a subjective experience. It is difficult to disentangle one from the other;
- a holistic approach is required for the study of childhood;
- childhood is a relational concept – it needs to be viewed in relation to adulthood;
- children's viewpoints have often been absent, or marginalized, in past debates about children and childhood. Knowledge about children and childhood has therefore largely been built from an adult perspective;
- for much of the twentieth century developmental psychology dominated childhood theory. This emphasized the 'time future' of children, thus constructing children as human *becomings*. Children are in an 'underdog' position and viewed as subordinate to adults;
- a social constructionist perspective constructs children as competent social actors, as human *beings*. It provides a means for incorporating children's views and enables the past, present and future to all receive consideration;
- within a social constructionist approach, children and childhood are to be studied in context. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory provides a useful framework for building context into the research design;
- history has a valuable contribution to make to the study of childhood. An understanding of the past helps to shed light on the present and can help in the process of considering the future;
- children have rights to participation and to be heard.

I consider that a social constructionist approach provides the necessary starting point for my fieldwork. The belief has long been that children are either unable or unentitled to have a point of view (Greig and Taylor, 1999). This promoted and reinforced the assumption that children could not have a view. However, in repositioning children as social actors in their own right, a social constructionist approach challenges this assumption. Such a move recognizes children as co-constructors of their childhood experience and therefore have

their own unique understandings, insights and meanings. Adults' viewpoints can therefore no longer be seen as superior. The implication for this research lies in the clear need to provide opportunities for children to express their views for, as Alderson (1995: 40) argues, ignoring children's views would '*reinforce common prejudices that children do not have views worth hearing*'. Adopting a social constructionist approach for this research demonstrates my respect for children and childhood. I perceive children as having a perception and experience of childhood that will enrich my understanding. Respect for children's views will need to go beyond providing opportunities for them to express their thoughts, as it also requires a commitment to listen to, and hear, what children have to say. Alderson (2000) reinforces this point, stating that whilst 'giving children a voice' is a popular slogan, children do have voices, and it is adults who need to listen. Real listening will demand that the children in this study are firmly situated within a competence paradigm and are thus viewed as competent reporters. However, I see respect as extending beyond an assumption of mere competence as on the subject of childhood I view children as the 'experts' with valuable knowledge to impart.

I acknowledge that not everyone will share my view of children's competence. In the early stages of my research I received some comments about my work from a colleague within the field of education, who argued that:

*'I am sure that there are very good reasons for including children's perceptions of their own lives in such an evaluative study but one might argue that such data is likely to be very limited. Children are not in a position to evaluate the quality of their own lives since they have no criteria, no alternative experience from which to draw judgements. They are still at the stage where their own understandings are undergoing construction and their perceptions will inevitably be incomplete and impressionable'* (personal communication – anonymous, July 2002).

Whilst I initially internalized these comments as a criticism of my research, I came to realise that they were perhaps evidence of the way in which developmental psychology, as the dominant discursive regime, had embedded itself in professional thinking about children. The comments thus acted as a spur, challenging me to think more carefully about



why I was including children in the research. My colleague's comments appear to suggest that all children are the same and that they walk around with blinkers on. However, I view children as having a *different* experience to adults rather than the *lesser* experience that my colleague infers. Children's experiences do not occur in a social vacuum (Montandon, 2001). Children have a variety of experiences as a result of their age, gender, ethnicity, social class, (dis)ability, and as a result of their interaction with others, both adults and other children, who themselves have a diversity of experience. Children's constructions of childhood will thus be influenced by multiple interrelating experiences. Since research is about discovery and the creation of new knowledge (Rolfe and Mac Naughton, 2001), then, given the relative absence of children in past debates about childhood their inclusion in this research is merited on these grounds alone. However, I agree with Oakley's (2000) view that taking on board children's opinions calls for a greater child's rights perspective. Children do have rights to participation, to have their views listened to, and heard, as enshrined in the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989). Acknowledgement of these rights demonstrates further my respect for children and childhood. As such, this research needs to be seen as representing a commitment to social justice (see Griffiths, 1998: 92).

My firm commitment to the inclusion of children in this research leads me to recognize that I am adopting a child standpoint methodology:

*'To develop a child standpoint is to make one kind of move towards upgrading childhood; it is to propose that children's own take on their social positioning is worthy of attention and consideration'*  
(Mayall, 2002: 177).

This approach challenges the dominant discursive regime, which stereotypes children as incomplete, inexperienced and as 'human becomings'. I wish to see how childhood is constructed from the position of children themselves, whilst also acknowledging that I need to remain open to what that viewpoint may tell me. Children, as 'underdogs', have often been absent from sociological theorizing in the past, but a more complete, and improved, sociological knowledge should arise by taking account of their views. Woodhead and Faulkner (2000: 31) lend support to this view, arguing that

*'Significant knowledge gains result when children's active participation in the research process is deliberately solicited and when their perspectives, views and feelings are accepted as genuine, valid evidence'.*

My strong feelings with regard to the need to include children in this research might lead others to question why parents have also been included. Childhood and adulthood are relational concepts, leading Alanen (2001: 129) to argue that children and adults are interdependent since

*'neither of them can exist without the other, what each of them is (a child, an adult) is dependent on its relation to the other, and change in one is tied to change in the other'.*

I recognize that in UK society childhood is closely associated with the family<sup>1</sup> (see page 22) and that, for most children, the family provides *'one of the more important social and emotional contextualizations of their everyday lives'* (James and Prout, 1996: 45). Within a social constructionist perspective I acknowledge that children co-construct their childhood experience and recognize that parents play a significant role in that construction. I therefore agree with Solberg's (1997: 126) view that

*'The ways in which the family shapes the content of childhood are both subtle and varied but, in general, it can be argued, it is through the interaction of parents and children that its form most clearly emerges'.*

The inclusion of parents therefore seems to be a necessary part of the research design. Placing parents' views alongside those of children's provides a more complete account of the childhood experience and is therefore in keeping with my desire for a holistic approach. In using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory (pages 28-30 refer) as a framework for exploring the constructions of childhood in different contexts, the inclusion of parents will provide a dual focus on the microsystem. Indeed, a strength of

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<sup>1</sup> Whilst the family can take different forms, such as one-parent families and reconstituted families, it is children who differentiate the family from the couple (see Makrinioti, 1994).

Bronfenbrenner's *systems* model is the potential it offers researchers to investigate the *dyad* (two-person system) as this allows for more dynamic possibilities in interpretation than when data is only collected from one person or one group of people. The focus on the single experiment (one person or one group) had, Bronfenbrenner (1979) notes, been a feature of much previous research carried out within the field of developmental psychology. Aubrey *et al.* (2000: 165) lend support to the inclusion of both children and parents in research, arguing that it may provide '*more intimate and fine-grained evidence*'. Since a social constructionist approach to childhood is based on equality, I see the children's views as carrying equal status to those of their parents. It will, however, be important to beware of tokenism for, as Jones and Tannock (2000: 89) comment, '*claims to listen to the voice of the child may be merely rhetorical*'.

A criticism of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory comes from Bee (1992: 495), who argues that '*it is hard to keep all the elements of the system in mind at once, let alone study all the relevant parts simultaneously*'. However, Bronfenbrenner (1979: 33) himself states that '*it is neither necessary nor even possible to obtain a **complete** picture of the research situation*'. Whilst the more levels – micro, meso, exo and macro – that are investigated will lead to a more detailed and, consequently, a more holistic understanding, Bronfenbrenner's theory does not require all levels to be explored. Beyond the dual focus on the microsystem this study also seeks to provide a focus on the exosystem (through an examination of news media samples) and on the macrosystem (through literature review of the UNCRC and the Children Act 1989). This study does not, therefore, seek to provide a specific focus on the mesosystem. My intention in this study is not to use Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory for its intended purpose – as a means for investigating children's development in context – but to explore the constructions of childhood in different levels of the system in order to consider whether 'childhood' is in 'crisis'.

My commitment to a holistic approach for this research has sometimes felt like a burden. When people have enquired as to what my research is about, my initial response has often been, "It's very broad". Silverman (1998: 86) comments on how researchers can make the error of taking on an impossibly large problem, arguing that the temptation to say a little about a lot '*can be something of a cop-out*'. However, investigating the notion of 'childhood in crisis' will clearly entail looking at a diverse range of factors contributing to

the childhood *experience*. It will only be through a careful examination of children's lives that an informed understanding of the condition of contemporary childhood can be achieved. As such, my commitment to a holistic approach does, I feel, make this research a complex task. My holistic approach ties into my personal philosophy of openness in the research process. This includes making myself open to multiple viewpoints – for example, within the literature that I read, in the fieldwork and in any other comments I receive in connection with my work. This openness to a variety of viewpoints is consistent with the aims of social justice (Griffiths, 1998).

Mayall (2000: 252) comments that *'the inclusion of historical time into sociological thought helps us to understand childhood'*. Time (past, present and future) and the subjective experience of childhood have emerged as issues that need to be taken into account in this study. I recognize that the fieldwork I am embarking on is a socially interactive process in which subjectivity is shared (Walsh, 1998). Children's subjective experience in the present, which within a social constructionist perspective they are seen to co-construct, is influenced by their past experience. Parents have their present subjective experience to call upon and their current constructions of childhood will be influenced by memories of their own childhood and of the children they now have. I, as the researcher, bring to the enterprise my own experience of childhood as a child, parent and student. It is important to recognize that those I work with in the research enterprise, including those not directly involved in the fieldwork – such as journalists, policy-makers and my research supervisors – my life experiences in general and the literature I read, will all influence my subjectivity. This kaleidoscope of subjectivity, reflexively explored, should help to illuminate and enrich my, and others', understanding of contemporary childhood in southeast England.

#### **CHOICE OF PARADIGM: QUALITATIVE (INTERPRETIVIST) WITH SOME QUANTITATIVE DATA**

Hughes (2001: 31) states that *'a researcher's view of the world influences their choice of paradigm'*. The two main paradigms are defined as qualitative (interpretivist) and quantitative (positivist) (Robson, 1993). My social constructionist approach, which has already been discussed in some detail, requires a qualitative (interpretivist) paradigm in order to access the meanings of research participants (page 30 refers). However, during the

process of reflecting on *my* worldview I consider that the paradigm for this study has been influenced by past experiences.

At secondary school (in the 1970s) my interest lay in subjects that made sense through *words*, rather than those that involved knowledge based on numbers and formulas that provided 'the truth'. History held a particular fascination for me and, as mentioned previously, '*is not absolute truth; rather it is interpretation*' (Rhodes, 2000: 164). I also had a very strong interest in sport, particularly ball sports. Nothing can be predicted in these sports, for when you are chasing after a ball, or an opponent, anything can happen. I was less interested in athletics. Athletic events are predictive (they involve getting either yourself, or an implement, from A to B) and precise (they are measured by time or distance). After leaving school I worked for 7½ years in unemployment benefit offices. This job involved working *with* the public. I became aware that there were often *multiple* reasons as to why people found themselves in this disadvantaged position. Listening to their stories was an important aspect of the job, requiring emotional engagement on my part. Motherhood and my undergraduate studies heightened my awareness of the *subjective* and *emotive* nature of childhood. However, as will be evident at this stage in the thesis, I was strongly influenced by the holistic philosophy of the Early Childhood Studies degree. This encourages students to *make sense* of children's lives by looking at the different parts that make up the whole picture and thus requires a *multi-disciplinary* approach. During my undergraduate studies I developed a keen interest in children's rights, particularly their participatory rights. Knowledge about children and childhood had, for much of the twentieth century, been dominated by the discipline of developmental psychology. Such knowledge was based on adult understandings. Research was generally undertaken within the positivist research tradition in which children were tested and experimented on in order to prove or disprove theory. The knowledge that this provided claimed to provide *the* truth about children and childhood. However, I consider that such knowledge cannot represent *the* truth as it neglected social forces as well as children's own understandings about matters concerning their lives. How can we be certain that an adult's construction of the world is the same as a child's construction?

The experiences described above suggest that I am situated within the philosophy of fallibilism, in which nothing about the world can be known for certain (Fay, 1996). However, it is the holistic philosophy to which I keep returning, for it requires an open

mind. I prefer to make sense of things by probing and digging, looking at things from different angles in order to build up a complete picture, though never quite sure as to whether I have found the 'right' answer. I believe that my past experiences have drawn me towards the qualitative research tradition, which can be seen as

*'an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting'* (Cresswell, 1994: 1-2).

I specifically see it as a process that requires making sense of the research setting, and the people in it, by building gradual pictures through interpretations, approximations and subjective involvement (Holliday, 2002). To be subjective is to 'tend to' the subject (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994) and, as such, the written study becomes *'an account of personal struggle to make sense of the complex human situations within which the researcher herself often becomes implicated'* (Holliday, 2002: 10). Qualitative research is a flexible open-ended process that is based on illumination and discovery and can therefore be seen as an emergent process in that it offers *'the opportunity to change focus, modify questions, find new ways of generating data'* (Graue and Walsh, 1998: 159). The overall aim of qualitative research is to seek *multiple* truths.

In contrast, my past experiences do not seem to draw me towards the positivist research tradition. Positivist research looks past people's words and actions to their mathematical significance; statistics therefore play an important part in analysis (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). The objectivity that is a feature of a positivist approach requires disinterest – an unemotional effect, a non-committal attitude and a cool, detached, dispassionate style (Fay, 1996). Research conducted in this manner is controlled and the aim is to prove, or disprove, in order to seek *the* truth. Thus my past experiences have, I feel, steered me towards the qualitative research tradition; I view knowledge as being created by multiple truths rather than by a single truth. There is not one childhood; there are many childhoods.

This study adopts a qualitative (interpretivist) paradigm as it seeks the *perspectives* of children and parents (directly) and of journalists (indirectly through an analysis of news



media samples). My study is suited to a qualitative (interpretivist) paradigm as I wish to *explore* and *understand* the specific *meanings* they ascribe to childhood. How do they construct childhood and why do they construct it in the way they do? Using solely a positivist paradigm, thus presenting the situation mathematically through the use of statistics, would be *'to strip the experience of its meaning, that is, the meaning as the participants experienced it'* (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994: 18). Knowledge surrounding the general notion of 'childhood in crisis' has tended to be built from an adult perspective under the strong influence of developmental and socialization theory (see Chapter Three). A qualitative (interpretivist) paradigm is therefore an important ethical choice for this study as it permits the research problem to be explored from a child standpoint. My social constructionist approach, which provided the starting point for this study, is also an ethical choice as it recognizes children's agency and enables their voices to be heard. Further, it situates children within a competence paradigm and regards them as holders of unique knowledge and insights concerning their childhood experience. It is their *subjective* childhood experience that I wish to enter in order to get their perspective from the inside and so to try and understand what it feels like to be a child in contemporary society in southeast England.

However, my strong desire for a holistic approach for this study means that I wish to keep an open mind about my research design. It is therefore important to consider the strength that a quantitative paradigm can bring to this study. I should not close myself off from alternative ways of thinking and interpreting data for, as Aubrey *et al.* (2000: 34) argue, *'to reject totally the quantitative perspective is to lose all right to claim factuality for one's results'*. To view my research only from a qualitative perspective would be to situate myself in the qualitative vs. quantitative battle. Graue and Walsh (1998: 17) regard this as being unhelpful as *'opposing something inevitably results in defining oneself in oppositional terms – who one is not and what one does not do instead of who one is and what one does do'*. I like to look at issues from different angles in order to build a complete picture. I recognize the strength of a quantitative perspective and will seek to embrace this within my qualitative study by presenting some of the findings quantitatively. Besides, 'fitness for purpose' is perhaps the best measure of the methods selected for a particular study and *blending* qualitative and quantitative approaches based on rigorous principles for the research is now regarded as sound (Thomas, 2003).



Reflexivity is an important feature of qualitative research, requiring the researcher to be aware of their influence and to be open in recognizing and recording the effects (Blaxter *et al.*, 1996). The objectivism that is a feature of quantitative research requires 'a form of self-emptying in which elements of the self are eradicated from its cognitive activities' (Fay, 1996: 202). This is at odds with my previously stated personal philosophy of openness in the research process. Reflexivity will be an important element in my desire for social justice for, as Griffiths (1998) states, it is a necessary component in helping to reduce bias in research. Without acknowledging my concerns, beliefs, values, opinions, assumptions and experiences, this research certainly would be biased. The autobiographical elements interspersed in this thesis help to provide evidence of reflexivity in my work. I have tried to be open about what I bring with me to the research enterprise and have endeavoured to maintain this stance throughout the fieldwork and beyond.

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The question at the heart of this situated study is:

- Is childhood in crisis?

I intend to address this question through the examination of two further questions:

- How is childhood constructed?
- Why is childhood constructed in the way that it is?

The responses to these further questions will allow me to explore whether participants suggest childhood, in their view, is in crisis. Thus, these research questions will enable me to consider whether the notion of 'childhood in crisis' is myth, reality, or cause for concern. These questions will be explored, empirically, from the perspective of children, parents and the news media. In formulating the research questions I have taken note of Holliday's (2002: 33) advice that qualitative research questions should be '*sufficiently open-ended to allow full exploration and the emergence of factors and issues during the process of the subsequent investigation*'.

## CHOICE OF APPROACH: CASE STUDY WITH INSIGHTS FROM ETHNOGRAPHY

At the outset of my research the decision as to which approach to use centred on a choice between case study and ethnography. In some ways ethnography seemed preferable in that it

*'is by its very nature interpretive, that is, it is concerned to understand the subjective world of human experience. The central aim of the ethnographer is therefore to provide a holistic account that includes the views, perspectives, beliefs, intentions and values of the subjects of the study'* (Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford, 2001: 194).

This seems to be an accurate reflection of my objectives outlined in the previous sections of this chapter. Further, Aubrey *et al.* (2000: 111) describe ethnography as an approach which aims *'to make a person's implicit behaviours explicit'* in the process of developing understanding of that behaviour. Learning these behaviours, which needs to take place in a naturally occurring setting (Walsh, 1998), takes time. In addition, James *et al.* (1998) highlight the fact that ethnography is an approach that has a particular role to play in developing the sociology of childhood in that it allows children a more direct voice in the production of sociological data.

However, my uncertainty with ethnography centred on a key issue. Participant observation is the method most often associated with ethnography. The aim is to gain an insider perspective, which the ethnographer seeks to do by adding *'the dimension of personally experiencing and sharing the same everyday life as those under study'* (Brewer, 2000: 59). In order to do this the ethnographer needs to be accepted as a bona fide member of the observed community (see Aubrey *et al.*, 2000). This causes particular difficulties when undertaking research with children, as researchers need to think through what their adult status entails. Fine and Sandstrom (1988) argue that an adult cannot pass unnoticed as a member of a child group as legitimate adult-child interaction depends on taken-for-granted adult authority. Holmes (1998) agrees with this view whilst also highlighting physical differences between children and adults, and further adds that adults will not be fully accepted into children's cultures because they are unable to relinquish their adult status.

However, Waksler (1991b) and Goode (1991) believe that all aspects of adult superiority, except physical difference, can be cast aside, thus allowing them access to children's groups as a fully participating member. Mandell (1991: 40) takes this a step further, arguing that '*physical differences can be so minimized when participating with children as to be inconsequential in interaction*'. These differences of opinion, coupled with my inexperience as a researcher, suggested to me that a more cautious approach would be appropriate and I therefore decided against using ethnography as the main research approach.

However, in terms of the fieldwork that I wished to undertake with children, ethnography had a particular quality that I admired in that participants are viewed as equal partners: both the researcher and the participants learn, give and gain from the experience (Aubrey *et al.*, 2000). It is therefore an approach that is based on respect and thus lends support to my beliefs about children's competencies. I therefore felt that the characteristic of equal status had an important message to impart for the membership role (to be discussed later on) I would desire in the fieldwork with the children.

As a result of my uncertainty with ethnography, I decided to adopt a case study approach as the main strategy for this research. Robson (1993: 52) states that case study requires the development of detailed, intensive knowledge about a single 'case', or a small number of related 'cases', and involves '*an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence*'. The issue of context has particular importance as case study is particularly useful for researchers who believe that contextual conditions may be relevant to their phenomenon of study (Yin, 1994). The fieldwork will depend upon an understanding of what is being studied, since this prior engagement with theory will help to guide data collection and analysis (Yin, 1994). The different elements of the case will make up a total picture or a vignette that 'says it all' (Greig and Taylor, 1999). Robson (1993) comments that a great strength of case study is its flexibility, thus allowing the research design to be as pre-structured or emergent as the researcher wishes. It thus allows the researcher '*to take advantage of unexpected opportunities rather than being trapped by them*' (Yin, 1994: 55). Case study is carried out within a limited time scale (Bell, 1999) and is the preferred strategy when 'how' or 'why' questions are being posed (Yin, 1994).

The case study approach described above has some particular features that provide a comfortable fit for how I see myself as a researcher. It is an approach that allows the researcher to dig deep in many places, much like the detective who is searching for clues to try and solve a case. As stated previously, I am the type of person who likes to dig and probe, looking at things from different perspectives, keeping an open mind in order to try and build up a complete picture. The flexibility of case study is therefore something that can be utilized to enable me to ask new questions and to search for answers, whilst remaining open to contradictory evidence. The unique flexibility of a case study approach means that it can incorporate both qualitative and quantitative data as well as other research approaches (such as ethnography). Case study is therefore an all-encompassing strategy, thus further fulfilling my desire for a holistic approach.

My exploration of the literature in Chapter Three revealed that the notion of ‘childhood in crisis’ should be translated as multiple expressions of concern about the condition of contemporary childhood. The ‘case’ I decided to investigate is the condition of contemporary childhood within two school communities in southeast England. The social constructionist approach underpinning this study emphasizes the need to study children’s lives in context. For this reason I have adopted and adapted Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory and will use it as a framework to discover the *constructions* of childhood in three bounded research contexts:

- at the micro level through an examination of the perspectives of groups of children and parents at two junior schools in southeast England;
- at the exo level through an analysis of national and local news media samples over set periods of time;
- at the macro level through *literature review* of the UNCRC and the Children Act 1989.

This will enable me to examine the ways in which the different levels of the system interrelate and whether the constructions of childhood are congruent or divergent. Through this exploration, which will employ a variety of methods, I seek to address the question at the heart of this study: Is childhood in crisis? In accordance with a case study approach I sought to obtain an understanding of the relevant issues surrounding the notion of ‘childhood in crisis’ and therefore undertook some focused reading (Chapter Three refers)

to help guide my data collection and analysis. The 'case' was bounded by time in terms of the start date (October 2000) of my period of registration as a PhD student and the deadline to produce the thesis (August 2004, but extended to February 2006). In terms of the fieldwork with children and parents the case study was confined to the period from February 2002 to July 2002. The case was also bounded by age in that it was confined to the period of childhood from 0-12 years, although the children in the fieldwork are aged 9-11 years (see pages 77 and 78-9). My 'how' and 'why' research questions make the case study particularly suitable to an explanatory approach (Yin, 1994): it allows me to explain *how* childhood is constructed and *why* it is constructed in the way that it is. However, the concerns being expressed about contemporary childhood (Chapter Three refers) caused me to ask, 'What is happening here?' The explanatory approach has therefore been supplemented by one that is exploratory, as explanation requires exploration.

A criticism of the case study approach concerns its perceived lack of rigour if the researcher allows *'equivocal evidence or biased views to influence the direction of the findings and conclusions'* (Yin, 1994: 9). Reflexivity is important for helping to reduce bias. In Chapter One I briefly explored my own childhood. Although I am aware that I should not consider it to be the 'ideal' childhood, I cannot escape the fact that it was *my* childhood and therefore forms part of my subjectivity. I am also aware that I came to this study with certain views about the news media and the role they might play in the notion of 'childhood in crisis'. Finally, I am aware that the predominantly social constructionist approach of this study positions me as someone who views children in a particular way – as *beings*. Being open and honest in recognizing and stating these potential biases helps in two ways. Firstly, it helps me to remain alert to these possible biases throughout the research process and secondly, it helps the reader to assess the validity of the research. Failing to acknowledge these potential biases would certainly have made my research biased (Griffiths, 1998).

The flexibility of case study research has enabled me to incorporate another research approach. Although ethnography was initially discounted as the main approach, I agree with Walsh (1998: 232) that ethnography *'opens out the possibility of an understanding of reality which no other method can realize'*. As my research progressed I collected some ethnographic data as a participant observer during the fieldwork with the children. In addition, the documentary analysis of the news media (see pages 99-101 and Chapter

Seven) is informed by ethnographic principles. My research should therefore be seen as contributing towards 'an ethnographic approach' or of providing a 'partial ethnographic account' (Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford, 2001: 193) and thus also forms part of the case study.

### **SELECTING THE RESEARCH SETTINGS AND PARTICIPANTS FOR THE CASE STUDY**

This study adopted a purposive sampling strategy in that participants were selected on the basis that they had the required knowledge or experiences for the study (Greig and Taylor, 1999). Due to the time-consuming nature of the various research activities that were planned, I decided to seek access to two junior schools in southeast England. I decided to invite one class of Year 5 children (aged 9-10 years) and one class of Year 6 children (aged 10-11 years) at each school, along with their parents, to participate in the research. I considered that a comparative element – through the use of two contrasting schools – might provide the opportunity to explore different constructions of childhood, thus offering the potential for more dynamic possibilities in interpretation, such as Lubeck's (1985) study in two contrasting research settings, rather than a study confined to one setting, such as Ball's (1981). Since the area in which the proposed schools are located is predominantly White British, I recognized that my study would reflect this. Issues relating to ethnic minority childhoods were not, therefore, intended to be a focus of the research, although they could be so in the future. However, no population of children and parents will, per se, be alike. As Fay (1996: 39, 47) comments:

*'the self is essentially permeable ... not only are you not separate from others but rather others are part of you ... Each of us is not a closed and bounded entity. Instead we are complex, dynamic compounds emergent from our interactions with others'.*

Therefore, living as we do in a multi-cultural society, the influence of different cultures on the children's and parents' constructions of childhood needs to be acknowledged, respected and valued. Fay's comment can also be applied to other categories, such as social class, religion and (dis)ability. We are all exposed to a variety of experiences in our lives, whether it be through direct interaction with others or indirectly through, for example, the media. All these experiences become part of our subjectivity.



The area in which I intended to undertake the fieldwork did, however, provide the opportunity to explore different socio-economic groups. Buckingham (2000) states that increasing polarization between the rich and poor in the UK has produced a growing underclass, in which families with children are unequally represented. Children are poor because adults are poor and children are dependent on adults economically (Jackson and Scott, 2000). Buckingham (2000) observes that widening inequalities have implications for nearly every aspect of children's lives – for example, in terms of educational opportunities and achievements; leisure options; mobility; and in the purchase of consumer goods and services that are viewed as symbols of childhood. In seeking to explore *how* childhood is constructed I thus felt it might be beneficial to explore the way in which different socio-economic settings might produce different childhoods.

My decision to undertake the fieldwork with children in schools was based on several factors. Although I recognize that childhood is lived out in many different locations, the school environment provided a naturally occurring setting. School is also an important interface between the state and the family, shaping and controlling childhood (Dale, 1989). Additionally, school contextualizes the greater part of children's lives with other children in Western society (James *et al.*, 1998). Since most of the research activities would involve group work I hoped to be able to utilize children's friendship groups. Within the school setting, children are also used to working with each other and with other, sometimes unfamiliar, adults. It is possible that children may feel more relaxed at school, amongst their peers, rather than say, at home, where privacy from other family members might be difficult. Conducting the research in schools would also be more cost-effective than in children's homes, where access might also be more difficult to negotiate. Indeed, Thomas and O'Kane (1998) observe that difficulties in gaining access to children have shaped the design of much research. It is important to remember, however, that the research findings might look different if they were obtained in children's homes, where power relations are different (Mayall, 1994), or in another setting, although this would be the case whichever setting was chosen.

James *et al.* (1998: 174) comment that researchers may choose a particular age group of children in the belief that they are old enough to cope with the research rather than because '*at that particular age in that particular society children are sharing a particular social, rather than simply developmental, sequence*'. However, my decision to involve Year 5 and



Year 6 children in the research centred on the notion of 'tweens' (page 43 refers). Childhood is seen as becoming more compressed as a result of teen characteristics impacting on children between the ages of 8-12 years (Hymowitz, 1999). The inclusion of Year 5 and Year 6 children covers the middle range of this age bracket. In this sense, the age segregation of children in school provided a degree of similarity in the sample.

I began the process of identifying possible schools by looking at the Key Stage 2 Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs) results for the year 2000 (source – *Times Educational Supplement*, 8/12/00) for state schools in England. This provided information about the number of children in a school; the percentage of children with a statement of special educational needs (SEN); the SATs results for Year 6 children; and the annual improvement measure for SATs since 1997. The first search involved identifying schools within a reasonable travelling distance, as I would make many visits, and also schools of a certain size (those with more than 300 children). Since I wished to involve as many children as possible from whole classes, a larger school indicated more than one class in each year group, thus offering some flexibility for schools to decide which class might be involved. Schools with a high number of children with SEN statements (more than 7%) were eliminated. Whilst I did not propose to exclude any child with SEN at the two schools at which I would be based, I did not intend this study to have a specific focus on children with SEN, although a future study could do so. The SAT scores were considered in the sense that high scores (85%) *perhaps* indicated a school from a more socially advantaged area and lower scores (below 65%) *perhaps* indicated schools from a more socially disadvantaged area. However, this is a very grey area and many schools also had scores within these two bands. At this point it was therefore easier to include schools in the next stage of my search rather than eliminate them.

Having identified a number of possible schools, the next stage was to look at the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspection report for each school, which I accessed through the Ofsted website. This gives a range of specific information about a school as well as providing the reader with a general feel about a school. I used the percentage of children eligible for free school meals as an indicator for identifying schools from contrasting socio-economic backgrounds. The national average for those eligible for free school meals in 2000 was 17% (source – *Independent*, 7/12/00) and I therefore searched for schools significantly above and below this mark. An important consideration for

inclusion in this study was the issue of parental partnership. An Ofsted report provides general information about a school's partnership with parents, as well as recording the response rate for the questionnaire issued to parents by Ofsted during an inspection in order to seek their views on various aspects of school-life. Since I would require parents' permission for children to take part in the research, and parents would also be invited to complete a questionnaire and volunteer for an interview, schools that revealed a good partnership with parents and a favourable response rate to the Ofsted questionnaire were important criteria for short-listing schools. Whilst two schools satisfied some of my criteria, in that they had a high percentage of children eligible for free school meals (indeed, the highest percentages I came across), they were eliminated from my search because parental partnership seemed weak and the response rate for the Ofsted questionnaire was below 10% at both schools. I felt that attempting to undertake my fieldwork in such schools might not enable the research objectives to be met. However, I hoped that within the sample populations there would be some representations from children and parents living in disadvantaged circumstances, whose constructions of childhood *might* be different.

Short-listing schools on the basis of the aforementioned criteria was a relatively easy task as percentages on the various aspects provided benchmarks. However, it is important to be open about other factors that came into play, as these may be considered to reveal bias on my part – readers will need to decide for themselves. For instance, I found myself eliminating schools for a variety of reasons – if, for example, the school had suffered from vandalism; leadership at the school was weak; there was a high turnover of staff; the school had suffered from long periods of staff absence; pupil behaviour was poor; there was a relatively high percentage of 'unsatisfactory' teaching. As a parent of two children who have progressed through the primary school system, as well as knowledge gained during my undergraduate studies, I have gained valuable insight into pressures faced by the teaching profession. Since the planned research activities would be relatively time-consuming, I considered it important to try and identify schools that would be interested in and welcome my project.

A short-list of ten schools was composed – five schools from more socially advantaged areas and five from more socially disadvantaged areas. A letter was sent to the headteacher of each school, asking them to consider participating in the research (Appendix 1). A letter

of introduction from my research supervisor (Appendix 2) was included. This not only added credibility to the research but, in this age of ‘stranger danger’, also provided some evidence that I was who I claimed to be. Two schools indicated they were unable to take part, three schools failed to reply, and five schools indicated they would be happy to discuss the research further. Two schools were then approached further, with both subsequently consenting to participate in the research. A letter of thanks was sent to the three remaining schools. Once the two class teachers at each school had been identified, each was sent an information pack about the research. This included a photograph of myself; information about my personal background; an overview of the research; a description of the fieldwork process, including anticipated time-length needed for each research activity and ways in which the teacher’s help would be appreciated (such as class organization and issuing verbal reminders); and copies of documents that would be issued to children and parents.

The following information about the two schools – which were separated by a distance of approximately 13 miles – was taken from the Ofsted reports. At both schools there were few children from ethnic minority groups. Both schools were situated near to the coast. At Howland School<sup>2</sup> 34% of the children were eligible for free school meals. The school was set in a town in an area recognized as being socially disadvantaged. There was high unemployment in the area and many of the children came from ‘less favoured’ backgrounds. However, the school received children from a full range of social and economic backgrounds. At Moorcroft School 8% of the children were eligible for free school meals. The school was set in a village and received children from a range of backgrounds from the village, surrounding villages and nearby town.

### ***Initial contact with staff at Howland and Moorcroft Schools.***

I met with the headteacher of Howland School in December 2001 to discuss the possibility of the school taking part in my research. Our conversation was relaxed. Permission was granted for my research and we spent a little time reminiscing about our own childhoods. I telephoned the headteacher of Moorcroft School to make an appointment to discuss the possibility of carrying out my research there, but as he was not available at the time he

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<sup>2</sup> Pseudonyms have been applied to the two schools, teachers, children and parents throughout this thesis – see pages 105-6.

returned my call. During this conversation permission was granted for my research to take place and the headteacher did not feel that it would be necessary for us to meet beforehand.

Prior to undertaking my research activities at the two schools I met with each of the class teachers in order to introduce myself and to negotiate some preliminary dates for the research to commence. The meeting with the Year 5 teacher at Howland School in January 2002 was also relaxed. We sat side-by-side in the classroom, I was made to feel very welcome, and her friendliness and willingness to be flexible in accommodating the research shone through. The meeting with the Year 5 teacher at Moorcroft School took place in her office and the desk between us seemed to serve as a barrier. This teacher seemed to take control of my research at the outset, dictating some of the terms as to how, and when, the research would be carried out.

Rather than just 'taking' findings from the schools involved in my study, I considered it important to offer some of my time in return (see Appendix 1). Whilst this offer was not taken up by either of the headteachers, at Howland School I helped with the Year 5 class involved in my research for one afternoon a week during the summer term (after my research with that class had come to an end) and I also became involved in the after school football club, both at a participatory and supervisory level. As part of the familiarization process with the children at both schools, I participated and helped in each class prior to the commencement of the research activities (see page 84).

#### **MEMBERSHIP ROLE: RESEARCH WITH CHILDREN**

My undergraduate (as an Early Childhood Studies student) and postgraduate studies have increased my awareness of the inherent power inequalities in the adult-child relationship. Punch (2002) comments that many aspects of children's lives are controlled and limited by adults and children tend to expect adults' power over them. Coady (2001) observes that children, as a socially powerless group, have been heavily represented among victims of research. In seeking to undertake fieldwork with children it was therefore important for me to think about issues surrounding my adult status. Holmes (1998) suggests that female researchers (which I am) may have an innate size advantage over male researchers because they are generally smaller (I am 5 feet 3 inches) and therefore perhaps less intimidating and unthreatening. However, the fact remains that as an adult researcher a power imbalance still exists due to physical, social, cognitive and political distances between

children and myself (Graue and Walsh, 1998). In particular I needed to be aware that the fieldwork with children would be taking place in the school setting, where children are usually expected to conform to adults' rules and to learn from those in authority – teachers. However, although I wished to treat children as equal partners in the research process, within the context of the school setting there was a sense in which the tables would be turned as I wished to learn from the children!

Walsh (1998) comments that the fieldwork relationships that the researcher establishes need to be able to generate the data that are required and that the identity the researcher assumes will determine the success of this. I therefore considered it vitally important to find ways of redressing the inherent power imbalance in order to gain the children's trust, thus hopefully empowering them to share their thoughts, feelings, concerns and views with me. I concur with Alderson's (2000: 135) view that *'Working with children more equally involves sharing power with them'*. This quote served as a useful reminder to me in my commitment to social justice.

In order to mitigate the power imbalance between the children and myself I decided to develop a field relationship with the children based on the idea of the 'friend role' advocated by Fine and Sandstrom (1988). I sought to create a relationship that would be more *horizontally* structured, rather than the usual vertical structure of adult-child relationships (see Hartup, 1992). I recognized that building such a relationship and gaining the children's trust would take time, as one cannot automatically become a 'friend' (indeed, it cannot be assumed that 'friendship' will materialize; the adult researcher is always likely to remain an outsider due to the physical, social, cognitive and political distances mentioned on page 82). Time was therefore built into the research design so that we could familiarize ourselves with each other prior to the commencement of the research activities. I saw this as being extremely important since, as Aubrey *et al.* (2000: 16) state, *'parents' and social caution actively discourages children from talking to strangers'*. The specific characteristics I adopted for the 'friend role' were as follows:

- I adopted a non-authoritarian and non-disciplinarian stance (Fine and Sandstrom, 1988). Within this I sought to distance myself from my adult identity. However, I recognized that as an adult I had a legal and moral duty to intervene if a child was in physical danger (Fine and Sandstrom, 1988). For example, on one occasion a

playground 'fight' was beginning to escalate to the point where I thought I might have to intervene. However, at this point the bell rang for the end of break-time and the 'fight' dissolved. I also distanced myself from my adult identity by forgoing the privilege of using the staff room at break-times: I either went into the playground with the children or stayed in the classroom with some of the children.

- I encouraged the children to use my first name, thus putting myself on an equal footing with them. I recognize that this is not the norm for adults in most school settings. Several children had difficulty with this and continued to call me 'Miss' or 'Mrs Cox' throughout my time at their school. Although all the teachers were made aware that I wished the children to use my first name, the Year 6 teacher at Moorcroft School always referred to me as 'Mrs Cox', which influenced the way some of the children addressed me. I tried to alleviate this by verbally reinforcing my first name to the children.
- I participated and helped in some lessons prior to the research activities. This promoted rapport with the children. I participated in a range of lessons, such as dance, singing, games, cricket, netball, cooking and art, and helped in other lessons, such as English, science, mathematics and history.
- I spent time talking to the children and made a conscious effort to learn their names as quickly as possible. Opportunities for talking to the children on an informal basis within the classroom were sometimes restricted. Time that I spent in the playground, either before the start of school or at break-times, was therefore useful for having informal conversations with the children.
- I based the relationship on respect, viewing the children as equals. For example, on several occasions I held the door open for children to pass through. I also showed respect by carefully listening to what they told me. For example, a comment made by a child one week about an unwell relative was followed up the next week by enquiring how the relative was. Such acts hopefully helped to establish the research relationship by reinforcing to the children that I was someone who was interested, listened, and could empathize.
- I based the relationship on reciprocity: '*Only to take is unfair. To give and take is more just*' (Herbert, 1994: 101). I felt the children would be more willing to share their views and experiences with me if I shared something of myself with them. I therefore invited the children to ask personal questions as well as questions about the research. Some of the questions the children asked were: '*How old are you?*' '*Have you got any*



*children?’ ‘Have you ever had a love at first sight experience?’ ‘What will your research accomplish?’* I tried to answer all of the children’s questions openly and honestly.

- I sought to be someone who was fun to be with and not a ‘proper adult’ (Pollard, 1987). All of the above points helped in this respect. Additionally, I showed myself willing to share a joke with the children and to join in with some of their playground games. I also tried to put myself at the same level as the children. For example, I sat on the floor with them and bent down to talk to them if they were working at tables.

It was important that the class teachers were aware of the membership role that I wished to adopt. Details about this were therefore included in the information pack sent to the teachers and were verbally reinforced at the pre-research meeting with each teacher (page 82 refers)<sup>3</sup>.

### **THE PLANNED FIELDWORK PROCESS**

The expectation of case study methodology, which was employed for this study, is that a range of methods is used to meet the aims and objectives of the research questions. Such methods need to be open-ended, both within and across methods, in order to build a detailed understanding of ‘the case’. Data collection and analysis is thus a simultaneous activity. The chosen case study methods aimed to address the research questions (page 72 refers) whilst taking into account the framework applied in adopting and adapting Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory (pages 28-30 refer). My exploration of the relevant literature (see Chapter Three) played an important role in helping to generate questions posed to research participants. The planned fieldwork can be summarized as follows:

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<sup>3</sup> My ‘friend role’, however, developed differently at the two schools – see pages 126-8 and 254-5.



**Table 4.1 Overview of the planned fieldwork process. Observation was used as a complementary research method.**

Phase	Method	Participant	Time scale
1	Pre-pilot and pilot	Children and parents	March-July 01
2	Questionnaire	Year 5 children Year 6 children	February 02 June 02
3	Questionnaire	Year 5 parents Year 6 parents	Distributed February 02 June 02
4	Projective focus group - poster design and discussion	Year 5 children Year 6 children	Feb-March 02 June-July 02
5	Group interview	Year 5 children Year 6 children	March 02 July 02
6	Interview	Year 5 parents Year 6 parents	April-June 02 July 02
7	Documentary analysis	National newspapers National television news Local television news National radio news Local newspapers Local radio news	August 02 August 03 September 03 September 03 Nov-Dec 03 May 04

(Detailed information about these phases can be found on pages 89-101).

In the methods used with the children and parents I considered ways in which any power imbalance could be reduced. Achieving this largely depended upon establishing good research relationships. In this way I hoped to reduce the difficulties associated with demand characteristics, whereby participants try to respond in the way they feel the researcher wishes.

Interviewing is one of the main methods used in case study research (see, for example, Robson, 1993). Although it is a subjective method, and is thus liable to bias, it is flexible in that it allows the researcher to probe and follow up on responses (Bell, 1999). In this way it is possible to find out about a person's inner state (Seale, 1998). Brewer (2000: 66) describes qualitative research interviews as giving access to participants '*meaning-endowing capacities and produces rich, deep data*'. The open-ended nature that characterizes such interviews makes data analysis more difficult (Cohen and Manion, cited in Robson, 1993) than the closed-ended questions that are a feature of positivist research. However, I support Boyden and Ennew's (1998) view that the interview should not be the first method used because

*'Questions are speech acts which place two people in direct, immediate interaction. In doing so they carry messages about relationships – about relative status, assertions of status and challenges to status'* (Goodey, 1978, cited in Boyden and Ennew, 1998: 123).

Self-completion questionnaires were thus used as the initial method with both the children and the parents. This less obtrusive questioning method enabled me to establish the research on a formal footing prior to the potentially more obtrusive interview situation. At the same time, this method hopefully contributed towards the development of positive research relationships. Such action was perhaps particularly important with the children due to the heightened power differential, although I had spent time getting to know them prior to the start of the research activities (page 84 refers). Whilst questionnaires are usually identified as being part of a large-scale positivist study to provide generalizations about the target population, Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford (2001) note that they can also be used with small populations. Self-completion questionnaires are a quick way of collecting data (Herbert, 1990), but need to be carefully constructed if ambiguity is to be avoided (Robson, 1993). I therefore spent much time drafting and re-drafting the questionnaires prior to the pilot phase. Robson (1993: 243) argues that questionnaire data are superficial as *'there is little or no check on the honesty or seriousness of responses'*. I addressed this particular difficulty by directing participants to provide explanations for many of their responses. Indeed, this approach was important within the context of this interpretivist study as I wished to explore participants' meanings.

The aim of the methods with the children was to build up a picture of what contemporary childhood is like, as constructed by those experiencing it themselves. At Howland School I received parental permission (see Appendix 3, which was distributed by pupil post) for 30 Year 5 children (out of a possible 32) and 25 Year 6 children (out of a possible 31). At Moorcroft School I received parental permission for 28 Year 5 children (out of a possible 30) and 30 Year 6 children (out of a possible 33). In the pilot 20 children out of a possible 32 had participated. The increase in level of participation may have been due to changes I made in the letter sent to parents and the instructions provided for class teachers in the information pack sent to them prior to the start of the research (page 81 refers). Whilst the number of children eligible to take part in the research was extremely encouraging it led

me to reconsider my planning of the research activities. My original intention for group work activities had been for the children to determine their group size. However, due to the time-scale I was working within it became necessary to have groups of 4-6 children (although several groups had fewer). I could have reduced the number of children taking part, but I considered it important that the research was inclusive and, therefore, that as many children who wished to participate could do so. Any children not taking part in the research were organized by the class teacher to undertake separate activities. All of the activities with the children were undertaken during school-time (not break-time) and all of the teachers were generally flexible about the length of time required for each activity.

Punch (2002: 322) comments that '*The way in which a researcher perceives the status of children influences the choice of methods*'. Positioning children, as I do, within a competence paradigm required careful consideration of appropriate methods. I decided to settle for a balance that reflected my perception of children as competent reporters of their experience whilst also recognizing they may have *different* competencies to adults. However, a group of children will have a range of competencies and I therefore sought to provide a range of methods, incorporating both individual and group work that would permit all of the children to find an avenue to express their views in some form. The ongoing development of my 'friend role' was important for forging the good research relationships that would hopefully enable them to do so. I considered group work with the children to be an important approach for minimizing the power differential – the number of children outnumbered myself, the researcher (Morrow and Richards, 1996; Boyden and Ennew, 1998; Mason and Falloon, 2001). Being in a group has further advantages in research with children. For example, children can encourage each other to participate and it can help children to relax if they are with familiar people (Costley, 2000); it can give some children more confidence to talk than if talking to an adult on their own (Boyden and Ennew, 1998); ideas can be bounced off each other and it can provide group support for 'risky' topics (Dockrell *et al.*, 2000). Researchers, however, need to remain alert to power hierarchies within groups as these can influence who speaks and what is said (Cohen and Manion, 1989, cited in Robson, 1993).

Throughout my time at both schools I made informal observations of the children and the research settings, recording them as field notes as soon as possible after each visit to a school. Robson (1993) describes observation as an appropriate method for getting at 'real

life' in the 'real world' and for Greig and Taylor (1999: 83) it is a method that *'empowers the child whose 'silent' voice is heard by the researcher'*. In this way it was a useful complementary method to support information obtained by other means. As my time with the children at both schools progressed, my role as an observer developed more into one of participant observation. Indeed, as Atkinson and Hammersley (1998: 111) argue, *'in a sense all social research is a form of participant observation, because we cannot study the social world without being part of it'*. I shared a number of experiences with the children, such as morning assembly, break-time and lunchtime, as well as additional time spent in the classroom during the fieldwork. These occasions provided further insights into their constructions of childhood, as I was able to hear words and observe actions and emotions as they occurred naturally. In this way an ethnographic style of research emerged. It is difficult to know, however, the extent to which my presence may have impacted on behaviour in the research settings.

Table 4.1 (page 86) shows that the fieldwork was undertaken in seven phases. These phases should not be seen as being completely separate from each other as some of the phases overlapped. Further, fieldwork with the children and parents was undertaken in two cycles – initially with Year 5 children and their parents and subsequently with Year 6 children and their parents. I considered that it was not feasible to undertake research with Year 6 children until SATs had been completed in mid-May. It should be noted that this study did not intend to match a child's view with their parent's view, for to do so would have raised direct issues concerning confidentiality and anonymity. Detailed information about the seven phases now follows.

### ***Phase one***

This phase involved the pre-piloting and piloting of most of the planned research methods with children and parents. Further details about the methods used can be found in the information given in phases 2-6.

The children's questionnaire was pre-piloted with six children (friends' children and my two sons) aged from 8-12 years. This enabled me to identify questions that required refinement, those that it would be best to omit, and also new questions to be included (following suggestions made on an evaluation sheet). After consultation with a friend, who is a primary school teacher, I also restructured many of the original questions by breaking

them down into two parts. The projective focus group was pre-piloted with three children (including my two sons, aged 10 and 12 years at the time). Their frank comments convinced me that this was a useful method for eliciting rich discussion about contemporary childhood. The parents' questionnaire was pre-piloted with my husband and a friend. Advice was also sought from two other relatives. Comments from these various 'critical friends', as well as my two research supervisors (who had also advised on the children's questionnaire) enabled me to think more carefully about why I was asking certain questions, the usefulness of the questions and the position of certain questions within the questionnaire. A number of amendments were made to the questionnaire.

I decided to pilot some of my research ideas with a group similar to the one that would form the population for the study. As a novice researcher this would also, I considered, provide valuable experience for me to 'learn on the job'. The setting for the pilot case study – a junior school in southeast England – was selected for convenience, access and geographical proximity (Yin, 1994): the school was near to where I lived; my younger son was in Year 6 at the school; and I had previously been permitted to undertake some small-scale research there for my Early Childhood Studies degree (see page 4).

Research methods with the children – questionnaire, projective focus group and group interviews – were piloted with a class of Year 6 children. Parental permission was received for 20 children (out of a possible 32) to participate. Piloting the methods with a whole class enabled me to assess the logistics of the proposed fieldwork. An important learning point was the need for clearer communication with the class teacher, as I found myself writing a number of notes/letters to him with regard to fieldwork procedures. A further extremely important learning point centred on my membership role. At the time of undertaking the pilot I did not have a firm idea of the role I wished to pursue, but had read about the 'friend role' advocated by Fine and Sandstrom (1988). During the pilot I found that the 'friend role' developed gradually, but naturally. I found that my participation in class lessons prior to the research activities was particularly helpful for promoting rapport with the children. However, I felt uncomfortable when, on several occasions, the teacher appeared to draw attention to my adult identity. For example, on one occasion the teacher was moaning at the children and called to me at the back of the class, *'we always have this every day Mrs Cox'*. It was thus important for teachers to be made aware of the membership role that I wished to adopt. It was as a result of the learning points outlined here that I decided to

produce the information pack described on page 81 for future class teachers involved in the research. Piloting the research with the children also enabled me to identify further improvements that could be made to fieldwork procedures, such as ensuring that children had sufficient opportunities to ask questions about the research and the need to clarify certain terminology.

A questionnaire was distributed to the parents of all the children in the class. As the questionnaire was completed anonymously, no follow-up questionnaire was issued. A disadvantage of self-completion questionnaires is that a low percentage may be returned (Herbert, 1990). The low response rate in the pilot – 31% – led me to consider ways in which this method could be improved for the future fieldwork. However, the pilot of the questionnaire proved to be useful as it revealed an error that had arisen as a result of alterations made after the pre-pilot. Although two parents volunteered for an interview, I decided not to follow these up at this stage in order to allow time for ideas for future interviews to filter down.

### ***Phase two***

I devised a questionnaire for the children to identify themes that were important in their lives. Through this method I was able to incorporate questions that covered a wide range of childhood experience. Dockrell *et al.* (2000) suggest that it may be inappropriate for 10-year-olds to complete questionnaires due to concerns about children's linguistic skills to understand the meaning of the question and the possible lack of literacy skills to produce a decipherable response. Whilst this is perhaps a legitimate concern, Boyden and Ennew (1998: 107) take a different view:

*'Learning to write gives children a powerful way of expressing themselves, through which they can also take an active part in research ... Writing places a child at the centre of the research process as an acting subject. This means that what is expressed is a reflection of a child's own feelings and experiences, capturing more aspects than a researcher might have imagined and freeing the child from the researcher's preconceived frameworks.'*



I therefore saw writing, in some form, as an opportunity to capitalize on some children's abilities. Consultation with a primary school teacher had helped to ensure the children could understand and answer the questions.

My initial concern about the use of a questionnaire concerned its test-like nature. However, it can perhaps be argued that this is its strength as within the current school environment children are very familiar with testing procedures. Although several children asked '*Are we doing your test today?*', this appeared to be posed in a way that suggested the children were looking forward to the questionnaire. I acknowledge, however, that for some children the questionnaire *may* have been viewed as a test to be endured. I reiterated that the questionnaire was not a test, that there were no right or wrong answers as it was their views that I was interested in. The questionnaire provided the opportunity for children to work alone. This may be preferable for reticent children, for whom group work may be intimidating (see Lewis, 1992). Written instructions for the questionnaire (Appendix 4) were reinforced verbally and the children's understanding of terminology on the questionnaire (Appendix 5) – such as 'treasured possession' and 'spider diagram' – was checked and clarified where necessary. I provided texture in the questionnaire, through the use of closed and open questions, to hopefully retain the children's interest as well as to draw upon the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The inclusion of diagrams for completion provided the opportunity for drawing skills to be used. One of the diagrams – 'My week' in section 2 (Appendix 5) – was adapted from a technique used by Christensen and James (2000b). The questionnaires permitted the children to raise potentially sensitive issues e.g. section 1, question 11: 'Do you worry about anything?' I was always on hand when each class completed their questionnaires and tried to answer the children's queries in a way that did not directly put suggestions into their mind.

A total of 107 questionnaires were completed. Of these only a few presented *some* difficulties with deciphering responses due to weak literacy skills. Although the questionnaire was an individual activity it was evident that some children worked together and produced the same responses. Whilst this indicates that the questionnaires do represent the children's ideas as a group it was important, as Punch (2002) advises, not to attach too much significance to certain recurring ideas. However, it was noticeable that issues relating to death were a frequent occurrence. I therefore considered it important to discuss this

sensitive topic in the final research activity with the children – the group interview – by which time I was very familiar to the children.

### *Phase three*

I devised a questionnaire (Appendix 6) for the parents to provide an initial insight into the issues under investigation, as well as for obtaining other specific information, such as parents' consumption of news and demographic details. I hoped that a good response rate would enable me to ascertain some views that were representative of the sample population. The questionnaire asked parents to reflect on childhood in the UK and had two key aims. Firstly, it sought to explore parents' views and concerns about contemporary childhood. National newspaper items (from a variety of tabloids and broadsheets) with representations of children up to the age of 12 years, and issues relating to children generally, had been retained from January 1999 to February 2001 for the sole purpose of identifying issues to compose a key part of the questionnaire (section 3, question 1). News items were used for composing this part of the questionnaire as media reporting is often central to the construction and reporting of crisis (Franklin, 1999).

The benefits of an historical perspective (pages 63 and 68 refer) were employed for the questionnaire as I hoped that encouraging parents to reflect on their own childhood would provide insights into their constructions of contemporary childhood. Secondly, in utilizing Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory as a framework for this study, the questionnaire began to explore the relationship between parents (in the microsystem) and the portrayal of children in the news media (the exosystem) upon their constructions of childhood. Within the context of qualitative research a number of the questions were open-ended, thus providing the opportunity to express views in a personal way. To help maintain parents' motivation for completing the questionnaire, as well as drawing upon the strength offered by quantitative research, I provided texture by incorporating a number of closed questions as well as attitudinal and rating scales. In a bid to achieve a favourable response rate I reduced the surprise element by increasing the time that parents had to think about participating (Frey and Oishi, 1995). The earlier letter seeking parents' permission for children's participation in the research (Appendix 3) therefore also informed them of the future questionnaire for parents. I made four further changes to hopefully improve on the low response rate in the pilot. Firstly, since Hague (1993) considers that the cover letter sent with a questionnaire is as important as the questionnaire, I made changes that would

hopefully motivate more parents to complete the questionnaire (see Appendix 7 for cover letter); secondly, I enclosed a pen with the questionnaire; thirdly, I followed up non-response; and fourthly, I only distributed the questionnaire to the parents of children participating in the research.

The questionnaire was distributed by pupil post. Parents were given approximately ten days to complete the questionnaire, with non-response followed up with a further questionnaire. Marking each questionnaire with the child's initials enabled me to identify those for whom I had not received a response. Space was allocated on the questionnaire for parents to volunteer for an interview. A reply slip was also enclosed to enable parents to apply for feedback on the research if they wished to do so.

Given the time-consuming nature of the questionnaire the response rates were extremely encouraging:

- Howland Year 5: 66%
- Howland Year 6: 76%
- Moorcroft Year 5: 85%
- Moorcroft Year 6: 86%

However, what needs to be acknowledged is that some parents chose not to complete the questionnaire and I therefore know nothing about their constructions of childhood.

#### ***Phase four***

This phase involved the use of projective focus groups (Krueger, 1998a). Although the questionnaire (phase two) had permitted the children to answer many of the questions in a personal way the questions had, nevertheless, been posed by myself. The purpose of the projective focus group, therefore, was to reduce the power differential by enabling the children to set the agenda with regard to their constructions of childhood. A number of authors have noted the strengths of visual stimuli in research with children. For example, visual stimuli enrol children's enthusiasm and interest (Christensen and James, 2000b); they provide a focus to maintain children's attention (Fabian, 1996); and they make the topic more concrete (Scott, 2000). I decided to employ the strengths of this technique by asking the children to *create* the visual stimulus in the form of a poster. This is in keeping

with suggestions for projective focusing techniques: the idea of a poster sought to blend, and extend, Krueger's (1998a) suggestions of making a collage and drawing a picture. A significant strength of the poster activity was that the children, through discussions of their poster, would be involved in the analysis of the data they had created. This helped to further reduce the power differential between the children and myself, as the poster did not rely on my interpretation alone.

The children were given a note (Appendix 8) one week prior to the poster design, asking them to look for items at home to use for their poster. The children brought items such as photographs, Pokémon<sup>4</sup> cards and football stickers. On the day of the poster design I provided some magazines, catalogues and local newspapers to supplement the children's items. I acknowledge that in this way I had some influence on this research activity. Each group was provided with a large sheet of coloured paper and a box of resources (purchased specifically for the research) containing felt tips, crayons, pencil, ruler, eraser, pencil sharpener, blank paper, scissors and glue. The children were asked to design a poster that would help aliens to understand what children and childhood are. The initial focus was therefore very broad. This is in keeping with projective questioning techniques and helps the researcher to identify where to focus attention (Krueger, 1998a). Written instructions for the poster design (Appendix 9), which took place in class, were reinforced verbally. The children were largely able to work in friendship groups for this activity. It should be noted that although the poster design activity helped to minimize the researcher-researched power differential, some groups had their own power imbalances that needed to be worked through. The posters provided a rich source of information about the children's constructions of childhood at a particular moment in time and helped to visually identify the commonality and diversity of childhood.

Each group was taken out of their classroom to discuss their poster with me. Holmes (1998) suggests this approach can be anxiety producing for children as it may make them feel they have misbehaved. My experience suggested otherwise as I found that many of the children positively liked this aspect of the research and I often had difficult decisions to make about which group to see next as there were many willing volunteers! Conducting the discussions in the classrooms was not, I consider, a feasible option due to the inevitable disruption and distraction it would have caused. Trying to find a private quiet space for the

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<sup>4</sup> Pokémon, a popular global phenomenon in children's media culture, evolved in the mid 1990s.

discussions was not easy. This was particularly the case at Howland School, where discussions often had to be in areas where staff or other children were sometimes present. This *may* have affected what the children chose to talk about (Boyden and Ennew, 1998). This highlights a difficulty in undertaking research in schools and raises issues concerning confidentiality. How confidential is group work anyway (see Lewis, 1992) – although I offered confidentiality to the children, ensuring that what was said within a group remained within the group was outside my control.

Discussion groups were, with the children's permission, tape-recorded. The use of a tape recorder can affect what is being said, how it is being said, and can make the researcher less attentive through over-reliance on the tape-recorder to do the listening (Graue and Walsh, 1998). However, I saw tape-recording as being extremely important as it enabled me to capture everything that was said, leaving me free to observe and to help develop the discussion. Within a group context it would have been extremely difficult to make meaningful written notes without disturbing the flow of conversation.

According to Scott (2000), guidance for best practice regarding group work suggests that boys and girls should be interviewed separately as they have different communication styles. However, this fails to respect children's own preferences for working together. I considered it important to respect the children's wishes and, as a result, there were a number of mixed gender groups through personal choice<sup>5</sup>. I sought to address power dynamics within some groups by trying to draw all children into the discussions (phase 5 also), which were conversational in style.

A particular strength of visual aids in research with children is that, as O'Kane (2000: 141) comments, while focused on 'concrete events' they also '*enable dialogue about complex and abstract issues*'. Thus items on posters did not end conversations but opened up discussion about other issues. For example, in one group a picture of an animal led to a conversation about pets, which led to a child-initiated discussion about pets that had died, which led to a child-initiated discussion about a school friend who had died. In this way children themselves chose to talk about some sensitive issues.

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<sup>5</sup> The Year 5 teacher at Moorcroft School requested that all group work was undertaken in the children's literacy groups, which were all mixed gender.

### *Phase five*

Group interviews were undertaken with the children in order to gain a deeper insight into some of their previous responses, to develop emerging ideas and to explore other issues relevant to this study. In preparation for this I read all the children's questionnaires (phase two) and listened to the tapes (phase four), making notes as I did so. This enabled me to identify some topics for the semi-structured interview schedules (see Appendix 10 for an example). Further topics were incorporated, informed by my background reading on the notion of 'childhood in crisis' (Chapter Three refers). Additionally, in using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory as a framework for this study the interview schedules included a topic to explore the relationship between the children (in the microsystem) and the news media (in the exosystem). This provided an avenue for exploring the children's perspectives on their exposure to 'adult' knowledge, the central issue in Postman's (1982) argument about the 'disappearance of childhood' (page 40 refers).

The children remained in the same groups as for the poster activity. Once again the children were taken out of the classroom for this activity and the interviews were tape-recorded. One of the earlier interviews did not proceed well; since the children were fidgety and their concentration was poor I decided to end the interview after approximately 20 minutes. This caused me to question the success of my 'friend role'. However, I came to view this as a missed opportunity. I realised that on certain occasions it might be better to give the children more control over what they wished to talk about, thus further helping to reduce the power differential. Since I wished to find out how the children themselves constructed childhood, I considered that *anything* they had to say was relevant. For example, Sally and Matt (Howland) quickly became disinterested in the interview questions and proceeded to engage in conversation between themselves. I just sat and listened as they discussed arrangements about what they would do together after school and in this way I gained further insight into their friendship. The need for a more flexible approach was particularly evident in the latter stages of the group interviews with the Year 6 children. Many of these children were experiencing a range of emotions concerning their impending departure from primary school and forthcoming admission to secondary school. For example, in one interview the children wished to 'let off steam' about their teacher. It seemed important to let them do so as that was what was important to them at that moment



in time in *their* childhood. By not imposing my agenda it was thus possible to find out more about what was important to the children.

### ***Phase six***

The purpose of the parent interviews was to gain a more in-depth understanding of parents' constructions of contemporary childhood, particularly with regard to their concerns. In using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory as a framework for this study the interviews also sought to explore the relationship between the parents' constructions of childhood (in the microsystem) and the portrayal of children in the news media (in the exosystem). Interviewees were selected randomly from volunteers. Letters (see Appendix 11 for an example) were posted to check on parents' availability, followed by telephone calls to finalise arrangements. Eleven interviews were undertaken with Howland parents (two of these were joint interviews, thus involving thirteen parents in total) and eight interviews with Moorcroft parents. Interviews lasted for no less than one hour and were usually at least 1½ hours long. Parents were given assurances of confidentiality and anonymity and with their permission the interviews were tape-recorded. Feelings and thoughts about the interviews were written up as field notes.

The questionnaire completed by the parent acted as a key focus for the interview and was used to provide a semi-structured approach. Prior to each cycle of the interviews (Year 5 and Year 6 parents) I examined all the parents' questionnaires in order to identify emerging trends. These were used to help devise topics for the interview schedule (see Appendix 12), which was also informed by my background reading for this study. Further topics were added to enable exploration of certain aspects relating to the news media. Before each interview I examined the parent's questionnaire and identified some responses that I explored further. I also asked all interviewees to expand on their responses given in question 1 of section 3 of the questionnaire. This enabled me to gain a greater insight into their level of concern about a range of issues relating to contemporary childhood in the UK. Additionally, interviewees were also asked to expand on their responses to question 11 of section 3 of the questionnaire. Together, these various aspects were interspersed with the topics from the interview schedule. The absence of a formal structure to my questions gave parents more freedom to respond accurately and in-depth (Brewer, 2000).

Frey and Oishi (1995: 113) argue that the researcher should '*remain neutral by keeping personal opinions out of the interview process*'. However, as with the children, I believed that a more reciprocal relationship, based on openness and honesty, would be more likely to build the trust that would empower parents to share their views, thoughts and feelings. I therefore sought to reduce any possible power imbalance by sharing some of my own personal identity and views. Although this brings the possibility of bias, Oakley (1981: 58) argues that it is also '*the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives*'. Perhaps it was this approach, coupled with my female status, which led to three female interviewees making disclosures about sexual abuse during their childhood. As a novice researcher I was unsure of how to respond to these disclosures; instinct told me to permit the parents to say what they wished to and to not probe further. Such instances revealed the highly subjective and emotive nature of childhood (see also discussion regarding the risk/benefit equation, page 105) and that childhood is not always a happy time. Although I shared some of my own experiences and views with the parents I paid particular attention, as I did in the fieldwork with the children, to ensure that I was non-judgemental. In using this approach the research process is democratized and the participants empowered (Cannold, 2001). Indeed, the etiquette of the researcher remaining non-judgemental about the researched actually makes the researcher relatively powerless (Lee, 1993). During the interviews I also remained aware of my possible bias about the news media and therefore made a point of asking parents to consider ways in which the news media portray children in a positive manner. I felt that in conducting the interviews I was respectful and sensitive to parents' needs and wishes. For example, I gave parents the choice of where and when they wished the interviews to take place: this resulted in five interviews taking place in the schools and fourteen interviews in parents' homes; some interviews were undertaken during the evening and some also at weekends. This flexibility was important for making parents feel as comfortable as possible during the interview. After each interview I sent a thank you card to the parent(s).

### ***Phase seven***

The purpose of the documentary analysis was to discover how childhood was constructed by the news media. More specifically, it sought to identify the constructions of children that my research participants were exposed to. Decisions about which news media to include in my samples were therefore based on those accessed by the parents in this study (Appendix 6, section 3 refers). A variety of national and local news media – newspapers,

television and radio – were included in the samples (see pages 211-13 for detailed information). My search for representations of children (up to the age of 12 years), and issues relating to children generally, produced a total of 552 news items for analysis. Finding an appropriate means to analyse these items entailed looking at several different methods.

Content analysis provides a means for reading cultural texts. Slater (1998: 234) notes that these include *'any expressive form, indeed anything that can be constructed as interpretable, as capable for bearing a meaning for someone'*. Since the news media can be seen to convey cultural messages to the audience, content analysis appeared to be a possible means for analysing news items in this study. However, the aim of content analysis is to apply rigour *'to the unruly and ostensibly subjective field of cultural meaning'* (Slater, 1998: 234-5). My disquiet with content analysis centred on its systematic and rigid approach, which is in keeping with the connotation of control in quantitative research. It is a method that requires a tightly structured approach to categorizing news items and may, therefore, prevent the asking of important questions. Whilst content analysis might have been a useful approach due to my possible bias with regard to the news media, it did not provide a fit for myself as a researcher. I like to keep an open mind as to what might be found and to dig and probe to search for clues. The tight structure and closed approach of content analysis does not permit the qualitative researcher to search for nuances and emergent meanings.

My attention turned to semiotics (see, for example, Manning, 1987) and discourse analysis (see, for example, Bell and Garrett, 1998). Semiotics appeared to provide a way forward in that it is *'utterly open-ended rather than closed in its questions and investigations'* (Slater, 1998: 237). It seeks to uncover meaning by discovering what is being communicated to the audience, but is a method that is applied to single documents. A strength of media discourse analysis is that it helps to reveal something about the make-up of a news story to reveal both what a story does say as well as what it does not say, but is a method that may require different considerations for newspapers, television news and radio news. I decided to adopt semiotic and discourse analysis principles but to continue searching for a more efficient means to analyse the 552 news items.

My search for a suitable method ended with a branch of qualitative media analysis in which the approach is 'to blend the traditional notion of objective content analysis with participant observation to form *ethnographic content analysis*' (Altheide, 1996: 2, my emphasis). This method is systematic and analytic, but not rigid, and focuses on collecting both numerical and narrative data. Content analysis, by means of categorizing news items, is used as a springboard for further, deeper analysis to search for nuances, subliminal messages and to discover meanings. News items are thus conceptualized as fieldwork and the researcher immerses herself in the field in order for understanding to emerge through detailed investigation. It is a method that can be applied to visual, written and aural texts. Since it includes both objective and subjective elements it helped to satisfy my concern about possible bias as well as my desire for an open-ended approach in which I could dig and probe to search for meaning.

An advantage of news media analysis is that news items can be collected together and analysed at the researcher's convenience. I recognize that a possible flaw in my approach is that I collected different news items at different times. The time lapses between the news media samples were largely as a result of the practical difficulties involved in purchasing and recording the variety of news media formats used in this study. However, whilst there might have been advantages in examining news media samples within the same time period – such as how different news media reported the same news item – the various time lapses enabled me to look for patterns over time (thus representing the chronosystem in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, 1979) and to incorporate a greater range of issues in my analysis.

### OTHER RESEARCH ACTIVITY

In addition to the methods employed for the fieldwork, I kept a research diary throughout my time as a PhD student to record my thoughts, feelings, views, insecurities and insights as they arose, as suggested by Blaxter *et al.* (1996). However, I also made other entries – for example, debates with family members, comments my own children made, observations outside the research settings, things I had read or seen on television. Whilst these particular entries have not directly become a part of this thesis, it is important to acknowledge that they form part of my subjectivity and have served to help confirm, or disconfirm, some of my views. For example, family debates have strengthened my belief in the additional gains that can be made by seeking children's perspectives. In an indirect



way, therefore, these entries are a part of this thesis. The research diary was thus an important method for aiding the process of reflexivity.

A tentative, but unplanned, idea at start of the study was the possibility of involving some children in a formal conference presentation of the research. Valentine (1999: 151) warns that although such forums may provide '*a theatre of agency, it does not necessarily provide children with any actual power*'. However, my interest in involving children in this way was the opportunity it provided to *share* power by including children in the research process as fully as possible. I broached the idea with the Year 5 children at Howland School and their *extremely* enthusiastic response convinced me to proceed<sup>6</sup>. The success of the first presentation, which was followed by a meal at McDonald's as a 'thank you' to the children, led me to repeat the experience a short while later with different Year 5 children, again followed by a meal at McDonald's. The children's teacher attended the second presentation and, at my invitation (approved by the children), she joined us for the meal. During the presentations, which involved a total of seven children, each child talked about their involvement in a specific research activity and also reflected on our research relationship. I provided some written guidance to help the children structure their responses, but within this framework the children had full control over what they wished to say. Indeed, I only came to know their thoughts during the actual presentation itself! The children's conference presentations provided some useful insights, particularly with regard to the evaluation of our research relationship (see page 255).

### ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Whilst ethical guidance for undertaking research with adults is well established, guidance for undertaking social research with children is still developing. Greig and Taylor (1999) comment that the lack of specific ethical application to children in the past can possibly be attributed to the place that children have held in society. Prior to undertaking the fieldwork with the children I therefore considered it extremely important to gain a good understanding of ethical issues from the available literature in order to provide a statement concerning the ethical principles that I would adopt. However, I acknowledge Griffiths's (1998: 97) statement that '*There is no hope of doing perfect research. Utopia does not exist*' and therefore agree with Alderson's (1995: 53) statement that '*Ethics does not*

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<sup>6</sup> After my research with this class came to an end (in March 2002) I helped in the class for one afternoon a week during the summer term. The children therefore came to know me very well. Parental consent was obtained for the children participating in the conference presentations.

*provide clear, agreed solutions. It is mainly useful as a method for exploring dilemmas to understand them more deeply'.*

At the outset it was necessary to acknowledge that there were several 'gatekeepers' – headteachers, class teachers and parents – whose permission would first be required before access to the children could be granted. The notion of 'stranger danger' has implications for researchers wishing to undertake fieldwork with children (see, for example, Fine and Sandstrom, 1988) and it was therefore important to acknowledge potential concerns. I arranged for myself to be 'police checked' (a procedure which provides evidence of any previous convictions) prior to the fieldwork so as to provide a measure of reassurance for school staff and parents. In the letter sent to parents to seek permission for their child's participation in the research (Appendix 3), I hoped that being open and honest about the research activities with the children would allay any concerns. Whilst a bolder approach within a child's right perspective might have been to offer the children at the outset the choice of whether or not they wished to participate in the research, the principle I adhered to, as commented on by Hood *et al.* (1996), was that adults' duty to protect children took priority over children's right to participate. A tension therefore existed between the principle I felt obliged to follow and my personal philosophy (page 65 refers), in which I view children as having rights to participation.

Whilst I have already given attention in this chapter to the issue of power imbalances between the researcher and the researched, this is an aspect that cannot be over-emphasized. Although the issue of power imbalance applies to both child and adult participants, power has the potential for exploitation and, therefore, *'The relative power of adults to children makes this a double-edged sword when involving children as research subjects'* (Greig and Taylor, 1999: 148). Alderson (1995: 42) provides guidance for the principle that I decided to adopt on this issue:

*'When there are discrepancies of power, such as between children and adults, it is not possible to be neutral; research either reinforces the unequal status quo or questions it'.*

Within the fieldwork with the children I sought to find ways of challenging the unequal status quo. This I largely hoped to achieve through my identification with the 'friend role'



(see 'friend role' evaluation on pages 254-5) and also my message to the children that on the topic of childhood I viewed them as being the experts. However, challenging the unequal status quo was not always straightforward. For example, on one occasion Dan (Howland) and I were both trying to manoeuvre our way through a small gap in the classroom. I moved to one side and insisted Dan went first, but Dan did the same. I, in my eagerness to put my respect for children into practice (why should adults always go first?) continued to insist that Dan went first and, finally, he did. However, what was successful here – my show of respect or my adult authority?

The issue of power leads on naturally to the issue of informed consent. In my first visit to each class I outlined the nature of the research to the children<sup>7</sup> and encouraged them to ask questions. Some questions the children asked were: *'Why is parents' permission needed?'* *'How long will it take?'* *'Will the questionnaire be timed?'* and *'When will it take place?'* An objective of the 'friend role' was that I hoped to gain the children's trust so they would feel empowered to express their views, including being able to say 'no' to participation in the research. For those children for whom I had received parental permission to participate in the research I recognized that within the school context it might be difficult for the children to say 'no' (Morrow and Richards, 1996). However, the children were potentially in a position of power since they could overturn their parents' decision if they wished to do so. It was therefore important to provide them with information about the research so that they would know what they would be saying 'no' to. I decided to follow Alderson's (1995) suggestion and produce a leaflet for the children. This included information on: what the research was about; what they would be asked to do; why they had been asked to participate; who/what else would be involved in the research; their right to withdraw from any of the activities; and who would be told, and not told, about what they said to me during the research (see Appendix 13). I personalized each leaflet by printing the child's name at the top. The leaflet was distributed to all children for whom I had received parental permission and the children were given sufficient time to consider the information prior to the first research activity taking place. Informed consent is, however, an ongoing process and before the start of each research activity I planned to check that the children were happy to proceed and to verbally reinforce that they could withdraw from the research at any time (see, however, 'Ethical considerations' on page 257).

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<sup>7</sup> At Moorcroft School the Year 5 teacher undertook this task. I viewed this as being another way in which she appeared to take control of my research (page 82 refers) – see David *et al.* (2001) for a related discussion.

As mentioned previously, this research did not totally fulfil my ideal of children's right to participation. However, the principle I maintained was that the children had a right **not** to participate. France *et al.* (2000) comment that offering children the choice to opt out may be a 'risky' business, since large numbers opting out would affect a researcher's ability to fulfil their research obligations and cause concern about meeting objectives. However, in my desire to respect the fact that children do have rights, this was a risk I was prepared to take. In the event, all of the children for whom I had received parental permission did participate in the research. There were, however, various occasions when children temporarily withdrew from research activities. In addition, some Year 6 children at Howland School chose not to participate in the final group interview; it was the last day of the school year and they preferred to spend the time with their friends. I was pleased they felt able to say 'no' to the research.

The risk/benefit equation is, Coady (2001) states, an important factor in the approval of research projects. The greater the benefit to be gained from a research project, the more the risks will be acceptable. However, the suggestion here is that the researcher's responsibility for considering risks and benefits arises only prior to undertaking the research. It thus fails to take into account risks and benefits that might be identified by the researcher and, more importantly, by participants during the course of the research. I therefore viewed the risk/benefit equation as being an ongoing responsibility and tried to respond sensitively to issues concerning possible risk as they arose. For example, as mentioned previously, the children's frequent reference to issues relating to death in their questionnaires led me to explore this topic in the final research activity – the group interview. However, for Ritchie (Moorcroft) this issue appeared to be too sensitive, for after a short while he covered his ears and asked '*Can we change the subject*', and so we moved on to another topic. Childhood is an emotive subject that has many different facets. It is difficult for the researcher to know prior to entering the field which topics will be seen as 'risky'. For while the topic of death was 'risky' for Ritchie, on another occasion, when I felt it was time to move on from this topic, Anna (Howland) exclaimed, '*I was enjoying that talk about death!*'

Confidentiality and anonymity were further important ethical considerations. Masson (2000) states that confidentiality involves taking care not to reveal information to those connected with the participants and disclosing information only within ways that protect

the identity of those who provided it. Confidentiality is necessary in order to conceal the identity of specific persons who might be subject to reprisals or embarrassment (Fine and Sandstrom, 1988). Confidentiality and anonymity were therefore promised to the schools, children and parents and pseudonyms have thus been used throughout this thesis. However, I acknowledge that the use of pseudonyms does not necessarily guarantee anonymity (particularly internally) and have therefore followed Robson's (1993) advice of taking reasonable precautions to assure anonymity without distancing the thesis too far from the reality I sought to describe. Attributing pseudonyms to the children is something I have struggled with, as my emotional engagement with them over a period of time made it hard for me to think about them other than by their real names. For myself, the application of pseudonyms does, to a certain extent, distance the thesis from the actual reality.

A major dilemma concerning the issue of confidentiality is whether, in the case of children, it can be fully guaranteed (see, for example, Alderson, 1995; Oakley, 2000; Masson, 2000; France *et al.*, 2000) and relates to the situation in which a child discloses that they have been seriously harmed or ill-treated, or when a researcher has cause for concern about a child (such as a medical concern or identification of a special need). The principle I adhered to, as advocated by France *et al.* (2000), was that my moral and legal duty to protect children outweighed my commitment to confidentiality. However, I agree with Alderson's (1995) view that this should be done in consultation with the child. During the fieldwork there were two occasions when I felt it was necessary to pass on information that was revealed to me and I did so with each child's agreement. Although these instances are also dealt with in Chapter Five, it is important to point out that I did not consider my responsibility ended with the passing on of the information, for I considered it equally important to follow up and ensure that my concerns had been acted upon.

Brewer (2000), in writing on ethnography, states that an exit strategy should be an important aspect of any research design. My research relationship with the children was based on reciprocity (pages 84-5 refer). Since they had shared their lives with me it seemed only right to mark my departure from the field in some way. To have just walked away at the end of the research would, I feel, have been unethical. Therefore, at the start of each poster discussion I asked the children to state their names and their favourite sweets. I have to confess to being somewhat deceptive here as I informed them that the purpose of this was to help me to identify their voices (which it did) when I transcribed the tapes later on. I

then purchased each child's favourite sweets and gift-wrapped them. On my last day with each class all of the children were presented with their gift (including those who had not participated in the research since I did not want them to feel excluded) along with a thank you card and some written feedback about the research. Each class teacher was also presented with a gift voucher and a thank you letter. A thank you letter was also sent to the headteacher at both schools.

Some preliminary writing, in which I explored my research relationship with the children, raised an important ethical issue. On reading through what I had written I became aware that one of the names that featured most often belonged to a child who was not one of my research participants! This child does not feature in the main findings but does appear in the evaluation of my 'friend role' (pages 254-5 refer), thus raising questions as to what can, ethically, be included in a research report. However, although in gaining access to the schools I was seeking to undertake specific research activities with specific children, I had been welcomed into the whole school setting as a researcher. Some of the teachers have also become part of this thesis but were not, technically, research participants. Omitting this evidence would have distanced the thesis from the reality I sought to describe (Robson, 1993). I did not set out to deceive anyone, but being open and honest in reporting this dilemma enables others to become involved in the debate.

## ANALYSIS

Krueger (1998b: 13) maintains that the guiding principle of analysis is '*to provide enlightenment, to lift the level of understanding to a new plateau*'. Since Cresswell (1994) argues that there is no right way to do qualitative data analysis I decided to see how others had approached the task. I therefore accessed four PhD theses (all of which had used a qualitative research methodology) – Driscoll (2000); Powell (2001); Black-Hawkins (2002); and Bottle (2003). Within these I identified what appeared to be a more open and fluid approach to analysis (Black-Hawkins, 2002) through to a more tightly structured approach (Bottle, 2003). I felt uneasy about adopting a rigid coding scheme for my analysis as how could I be *absolutely* certain that a piece of data could only tell me one thing? Whilst recognizing the need for rigour in my analysis, I favoured a more open and fluid approach as this fits more comfortably with who I am as a researcher (pages 69-70 and 75 refer). Additionally, since the aim of analysis is to answer the research questions (Robson, 1993), the open and fluid nature of my research questions arguably merits a

similar approach in my analysis<sup>8</sup>. In accordance with the qualitative methodology of this study, my analysis adopted an inductive approach (Janesick, 1998), thus allowing meaning to emerge from the data. The aim of my analysis was to explore and explain the case I was investigating – the condition of contemporary childhood within two school communities in southeast England – in order to consider whether ‘childhood’ is in ‘crisis’ and, if so, in what ways.

Theoretical understandings have played a key role in my analysis. In particular, a strength of the social constructionist approach adopted for this study is that it provides the opportunity to conceptualize a time past, present and future. The metaphors of *being* (time present) and *becoming* (time future) as well as a consideration of time *past* are used in my analysis. They are not words that are embedded in the accounts of the children, parents and news media but are helpful for considering *how* childhood is constructed. In this way, the use of *past*, *being* and *becoming* helps to keep meanings open. In addition, they provide an element of time in my analysis – the chronosystem within Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, which has been adopted and adapted for this study. The use of Bronfenbrenner’s theory, with its emphasis on context, provided dynamic possibilities for analysis. I was able to compare the constructions of childhood within bounded research contexts (i.e. the micro-, exo- and macrosystem) and across contexts, and also to identify ways in which the different levels of the ecological system interrelated. *Comparison* thus played an important role in my analysis. Foucault’s (1980) work on power and power relations has also informed my analysis. Additionally, my focused reading to explore the notion of ‘childhood in crisis’ (Chapter Three refers) has helped to guide and inform my analysis in terms of generating themes within the data and for identifying constructions of children, such as ‘victim’ and ‘aggressor’. Thus, theoretical understandings are used as meanings to assist the analytical procedure. Further literature has also been used in the process of analysis in order to support and contradict my findings. Inscription, whereby researchers inscribe their accounts of the field of study by bringing their own meanings to it (Lather, 1993, cited in Edwards, 2001), has also played a significant part in my analysis.

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<sup>8</sup> If this is so then it seems likely that the more tightly structured analysis of Bottle (2002) may have been as a result of her more tightly structured, narrow, research questions. Equally, the more fluid and open approach to analysis in Black-Hawkins’s (2002) study appears to be as a result of her open and fluid research questions.

Theoretical understandings, comparison, literature and inscription are thus all used as resources to make sense of the data.

Five main phases can be identified in my process of analysis. Although I present these separately they should not necessarily be seen as being completely separate from each other.

### ***Phase one***

During the fieldwork with children and parents, data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously. This ongoing process is a feature of qualitative data analysis (Robson, 1993). Questionnaires were used as the initial method in the fieldwork with both the children and the parents. Whilst questionnaires are generally associated with positivist research (see Cresswell, 1994), in this study they have been used in the way that a qualitative researcher would do. Thus I did not use the questionnaires to look for statistical significance, but to search for trends that would help to inform a subsequent phase of data collection.

Findings from the children's questionnaires and poster discussions helped to inform the group interviews (I read through the questionnaires and listened to the tapes of the poster discussions, making hand-written notes to aid this process). Further, within the poster discussions and group interviews, emerging ideas in one group were, on occasions, followed up with subsequent groups. The parent questionnaires helped to inform the parent interviews. Emerging ideas in interviews were again, on occasions, explored in subsequent interviews. This emergent process also *crossed* perspectives – for example, parents' positive comments about local news media led me to incorporate local news samples in my news media analysis.

I listened to all the tapes from the children's group interviews, making further hand-written notes. My notes from all the children's research activities were used to provide some written feedback to the children at my point of departure from each class (see Appendix 14 for an example). Whilst it may have been better to wait until I was able to analyse the data more fully, I considered it important for the children to have feedback at the point that was perhaps most meaningful to themselves. Within the feedback I provided children with an overview of some of the things I had discovered with their class. This writing process



helped to develop my initial thoughts about the children's constructions of childhood. The children were invited to comment about the feedback and were provided with a contact email address for this purpose. I hoped the children might be able to use school computers if they did not have access to one at home, but I received no comments. However, I considered the feedback to be very important: it provided the opportunity for the children to be involved in the process of analysis as any comments received could have been taken into consideration during the writing-up phase.

### ***Phase two***

I read through all of the parents' questionnaires and made notes on emerging themes. I listened to the tapes of the parent interviews, made notes and transcribed sections of specific interest. As with the children, I considered it important to include the parents (as well as the schools) in the process of analysis by offering them the opportunity to respond to some feedback prior to the writing-up phase. I therefore re-immersed myself in both the children's and the parents' evidence as well as my field notes and research diary. I searched for significant themes, informed by my focused reading on the notion of 'childhood in crisis'<sup>9</sup>, and through a process of refinement I was able to reduce these to six themes that could be applied to both the children and parents<sup>10</sup>. These themes were broad, by necessity, due to the broadness of this study. In addition I searched the parents' evidence for data concerning their relationship with the news media (this forms an additional theme in Chapter Six). Within the six broad themes, and the additional theme on the news media (parents), I searched the data to provide an overview for what I had discovered. Pieces of conversation from the children and parents were identified to help support my discoveries. This information was used to produce written feedback for parents who had requested it (page 94 refers). This was a valuable part of the analytical process as it enabled me to conduct an *initial* and *tentative* sweep of all the evidence from the children and parents. Copies of the feedback were also sent to the two headteachers and four class teachers. I invited the schools and parents to respond to the feedback, but received no response. Although Boyden and Ennew (1998) argue that full transcribing is not always necessary, I subsequently decided to fully transcribe all the tapes from the children's

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<sup>9</sup> This approach to my analysis recognized that themes can be '*partly emergent and partly influenced by questions or issues that the researcher brought to the research*' (Holliday, 2002: 108).

<sup>10</sup> It was not my intention to superimpose the parents' themes onto the children's themes (or vice versa) but to identify broad (open and fluid) themes that provided the opportunity to consider children's and parents' take on each theme, thus providing points for comparison.

discussions and the parent interviews in order to add rigour to my analysis. Transcription of the children's tapes was a particularly difficult task due to the fact that there was often more than one child speaking at once. As I typed up the transcriptions I made some comments in a different typeface to highlight some key points and issues.

### ***Phase three***

This phase focused on *reducing* the children's and parents' evidence to enable the writing-up of the findings for the thesis. I took a holistic approach to my analysis. I returned to all of the data and used different coloured pens to identify evidence that fell within the six broad themes identified in phase two. In addition I searched the parents' data for evidence concerning their relationship with the news media, using a further colour to highlight this material. Since all of the data (including questionnaires) had been typed up and stored on computer files, I was able to cut and paste data for each theme into a separate file, thus giving me a hardcopy with which to work. A number of sub-themes were identified. These sub-themes were numbered and marked with 'Post-it' notes. Within each sub-theme I searched for descriptors (*how* is childhood constructed) and explanations (*why* is childhood constructed in the way that it is) in order to identify the meanings ascribed to childhood. Through a consideration of the *how* and *why* I was able to address the research question at the heart of the study: Is childhood in crisis? In conducting my analysis I searched for comparisons within and across the two research settings. Theoretical understandings, literature and inscription also informed my analysis. Additionally, I looked for contradictions and surprises in the data as well as the frequency and extensiveness of comments. Analysis moved beyond words to consider behaviour and actions. I identified pieces of conversation that provided supporting evidence for my interpretations. It is the weaving together of these voices that provide the 'stories' in Chapters Five and Six.

### ***Phase four***

Ethnographic content analysis of the news media samples<sup>11</sup> took place at a later stage. Within my analysis I sought to address the research questions by exploring the world that my research participants were exposed to by the news media. Analysis was driven by seeking to discover the ways in which children were included or excluded in the news. The inclusion of a variety of news media provided the opportunity for more dynamic possibilities in analysis, as I was able to compare the constructions of childhood within and

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<sup>11</sup> Further details of the news media samples and analysis are provided in Chapter Seven.

across different media formats. Analysis incorporated both quantitative and qualitative elements (page 101 refers). All the news media samples were searched for representations of children (aged 0-12 years) and issues relating to children generally. Newspaper articles were read, the television news broadcasts watched and radio news broadcasts listened to. Notes were made on each news item, including emergent meanings (informed by theoretical understandings, literature and inscription). All the news items were assigned to one of two sets of categories: a) United Kingdom categories (for all news items relating to children in the UK) and b) international categories (for all news items relating to children in other countries). Ten news items were required to form a category in the UK categories and five news items for the international categories (see pages 213-4 for further information). Sorting the news items into these categories produced quantitative data and provided initial identification of *how* children were constructed by the news media. These findings were searched for emergent meanings to be explored qualitatively. Through a process of refinement I was able to reduce the data to four themes. My search for contradictions and surprises produced a fifth theme. Within these five themes a number of sub-themes were identified. Through a consideration of *how* childhood was constructed, and *why* it was constructed in the way that it was, I was able to address the key research question: Is childhood in crisis? In conducting my analysis I searched for comparisons across the different news organizations. Theoretical understandings, literature and inscription also informed my analysis. In particular, making sense of the *why* required an understanding of the news production process (see Altheide, 1996) and thus of news culture. During the process of writing I frequently returned to newspaper articles, television and radio news items to gain further information. Headlines, text, visual images and speech from the various news formats were identified to provide evidence to support my interpretations. These are used to bring the 'story' alive in Chapter Seven.

### ***Phase five***

The final phase involved a comparison of the dominant constructions of childhood in the three research contexts that were explored in adopting and adapting Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory as a framework for this study: the micro level (children and parents); the exo level (local and national news media); and the macro level (UNCRC and the Children Act 1989). These findings are included in Chapter Eight.

What these five phases do not reveal is the ongoing process of reflection throughout analysis for, as Fitzpatrick *et al.* (1998: 62) advise:

*'Give yourself time to soak up what words meant, to think through what you have discovered, what you've heard, what you've seen and what you've felt'.*

Analysis cannot be rushed and so much time was spent just *thinking* about the evidence in order to try and make sense of it.

Mayall (1999) points out that the process of analysis is an area in which the people researched have least power. I tried to reduce this power imbalance in two ways. Firstly, by inviting the children, parents and schools to be involved in the process of analysis (pages 109-110 refer). Secondly, by allowing the voices of the participants to shine through in the telling of the 'story' and representing as many of their voices as possible. Both these actions were, therefore, ethical decisions. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the findings presented in Chapters Five, Six and Seven are *my* interpretations. I do not claim that they are the only interpretations possible, for other researchers may have seen things differently.

## VALIDITY

An important task for the researcher is to establish confidence in the 'truth' of their findings. The process for achieving this centres on the issues of internal and external validity as well as praxis-oriented validity.

Internal validity for this study concerns the issue of whether the research design exposes the reality it sought to describe. The subjective nature of qualitative research requires action to be taken in order to ensure that the findings represent the social world of the research participants rather than that of the researcher (see Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford, 2001). Internal validity for this research is strengthened by the use of a case study approach, which advocates the use of different perspectives and different data collection methods. The trustworthiness of this research is therefore increased by triangulation, a process that provides a means for testing one source of information against other sources (Robson, 1993). I have explored different perspectives (children, parents and

news media) and have used a range of methods (questionnaires, interviews, projective focus group, observation and ethnographic content analysis) to compare and contrast the findings. Trustworthiness is strengthened further by the consideration of different theoretical knowledge in the process of analysis. Exploring the constructions of childhood from different angles and in many different ways helps to overcome the bias that arises from using a single perspective, method and theory. I acknowledge that critical intersubjectivity (see, for example, Fay, 1996) has an important role to play in the process of internal validity. Throughout the research process I have therefore endeavoured to remain open to the merits of all alternative viewpoints – those of my research participants, my research supervisors, others unconnected to the research (such as my colleague mentioned earlier) and in the literature that I have read. I have tried to listen carefully to these different viewpoints and acknowledge that they have all formed part of my subjectivity. Remaining open to the viewpoints of others is in keeping with my commitment to social justice (see Griffiths, 1998). The establishment of an audit trail also strengthens internal validity (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994): the field notes, research diary, questionnaires, posters and interview transcripts provide evidence that increase the trustworthiness of the research. The poster activity also strengthens internal validity, as the children were involved in producing and analysing the data themselves. Member checks have also increased the internal validity of this research: feedback was issued to the children and parents, to which they were invited to respond prior to the writing of the thesis. A final, and very important, measure for internal validity has been the process of reflexivity. This has required asking difficult questions of myself to try and understand my role in the research process (Mason, 1996). For example: Why have I chosen a particular age group of children? Why have I chosen the school setting? How ‘safe’ is my sampling strategy? How does my personal background influence the research? What has influenced my conceptual framework? How do my personal views on children and childhood affect the research? Within this chapter I have begun the task of responding to these questions and others. However, reflexivity is an ongoing process and so further questions will need to be asked in order to critically examine how I might have influenced the research.

External validity concerns the replicability of the research and the generalizability of the findings. Cresswell (1994) comments that within qualitative research the uniqueness of a study within a given context will mitigate against it being replicated exactly in another context. However, statements about my position – my assumptions, values, beliefs,

concerns, background and possible biases – which appear in the thesis, along with a conceptual framework for the study, a full description of the methodology and the rich description of qualitative research, should provide the reader with sufficient information to decide the extent to which the findings *might* help inform other settings. Within the social constructionist approach used for this study, childhood is considered to be a product of its time and place. My study has explored childhood at a specific moment in time in specific places. These are unique to my study and, as such, the findings cannot be generalized to other times and places (see, however, page 249). The ultimate goal of this research is not generalizability, but a deeper understanding of the condition of contemporary childhood within two school communities in southeast England. However, it should be noted that this study does tell us about how different childhoods and different crises are constructed.

The issue of praxis-oriented validity (Graue and Walsh, 1998) concerns the issue of what good this research will do and for whom. Knowledge of children and childhood has, in the past, been based largely on adult understandings, but as Mahon *et al.* (1996: 148) argue, '*we cannot assume that adult 'proxies' ... will be able to give valid accounts of children's own social worlds*'. A particular strength of this research, therefore, has been the firm commitment to the inclusion of children's views. For the children who participated in the research it thus provided the opportunity to have their views listened to, *heard* and reported on. In this way I hope the research will create new knowledge that will help to further develop understanding of children and childhood. However, as mentioned on page 105, I considered it important to keep the issue of benefits of the research open by remaining alert to benefits identified by research participants, and myself, during the course of the fieldwork.

### SUMMARY

This chapter has presented my stance as a researcher, as well as the methods and methodological approaches for this research. It has sought to give a clear account of what I did and to provide reasons for the decisions I made, thus enabling the reader to follow the various steps that I took. The study employs a qualitative research paradigm and a case study approach, whilst also providing quantitative and ethnographic insights. My research design makes a firm commitment to listening to, and *hearing*, the views of children. Indeed, children's views are considered to be central to this study. In the next chapter I examine the evidence I gathered from the children.



**CHAPTER FIVE**  
**MESSAGES FROM THE CHILDREN**

**INTRODUCTION**

This chapter seeks to build a picture of what contemporary childhood is like for those experiencing it themselves – children – in order to evaluate whether, from their perspective, childhood is in crisis. In making use of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory the chapter provides a focus on the microsystem, whilst also considering how it influences, and is influenced by, other levels and other players in the system (see pages 28-30). I considered the inclusion of children in this study to be extremely important as their views have often been absent, or marginalized, in previous debates about children and childhood. Much of what we know about childhood is therefore presented from an adult perspective. The inclusion of children's views here builds on existing knowledge about childhood and respects the fact that children have rights to participate on matters that concern them (United Nations, 1989). In reporting the findings from the children, the thesis follows the chronological order in which the fieldwork was essentially undertaken – children, parents, news media. In addition to chronology, I decided to position the findings from the children first in my reporting because they are central to this study (pages 2-3 refer). Although research involving children as participants is increasingly common (see, for example, Clark and Moss, 2001), this thesis is unique in its focus and approaches. Further, within Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, children are at the centre of the system; reporting children's findings first therefore recognizes this theoretical understanding.

The findings in this chapter are largely based on three research activities: questionnaire, poster design and discussion, and group interviews. The findings from these activities – as well as from two research conference presentations and field notes – have been pooled and, as far as possible, can be identified by the following codes: Q = questionnaire, PD = poster discussion, GI = group interview, RCP = research conference presentation, FN = field notes. Poster discussions often developed beyond items on the poster. Findings from the questionnaires and poster discussions contributed to further issues that were explored in the group interviews. These research methods were employed with the aim of giving me a deeper insight and understanding of *how* the children constructed contemporary childhood and *why* they constructed it in the way they did. This enabled consideration, from the

children's perspective, of the key research question: Is childhood in crisis? The variety of research methods provided the opportunity for children to express their views individually (questionnaire) and within a group situation (poster activity and group interviews), and also allowed for a range of competencies in which the children could use written, artistic and verbal skills. Prior to undertaking the research activities I spent time getting to know the children and learning their names, the aim being to establish a reciprocal research relationship based on trust. I considered the 'friend role' (pages 82-5 refer) that I adopted as being vital to this process. Throughout my time with the children I tried to maintain a non-authoritarian, non-disciplinarian stance, but recognized that it was not possible for the power differential to be completely negated. I made myself open to all children, whether they were participating in the research or not, and endeavoured to show my respect for them by, for example, listening very carefully to what they had to say, not only in the research activities but also during any additional time I spent with them. My aim was to be someone who was fun to be with and not a 'proper' adult (Pollard, 1987). I spent a total of approximately 120 hours (38 visits) contact time with children at Howland School and 58 hours (25 visits) at Moorcroft School. The difference in amount of time was as a result of the different research relationship that developed at the two schools (see 'friend role' evaluation on pages 254-5). Pseudonyms have been applied throughout this chapter.

The two schools that participated in this study were chosen to reflect contrasting socio-economic backgrounds: Howland School was situated in an area of social disadvantage and 34% of children were eligible for free school meals (the national average in 2000 was 17%); Moorcroft School was situated in a more affluent area, with 8% of children eligible for free school meals. Although children at both schools came from a range of social backgrounds the sample did not include children from the extreme ends of the socio-economic spectrum and does not, therefore, represent all children. A class of Year 5 (aged 9-10 years) and Year 6 (aged 10-11 years) children from each school participated in the research. Parental permission was required for the children to take part in the research. A few parents did not wish their children to take part. Additionally, a small number of parents did not return the permission reply slip. I considered it extremely important that the children also gave their permission to participate in the research. One child at Howland School chose not to participate. A total of 113 children participated in the study: 55 at Howland School (out of a possible 63) and 58 at Moorcroft School (out of a possible 63). A further breakdown shows that 28 girls and 27 boys at Howland School, and 25 girls and

33 boys at Moorcroft School, participated in the research. Although some children were absent from school on the day of certain research activities, the high level of participation in the research ensures that the full range of social background at each school is represented in the findings.

The time that I spent with the children at both schools brought me much enjoyment. This enjoyment was, I feel, also largely shared by the children themselves, as evidenced by Mary's (Moorcroft) comment at the end of the group interview, *'I really enjoyed that'*. It appeared that my research was often seen as a more enjoyable activity than schoolwork. I always tried to remind the children that they did not have to take part in any of the research activities if they did not wish to (see, however, page 257) and, on one occasion, this prompted the following conversation with two children at Howland School:

- Matt: *I wanna be here.*
- Interviewer: *'Cos it's better than doing schoolwork isn't it?*
- Sally: *If there's a game of football I wouldn't be here.*
- Interviewer: *No, that's true – I might not be here either, Sally.*
- Sally: *If it was a big match or David Beckham walked straight through that door.*
- Interviewer: *Football's, like, really important to you isn't it, Sally?*
- Sally: *Yeah.*

In addition, in bringing a group interview to a close at Moorcroft School, I asked the children whether they would like to ask me anything about my childhood, which brought the response: *'No, because it's time for play'*. Thus, whilst children at both schools indicated that the research was preferable to certain activities, for some there were more favourable alternatives. Further, some children at Moorcroft School, in response to my inquiry as to whether they had enjoyed taking part in the research, prompted the following exchange:

- Harry: *I love it – we miss loads of school.*
- Interviewer: *So, it's just a cop out from school?*
- Harry: *No, it's 'cos we can sit and say things that's*

*troubling us.*

Tim: *I think this research is good because it helps you to express what you feel about yourself and other people.*

This highlights an ethical aspect of my research – do no harm and benefit the participants. Harry and Tim appear to make clear statements about the benefit of the research to themselves. Whilst my hoped-for benefit for the children in this study (see page 115) centred on the opportunity the research provided for the children to have their views listened to, *heard* and reported on, Alderson and Morrow (2004) highlight the fact that children's definition of benefit, as Harry and Tim's example shows, might differ from that of adults.

This chapter is organized into six themes:

- Relationships
- Fears and dangers
- Freedom and constraint
- Exposure to 'adult' knowledge
- Pressures
- Play ... and fun!

These themes were guided by my exploration of the academic literature in Chapter Three (page 110 refers), but are purposely broad and open to enable exploration and explanation of the constructions of childhood from the children's perspective. The same themes will be used to report the findings from the parents in Chapter Six, thus facilitating children's and parents' take on each theme. This study does not, however, seek to match up children's views with those of their parents. The themes are presented in an order that *endeavours* to reflect the importance of the issues to the children in terms of elements that contain suggestions of 'childhood in crisis', although this was not an easy task. Exploration of the six themes enables me to draw the chapter to a close by addressing the research question at the heart of this study: Is childhood in crisis?

## RELATIONSHIPS

Mayall (2000) comments that children regard relationships as the cornerstones of their lives. Indeed, relationships appeared to take a central place in the children's constructions of childhood. When considering 'who and what are important to me' on their questionnaires (Appendix 5, section 2 refers), the children identified four key areas concerning relationships with others and it is to these that my attention turns.

### *Family*

#### *The threat and realities of family break-up*

For Cox (1996) and Wyness (2000) a key element in the notion of 'childhood in crisis' centres on the decline of the bonded nuclear family. Family break-up, reconstituted families and multiple transitions are known to potentially have a range of negative effects upon children, such as low self-esteem, depression, lower educational achievement and behavioural problems (Flowerdew and Neale, 2003), as well as positive effects for some children, such as escape from unhappy, conflictual or abusive situations (Hetherington, 2003). During the early stages of the research activities some children began to raise issues about family life with me and so I proceeded to explore this with care due to its sensitivity, especially as parents were also involved in the research. Children presented a range of concerns, *some* of which will now be explored.

Whilst Mayall (2002) comments that an important concern for children is to have good relationships with at least one parent, a significant concern for children in this research was the relationship *between* their parents/carers. Arguments between parents were a familiar concern and in Peter's (Moorcroft, GI) case, whose mother had taken the children to live somewhere else for a week, he said *'That's how serious it can be'*. However, for Dan (Howland, PD), whose parents had divorced, the arguments between his parents appeared to be more specific: *'when my Dad comes down and tells my Mum he hasn't got any money because he doesn't get paid, they always have arguments. I go in there and say 'shut up''*. Janice (Moorcroft, GI), whose parents were seeking a divorce, had become part of a custody battle that was awaiting a court decision. Conflict situations like those of Dan and Janice, where children are directly involved or caught in the middle, are thought to be some of the factors likely to have the most significant adverse consequences for children's lives (see Hetherington, 2003). This would, however, be the case for children in divorced, non-divorced or reconstituted families.

Flowerdew and Neale (2003) state that a significant number of children in stepfamilies will see the termination of their parents' second partnership. This was a particular concern for Darren (Moorcroft, Q), who was worried in case *'my Mum breaks up with my stepdad, because she broke up with my Dad and she married someone else, but they still argue'*. This concern was repeated by Darren 23 days later in the group interview, thus revealing a *continuity of concern*. Judy (Moorcroft, PD and GI) presented a different scenario. She was experiencing difficulties as a result of being part of two reconstituted families: her parents had separated and both had new partners, both of whom had separated from their previous partner and also had children (see Valentine 1997b for a related discussion). Judy thus had two stepfamilies and *'each weekend I have to keep moving houses'*. This complicated set-up meant that on occasions *'my Dad gets really stressy because sometimes I call him by my stepdad's name and he gets really annoyed about it'*. Friction with stepsiblings was a further feature in Judy's account. However, whilst Judy had regular contact with her father the benefits of such contact depend less on the quantity of time the child and parent spend together than the quality of the relationship (Hetherington, 2003). This appeared to be an important issue for Judy as what she really longed for was for her sister and herself to have time with their father away from the stepfamily.

Some children wished to speak about the issue of family break-up in greater depth and it seemed important to let them do so as it suggested that this concern was perhaps uppermost in their mind (see Flowerdew and Neal, 2003, for related discussion). Jack (Howland, GI) seemed to half-apologize when commenting, *'I know I keep going on about it ...'*. Jack appeared to be struggling with feelings of anger towards his father, the circumstances that had caused the family break-up and his father's broken promises about telephoning him. His anger towards his father appeared to have altered his feelings towards his mother:

*'I thought my Dad was an angel. I loved him. I thought my Dad was the best thing that's happened to me. My Mum, I've realized, has been with me all the way'*.

Jack's account reveals several significant facts: Jack had lost a role model and appeared to be feeling rejection (Kroll, 1994); Jack was focusing his anger towards the parent he considered responsible for the break-up, an action that is in line with the way in which 9-



12-year-olds are thought to respond to family break-up (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980, cited in Howard and Shepherd, 1987); and Jack had lost the parent with whom he perhaps believed he had the more powerful relationship (Kroll, 1994).

Taken as a whole, children's concerns centred not only on their own *present* and *future* happiness and stability, but also that of their parents for, as Jack (Howland, GI) confirmed in his desire for his parents to get back together, *'I want it like, not to be as it was when they were married, 'cos they used to fight all the time, but to live like a good life'*. Here, Jack also recognizes a *past*, a past that it appears he would like to eradicate. Whilst the children's accounts revealed that family break-up and reconstituted families were not an unfamiliar occurrence in their lives it is important to remember that there may also be other issues troubling children. Consideration of any effect that family break-up might be having on children should therefore take into account their cumulative life experiences (Flowerdew and Neale, 2003).

#### Parental authority

My findings concurred with Bardy's (1994) in that the children's accounts made the power constellation explicit. For example, some bad things about being a child were: *'You get told off by your parents'* (Wayne, Moorcroft, Q) and *'Your parents are always bossing you around'* (Tanya, Moorcroft, Q). Some children may believe that parents rightly have authority over them (Mayall, 2002), such as Robert (Moorcroft, GI), who stated *'The only reason that they tell you off is for your own good so that you learn by your mistakes'*. However, Sonia's (Howland, Q) comment about *'feeling in the way of things'* and Stefan's (Moorcroft, PD) statement that having to go to bed early *'makes you feel like a little package'* provided subtle insights that demonstrate the way in which children may feel excluded from adult space and time within the home (see Sibley, 1995). For some children the power differential ran deeper: Lauren's (Howland) wish on her questionnaire that *'there was no such thing as horrid parents'* may have been a precursor for a subsequent disclosure about physical abuse<sup>1</sup>. Whilst children's accounts did make the power constellation explicit it is important to point out that the majority of children (Q: 69%) stated that being a child was fair because, for example, *'everyone has to be a child'* (Philippa, Moorcroft).

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<sup>1</sup> Following consultation with Lauren, my concern for her well-being was passed on to her teacher and the family liaison officer. I subsequently checked with staff in order to confirm that my concern had been acted upon.

### Parental support and understanding

Parents were, however, valued for their supportive role. For example, Jonathan (Howland, GI) stated that his parents had listened to his worries about bullying at school, had sorted the problem out, and therefore considered his parents '*stick up for me*'. In addition, a boys' group at Moorcroft (GI) strongly defended their parents:

Interviewer: *You said teachers wreck your life – don't you feel parents wreck your life?*

Some: *No!*

Harry: *I love my parents.*

Robert: *I love my parents. My parents are like ...*

Harry: *... some of the best people in the world, even though they grounded me the other day.*

Robert: *You don't have to explain things to parents because they understand.*

However, some children were concerned about a *lack* of parental understanding, as Caroline's (Moorcroft, GI) comment shows:

*'When, say me and Joanne break up, when I tell my Mum she doesn't like feel for me, help me through it ... They don't understand how I feel. If it's something really, really nasty, you can tell your parents and they'll understand it. But if it's not as bad, they don't understand you. It's like you can't talk to them'.*

Thus what Caroline appears to be suggesting is that in certain instances children's feelings might be trivialized or overlooked by some parents.

### Care and concern for family members

The children's questionnaires revealed that family members (both close and extended) held an important place in children's thoughts. For example, Joanne (Moorcroft, Q) wished that an '*auntie and uncle lived in England instead of Australia*'; Gary (Howland, Q) was worried about his family '*because I love them*'; and Scott (Howland, Q) was looking forward to the future '*because my Mum is having a baby*'. The *present* and the *future*

therefore played a role in children's constructions of family relationships. However, Tina's (Howland, Q) inclusion of her baby sister who had died, as being the person *most* important to her, appears to reveal a strong influence of the *past* on her *present being*. Whilst children had their 'ups and downs' with, predominantly, parents and siblings, their care and concern for the health of family members was a significant feature in their accounts. For example, Julia (Howland, Q) was worried about her brother '*because he has a mental illness*'; Sally (Howland, GI) was '*really worried*' about her mother's epileptic fits, a concern that was heightened when, on returning home from school one day, she found an ambulance at the house; and Caroline (Moorcroft, PD) was worried about her grandmother, who now had fluid on the lung and had previously had lung cancer. My findings concur with those of Mayall (2000) in that working with and through family relationships, caring for both those they lived with, as well as those they did not, appeared to be extremely important for many children.

## **School**

### Moorcroft School

Moorcroft children's accounts of school provided further support for Bardy's (1994) finding that children's participation in research makes the power constellation explicit. At the centre of Moorcroft children's concerns were issues about the strictness of the school uniform and having to be obedient. Thus it appeared the children often felt powerless. Objections were more prevalent amongst the Year 6 children at Moorcroft – they wanted to have their say, but felt they were not necessarily given the opportunity:

Joe: *I don't see the point. They say 'Why did you do it?' and you're just about to say, and they say 'Don't tell me'.*

Dean: *There's not much point in answering back because they say 'No, I saw you do it'. Once they tell you off they stick to it, don't they? (PD)*

As such, Robert (PD) considered that his teacher was still '*living by the rule that children should be seen but not heard*' and thus, it appears, suppressing his *being* in the world. These findings suggest that the participatory rights of Moorcroft children, as laid down in the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), might not

always be valued and, as Lansdown (1994) points out, it is this category of rights that is recognized as a threat to the adult-child boundary. Further objections were raised. For example, *'I think it's unfair the way how they (the teachers) get to wear their own clothes'* (Dean, PD) and *'it's a bit unfair on the children, because at lunch break the teachers can go in the staff room and watch TV'* (Owen, PD). Such examples appear to confirm Corsaro's (1997) view that preadolescents are particularly sensitive to what they view as adult hypocrisy and injustice.

For some Year 6 boys at Moorcroft the relationship with their teacher appeared to be particularly tense, with Harry (PD) commenting that

*'When she tells you off she really embarrasses you – she sort of like calls you a baby, and a girl, in front of the whole class, and you sort of like have to answer back to try and make yourself not look like a poofy sort of thing'.*

Harry and his friends appeared to have something of a love/hate relationship with their teacher, at times criticizing her, yet also recognizing that *'most of the time she can be nice'* (Tim, PD). Harry's complaints, however, continued:

*'She's made me cry in front of the class about five times. She's made me cry lots of times. It's so embarrassing. Once she did apologize, which was quite good. Tim didn't understand he had to do his name in full and did his signature, and she shouted 'you stupid boy' and he went out crying'.*

It was the embarrassment that Harry felt and the fact that the teacher *'really hurt my feelings'* that raises concern about the possible effect on his, and others, self-esteem (see, for example, Mruk, 1999). As Harry pointed out further, *'I know Mrs Miller thinks we haven't got feelings, but we have'*. My final discussion with Harry's group took place on their penultimate day at Moorcroft School. Their emotions were running high and for a while all they wished to do was to 'let off steam' about their teacher. It seemed important to let them do this, as it appeared to be a significant issue at that moment in time in *their* childhood. However, the group were also complimentary about some teachers and spoke

warmly of, for example, Mrs Attwood, who *encouraged* them to do things, rather than *forced* them. A picture that emerges from the accounts of the Year 5 and Year 6 children at Moorcroft School appears to be that particular vertically structured adult-child relationships (see Hartup, 1992) caused tension.

Moorcroft children's concerns about the adult-child relationship in school are supported by my own observations. For example, when lining-up in the playground at the end of break-times children were expected to be silent and to remain silent as they filed into their classes (FN); the 'misdemeanour' of talking in assembly brought the punishment of being made to stand up in front of the whole school (FN); when I accompanied the Year 5 children to singing practice the teacher insisted that I sat on a chair, despite my request to sit on the floor with the children (as part of my 'friend role' identity – pages 82-5 refer) (FN); the Year 6 teacher, in whose class I conducted the research, reprimanded children in front of the whole class and the children were often expected to do their schoolwork in silence (FN); on one occasion a circle time activity was used by the Year 6 teacher to forcefully draw out information about the instigator of some 'trouble' in the playground, with the exposed 'trouble-maker' once again being reprimanded in front of the whole class (FN). Whilst it is important to recognize that my presence will have had some affect on the setting, the environment at Moorcroft School appeared, nevertheless, to be regimented. Although there may have been individual differences amongst teachers, the collective examples I have given appear to reveal that adults' power over children was part of the whole-school ethos. On taking children out of the classroom for some of the research activities they became *'like caged birds who had been set free'* (FN, 5<sup>th</sup> July, 2002).

#### Howland School

In contrast, children at Howland School rarely made criticisms of their school or teachers. Although I observed some antagonism towards their teachers, it appeared this was more likely to be as a result of inner conflict within the child. For example, a disclosure by Sally (PD) about 'problems' at home produced the following interchange:

Interviewer: *Your whole world has been a bit upside down recently, hasn't it? That can't be easy when you're at school, can it?*

Sally: *No, that's why I get so annoyed with the teacher probably.*

Thus some children's negative behaviour may have been a response to their personal situation (see Kroll, 1994, for related discussion). My observations at Howland School revealed a different picture to that at Moorcroft School. For example, lining-up in the playground after break-times and filing into classes did not have to be carried out in absolute silence (FN); a child talking in assembly was moved to the end of the row to *sit* near a teacher (FN); I was allowed to sit on the floor *with* the children (FN); the Year 5 teacher dealt with a small group of boys that had been causing 'trouble' by taking them to the back of the class to talk to them quietly while the rest of the class was working (FN); the circle time activity in the Year 5 class was used as a process for self-assessment and reflection (FN)<sup>2</sup>. Although, once again, there may have been individual differences amongst teachers, the collective examples I have given suggest that a different adult-child relationship existed at Howland School. The children I 'saw' in my discussion groups outside the classroom, were the same children that I 'saw' in the classroom.

#### *A different construction of childhood at the two schools*

A different cultural script (Rosenthal, 2003) appeared to be in place at the two schools. Different values and beliefs were evident and clear messages were conveyed to the children about the type of social behaviour that was expected of them (see also Fielding, 2000, for a useful related discussion). Observations during my time at Moorcroft School suggested that the adult-child boundary was clearly marked and the cultural script appeared to be one that reinforced physical distance, and hence adult authority, between children and adults. In this way the prescribed nature of adult-child relationships at the school tended to '*project the image that adults in school are unapproachable*' (Holmes, 1998: 46). This environment was perhaps deemed necessary in order to sustain the *higher* academic expectations of the children. Thus at Moorcroft School there appeared to be a greater focus on the end product, the human *becoming*. The adult-child relationship at Moorcroft School did *not*, I feel, reflect the notion of equality and respect for children and childhood that is inherent in the UNCRC (pages 16-18 refer). Indeed, it appeared to emphasize the 'otherness' of children. In contrast, the different needs of the children at Howland School, due to its location in a disadvantaged area, meant that although there were academic expectations of the children, there seemed to be a greater emphasis on developing children's social skills. Observations during my time at Howland School suggested that the

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<sup>2</sup> For example, on May 1<sup>st</sup> 2002 the children were invited to talk about what it felt like to work in a group, what problems arose, how did they solve them, what did they gain from it etc.



adult-child boundary was not so clearly marked. The cultural script in place at Howland School *did*, I feel, reflect the notion of equality and respect for children and childhood inherent in the UNCRC. At Howland School, therefore, there appeared to be a greater focus on children's *being*. This more respectful relationship appeared to make adults more approachable to children. Evidence of this can be found, for example, in the way that a number of the Year 5 children often hugged me on my arrival at, or departure from, school (FN)<sup>3</sup>; children (Year 5 and Year 6) *regularly* approached me to talk to me (FN); some of the Year 5 children *asked* me to attend their school play (which I did) (FN). In time, some of the Howland children seemed to view me as a 'friend' (FN and RCP; see also 'friend role' evaluation, pages 254-5). Thus at Howland School the possibility seemed to exist for forging more rewarding adult-child relationships as a result of what was offered to the children by the school. In contrast, the clearly marked adult-child boundary at Moorcroft School perhaps raises concern about the possible consequences for those children's future relationships with children when they are adults themselves.

### ***Friends***

Children's views on friendships support Mayall's finding (see Mayall, 2000) that the best thing about school is friends. For example, Kevin (Howland, GI) stated '*it's good going to school 'cos you see all your friends*'. It was noticeable that some children's friendships at Moorcroft School revealed a *past* as well as a *present*. Colin (PD) stated, for example, '*My best friend is Lee, because we went to the same Montessori school and we've been best friends ever since*'. Such continuity, which was not evident in the children's accounts at Howland School, may be important as it is considered to contribute to greater academic competence, as well as more social skills, less problematic behaviour and the establishment of more positive school perceptions (see Peters, 2003). Children's friendships also recognized a hoped for time *future*, as evidenced by Gary's (Howland, GI) comment about a friend, that when '*we get about sixteen we might go down this pub and have a drink*'. However, children's friendships were largely constructed in the *present* and it is to this aspect that attention now turns.

Boys and girls at Howland School appeared to mix more naturally than at Moorcroft School and there were a number of discussions about 'boyfriends' and 'girlfriends'. Howland boys and girls, in both Year 5 and Year 6, talked about others that they 'fancied'

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<sup>3</sup> Initially just girls, but towards the end of my stay at the school one of the boys also hugged me.

or were 'going out' with. 'Boyfriends' featured on one of the posters designed by Year 5 girls (Howland) and the discussion that followed was lively:

Interviewer: *'Boyfriends' – I'm interested to know all about this!*

Amy: *I had one, but ...*

Penny: *Who is it?*

Amy: *You know who it is – Reece – but we split up, but now we're friends.*

Interviewer: *But when you say 'boyfriend', what do you mean by having a boyfriend? What sort of things do you get up to, or shouldn't I ask?!*

Kay: *You just like love 'em and you chase them around the playground and stuff.*

Kylie: *And start kissing them.*

Kay: *We used to chase all the boys around. Girls like boys because they're like ...*

Jacky: *Cute.*

Kay: *Yes, cute. They always play football and you just want to watch them and stuff.*

Amy: *That's what I used to do with Reece.*

Interviewer: *So, you say it's like a boyfriend, but it's just in school then?*

Kay: *Yes. My best friend that was in Year 6 – she's left now – she was watching my brother and she said 'cor, look at his bum'!*

Conversations with Year 6 boys and girls at Howland were equally lively. On one occasion a girls' group put me under immense pressure to divulge the names of girls that boys had told me they 'fancied', but for confidentiality reasons I had to disappoint them.

The strong social mix between some boys and girls at Howland School did not seem to be apparent at Moorcroft School. Indeed, Peter's (Moorcroft, Q) comments told a different story: *'Because I have some friends that are girls I get bullied. I get called a girl and I've*

*been strangled and pinned against the wall*'. Peter's situation was compounded by the fact that he felt the school had not helped to solve the problem (GI). Authors such as Thorne (1986, cited in Hartup, 1992) suggest that opposite sex friendships in school-aged children are often seen as romantic or sexual and invite teasing. However, Peter's use of the term '*bullied*' and the apparent physical assault suggested a more serious concern about an asymmetric power relationship that is characteristic of bullying (Olweus, 1993). Peter appeared to be the victim of homophobic bullying, and the fact that his aggressors seemed to view him as being more 'girlie' means that he was seen as being less powerful (Epstein, 1998, cited in Skelton, 2001). Girls and boys at Moorcroft School generally appeared to have their own single-sex friendship groups and stepping outside this 'norm', as Peter's example shows, did not pass by unnoticed. In contrast, a good friendship between Matt and Sally at Howland School did not, during the time I spent there, seem to be remarked upon by their classmates.

However, children at Moorcroft School greatly valued the support that friends provided. For example, Peter (Q) considered that his friends – girls – were one of his most treasured possessions<sup>4</sup> because '*they are there for me*' and appreciated the fact that when he was being bullied '*Sian always sorts it out*' (GI); Caroline, referring to her friends, Joanne and Mary, stated '*I couldn't do without either of those two*'. Indeed, Caroline (GI) felt that in certain circumstances, such as an argument with someone at school, '*friends can understand me more than my Mum. My family, they don't understand how upset I am and how I feel*'. Thus friendships, which are based on a more egalitarian basis than that between children and parents, acted as a buffer for negative events occurring in children's lives (Hartup, 1992).

### ***Pets***

Family pets, or those belonging solely to children, were an important part of children's constructions of childhood and were valued in a number of ways. Pets provided continuity and thus represented both *past* and *present* as '*You grow up with them*' (Penny, Howland, PD). Children appreciated the closeness and comfort that pets provided as '*you bond with them*' (Joanne, Moorcroft, PD), '*you can talk to them and cuddle them*' (Amy, Howland, PD) and '*when I'm sad my dog comes over and licks me*' (Natasha, Moorcroft, PD). Pets

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<sup>4</sup> Question 1, section 1 of the children's questionnaire (Appendix 5) asked: 'What is your most treasured possession? Why is it your most treasured possession?' I feel Peter's response was a reflection of the value he placed on these friendships rather than a suggestion that he 'owned' his friends.

were also valued as playmates. Whilst sometimes moaning about the work involved in looking after pets, some children appreciated the responsibility they gave them. Although children valued the fact that childhood entailed few responsibilities compared to the major responsibilities of adulthood, they did like to be given *some* responsibility (and this did not just apply to the issue of pets) because *'It's like a step up. You feel you've been trusted'* (Mary, Moorcroft, GI). Caitlin (Moorcroft, GI) provided a further useful insight in stating that pets *'don't boss you about'*. Thus it appears that pets might be strongly valued for the unconditionally accepting relationship they provide. However, the significant place that pets held in children's lives understandably caused upset when they died. For example, the death of Caroline's (Moorcroft, PD) rabbit appeared to have been made worse by her father's comment that *'you'll get over it'*, but, as she wished to emphasize, *'He didn't know how I felt really, because when we got it out we held it and stroked it. It's not as if he's been with it as long as we have'*. The loss of an affectional bond requires a responsive approach (see Cairns, 2002). The death of a pet, in which it came to represent a *past*, was unsettling for some children and the situation may have been exacerbated if their feelings were trivialized or overlooked.

## FEARS AND DANGERS

### *Death and dying*

Many children, at both schools, made reference to issues relating to death or dying on their questionnaires. For example, John (Howland) was worried about *'When am I going to die, because it gives me a horrible feeling'*; Joe (Moorcroft) stated that one reason he was not in a hurry to grow up was because *'I'm afraid of dying'*; and Hayley (Moorcroft) was worried that *'My Mum and Dad might die, because I wouldn't have a home'*. These are only a few of the *many* examples that could be offered. Children's responses often appeared to have been triggered by the death of a family member, including pets. Some children associated death with adulthood, thus viewing it as an *undesired* state of *becoming*. In contrast, childhood was constructed as a *desired* state of living, of *being*. Thus, for example, Judy (Moorcroft) was not in a hurry to grow up, because *'I do not want to die'*. Given the extensiveness of such comments on the questionnaires – which was greater at Howland School – and in some cases the frequency, it seemed important to explore the topic of death in the group interviews even though this issue, as Blaise and Andrew (2005) state, is seen as taboo with children. Indeed, from Sieber and Stanley's (1988, cited in Lee, 1993) perspective, to have not explored this would have been an

evasion of responsibility on my part; avoiding it might have been personally convenient, but the issue was significant for the children. Boyden and Ennew (1998) state that starting with neutral subjects and gradually introducing more difficult ones can reduce the risk of causing distress to children. Any sensitive issues were therefore embedded in the final research activity – the group interview (see Appendix 10) – by which time the children had known me for a number of weeks. When combined with the questionnaires, the interviews revealed that many children had experienced the death of a family member. At Moorcroft School this was most likely to have been a grandparent, but for Year 6 children included the death of a child in their year group two years previously. At Howland School, however, children had experienced the death of grandparents, cousins, siblings, aunts, uncles and, in one case, parents. The prevalence of death within the children's accounts appears to negate Thurtle's (1998b) view that contemporary children in the UK have little contact with death other than in violent television programmes but, however, lends support to the incidence of death noted by Jones and Tannock (2000) in their practitioner research.

For most children it *appeared* their experience of death had caused them upset, rather than being something that caused fear. For example, Penny (Howland, GI) stated that at her Nan's funeral she *'couldn't sing any songs 'cos I couldn't stop crying. When I think about it now I just normally start crying again'*. For some children, however, death raised possible fears. For example, Stacey (Moorcroft, GI) stated, *'I don't want to die because you have to go under the ground in a big box'*; Harry (Moorcroft, GI), in asking me *'is it affecting you now?'* hinted at a possible fear during a shared discussion about our school friends who had died<sup>5</sup>. A number of girls at Howland School appeared to have fears about ghosts, although this may have been due to a story at school that *'ghosts were haunting the toilets'* (Penny, GI). Terminology used by children, such as *'stroke'*, *'cancer'*, *'heart attack'* and *'tumour'* indicated that children had been informed about the nature of serious illness and/or cause of death of people known to them. However, as Jones and Tannock (2000) state, research sessions with children can reveal unforeseen powerful, complex, anxieties. For a few children, fear of death and dying appeared to run deeper. The most extreme case was John (Howland) who, during the poster discussion, continually diverted the conversation to talk about death and dying, for example: *'Most people probably don't*

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<sup>5</sup> The 'friend role' that I adopted with the children was based, in part, on respect and reciprocity (pages 84-5 refer). I was able to reciprocate Harry's conversation about the death of a school friend by sharing my own experience of losing a school friend when I had been 5-years-old. I consider this showed Harry that I had some understanding of his experience.

*think about dying when they're an adult, but I do when I'm a child' and 'It worries me every day, all night. I can't get rid of it'. It is possible that John's fears were triggered by the recent death of a family friend and also of his dog<sup>6</sup>.*

In trying to make sense of the children's experience of death it appears that death does permeate contemporary childhood experience. Parents seem likely to share information about family illness and death. In addition, television *programmes*, videos, DVDs, computers and games consoles have, through their increased availability and accessibility, undoubtedly brought the experience of death into the family home (see Gill, 1996, and 'Exposure to 'adult' knowledge' theme, this chapter). While death in this format may be 'scary' it appeared, as Hargrave (2003) also found, that such images were recognized as being fictional. However, a discussion with Moorcroft children (GI) about the *news* brought the following response:

Keith: *The news is good, but if it ...*

Dominic: *... had something horrid in it, like showing someone dead.*

Keith: *... had something not to do with anyone dying.*

Further, Colin (Moorcroft, GI) made an emphatic statement about his radio listening:

*'I like listening to classical music. When the news is on, I'm going, 'I don't want to listen'. But I listen to it and I hope that there's nothing about death on it, but there always is. And I'm thinking, maybe I like classical music, but I don't like the death factor of life'.*

Seeing and hearing about death through the news caused anxiety for some children (see also Buckingham, 1996, and sub-section 'September 11<sup>th</sup> and other news items' on pages

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<sup>6</sup> Such was my concern about John (as well as the possible effect of his conversation upon the other group members) that I, in consultation with John, passed my concern on to the class teacher. I followed up to ensure that my concern had been acted upon and subsequently learnt that John had been referred for counselling. In my final research activity with the children (group interview) I decided not to pursue the topic of death with John's group as I did not wish to cause John any harm. However, as a friend (in the 'friend role' I had adopted) I wished to be there for John to talk to me if he wished to and, indeed, he approached me several times in the classroom and talked to me further about his fears.



136-8). The news is reality, *'it's what's happening, it's what's going on in the world'* (Andrew, Howland, GI) and so death on the news is real death. What is real has the potential to become real for children (Hargrave, 2003) and may therefore cause fear. In considering further children's exposure to death, it is interesting to note that Kline (cited in Buckingham, 2000: 160) has criticized children's television cartoons for being *'formulaic', 'inane', 'mind-numbingly banal'* and *'unable to deal adequately with feelings and experience'*. However, this neglects what cartoons *mean to children*. Damian's (Howland, PD) comment provides a useful insight: *'In a cartoon, if they fall down, off a roof or something, they don't die. They bounce back up and start running again'*. Thus one reason why children might enjoy cartoons and *choose* to watch them may well be because they do not contain scenes involving death.

### ***Local area and local people***

Children at Howland School identified the local park as a dangerous place. For example, Damian (PD) stated that *'A girl was raped and then they tried to suffocate her by putting a bag over her head'* and Emma (PD) reported that *'two people got killed at the park, shot by a gun, a few months ago'*. Similar stories were relayed by a number of children in various discussion groups. Such knowledge about the park had made some children scared to go there and fear appeared to be compounded by the fact that *'there's loads of hiding places there'* (Anna, PD) as, for example, *'there's loads of bushes'* (Rachel, PD). This supports Scott *et al.*'s (2000) study in that certain physical features in the park were read as signs of danger. However, Howland children also identified other possible dangers in their locality. For example, the arcades were viewed as dangerous due to the threat from *'drunken people, because there's about four pubs'* (Karen, GI); a recent murder on the local beach had made Penny (GI) scared to walk along the beach, even if with a friend or her brother; Jonathan (PD) commented *'the other day I saw a man with drugs'*; and Matt (PD) referred to people carrying pocket knives. Although places were perceived as dangerous, it was *people* that actually posed the threat and made some children fearful (see Roberts *et al.*, 1995). For Howland children fears appeared to be directly related to the geographical proximity of the danger (see Buckingham, 1996); they lived in *'a dangerous place'* (Dan, GI) in which they *knew*, and sometimes *saw*, 'bad' things happen. Thus for Howland children, such fears appeared to be real.

Moorcroft children's fears of their local area appeared to be both perceived and real. For example, Frank's (PD and GI) comment that *'Round by us you have to be careful because you've got woods ... and it's scary'* appeared to be a perceived fear as it was not corroborated with evidence. However, Tanya's (PD) fear during a firework display in her town was corroborated with her statement that *'it was really scary ... there was all these drunk people in the streets'*. In contrast to Tanya's comment, Tony (GI), in assessing the possibility of an attack on England following the events of September 11<sup>th</sup><sup>7</sup> considered that he had felt *'really, really safe, because we're in an extremely small village in the middle of nowhere'*. Thus the *specific* location in which Moorcroft children lived, which was varied, appeared to play a part in their perception of risk, so lending support to Scott *et al.*'s (2000) findings<sup>8</sup>. However, it is important to note that children at Moorcroft School also *shared* a concern about *'a stranger taking pictures round the back of our school'* (Richard, PD). In this way a real danger was seen to have entered their shared world (see Hargrave, 2003).

Children at both schools raised concern about other children, particularly teenagers. This lends further support to Scott *et al.*'s (2000) findings. For example, Kay (Howland, GI) stated simply *'I'm frightened of teenagers'*; Stacey (Moorcroft, PD) referred to teenagers who were *'threatening'* her; and John (Howland, Q) wished that people would *'stop beating me up outside'*. In this way some children, both boys and girls, constructed themselves as *victims*. Since such accounts were often based on direct experience, other children can perhaps be seen to pose as much of a risk, or greater, than adults (see Gallagher *et al.*, 2002, for related discussion). However, some children's fears of teenagers were perceived. For example, Kayleigh (Howland, GI) stated that she had heard on the news about teenagers doing bad things *'and now I'm too scared to go near teenagers ... I go over to the other side of the road'*. The fact that the news had played a part in Kayleigh's fear and had caused her to alter her behaviour appears to provide evidence of media effect (see, for example, Burton, 2000).

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<sup>7</sup> This relates to the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre – the 'Twin Towers' – in America on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001.

<sup>8</sup> This study was undertaken in two areas of Scotland – Edinburgh (city) and East Lothian (semi-rural). It involved 52 children, aged 9-15 and 42 parents and explored constructions of risk and the negotiation and management of risk anxiety in family contexts.

### *September 11<sup>th</sup> and other news items*

A planned discussion with the children centred on a specific aspect of the exosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) – the news media. News of the terrorist attack in America on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 had instilled fear in many children, albeit this appeared to have been temporary. My findings support those of Hargrave (2003) in that since the ‘baddie’ had not been captured, a threat had continued to exist for children and their families. For example, Paul (Howland, GI) was worried that a letter containing anthrax would be delivered to his house. A familiar concern centred on the possibility of war breaking out in England: *‘I wasn’t worried when it was all in America, but as soon as the Britons started helping that got me worried, ’cos they might come and attack Britain’* (Jonathan, Howland, GI). Thus the possibility that the danger might enter their world made some children fearful (Hargrave, 2003). Some children, such as Karen (Howland, GI), suffered nightmares involving death: *‘I had nightmares for the next two weeks, constant ... that it happened to my Mum, Dad, sister’*. Children’s fears, which were varied, represented fears both for the *present* and, due to uncertainty, for the *future*. Although children generally wanted to know about such news, because it was important to be prepared, it is possible that for some children *hearing* about such news may be preferable to *seeing* it, as evidenced by this conversation at Howland School (GI):

Rachel: *I don’t think that they should show it. It’s good to show it so that we know what’s happening, but it should be like an ‘only adult’. They should have said only for adult watchers, ’cos it can scare children.*

Stephanie: *Yeah, but we’ve got to know what goes on, ’cos if someone just comes down in a plane and crashes what are we gonna do?*

This appears to provide support for Moeller’s (1999) view about the potentially powerful effect of visual images in the news.

Whilst children expressed concern about a range of news stories, national news items concerning the abduction and/or murder of children were mentioned most frequently. Such stories, which constructed children as *victims*, had produced various effects. For example,

Dan's (Howland, GI) fear of an alleyway had been triggered by the Damilola Taylor case<sup>9</sup> as *'till then I wasn't scared of that alleyway'*; Trevor (Moorcroft, GI), commenting on the Sarah Payne case<sup>10</sup>, stated *'I don't like going out now because of that'*; and for Janice (Moorcroft, GI), the Sarah Payne case *'gave me nightmares ... really freaked me out'*. Thus national news items may impact on children's lives in a negative way. Both girls and boys expressed fears; this finding supports that of Buckingham (1996) but stands in contrast to Valentine (1997a), who found that boys were reluctant to acknowledge any fears for their personal safety<sup>11</sup>.

Given the statistics relating to the murder of children by strangers (pages 38 and 54 refer) some comments were worrying. For example, Ryan (Howland, PD), addressing myself, stated *'It was safer when you were a child, there weren't many kidnappings'*; Tina (Howland, GI) considered that *'there's loads of children getting murdered'*; and Melissa (Moorcroft, PD) commented *'In your time it was like really low with children getting kidnapped and now it's like really high'*. Children may therefore believe there are many strangers who pose a serious threat (see Furedi, 2002). The extent to which children's fears on this issue derive from the national news media or, as Blakeley (1994) suggests, may be acquired from their parents, is difficult to ascertain. However, the fears identified by Howland children about their *local* area (page 134 refers) may have been triggered by local news reporting. For example, Sonia (GI) remarked *'Some people are getting murdered and killed ... getting raped and that (in the local park). We've heard it on the news'*. This news had made Sonia frightened about *'getting hurt and stabbed'*. In such instances the news highlighted the geographical proximity of the danger (see Buckingham, 1996); a danger *had* entered the children's world (see Hargrave, 2003) and may have increased their fears. The term 'rape', which was used by seventeen children at Howland School (as opposed to one at Moorcroft School), was most often used in reference to incidents in their *local* park. This apparent awareness of a sexual risk stands in contrast to Scott *et al.*'s (2000)

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<sup>9</sup> Damilola Taylor was a 10-year-old boy, attacked and murdered in November 2000.

<sup>10</sup> Sarah Payne was 8 years old when she was abducted and murdered in July 2000.

<sup>11</sup> Valentine's study centres on children's and parents' understandings of children's competence to negotiate public space safely. I could not find any mention of the age of the boys involved in her study, although it appears they may have been older than the children involved in my study. This may help to explain Valentine's finding. However, it is possible that the 'friend role' I adopted (pages 82-5 refer) may also have played a part in boys' revealing their fears to me. There is insufficient information in Valentine's article to know what membership role was adopted in her study.

findings<sup>12</sup>. Whilst national news items did seem to play a part in the children's constructions of fear at both schools, for the children at Howland School *local news* also played a part in these constructions.

### ***Transition to secondary school***

Year 6 children at both schools raised various concerns about their forthcoming move to secondary school: a) capability – for example, *'if I can do the work'* (Tim, Moorcroft, Q); b) spaces – for example, *'Getting lost, it's a big place'* (Oliver, Moorcroft, Q); c) isolation – for example, Vicki (Howland, GI) was worried about how she would make friends *'because I'm the only one going there'*; and d) older children and peer pressure – for example, *'because there will be lots of kids bigger and older than me'* (Toby, Howland, Q) and *'whether they try to get you to smoke or take drugs'* (Joanne, Moorcroft, GI). Thus for some children, as Joanne and Toby's examples show, older children represented a threat and were therefore a group they may have no particular desire to join (see Scott *et al.*, 2000, for a related discussion). Taken as a whole, such fears represented a concern for the time *future* and appeared to preoccupy children due to the fast approaching transition. However, some children were not worried about this issue, as any previous fears had been allayed by introductory sessions that had taken place at secondary schools. I feel it is important for me to be self-critical at this point as the concerns raised by children on this issue were evidence of a possible crisis and therefore merited further exploration.

## **FREEDOM AND CONSTRAINT**

This theme centres predominantly on the issue of independent outdoor freedom. However, other freedoms valued and desired by the children also receive consideration.

### ***Setting the scene***

Many children at both schools – girls and boys – reported restrictions on their independent outdoor freedom. For example, *'My Mum won't let me out'* (Mike, Howland, PD); *'I'm allowed to go round the corner but no further'* (Christine, Moorcroft, GI); *'I'm not even allowed to go to the park and go home on my own'* (Ivan, Moorcroft, PD); and Kevin (Howland, PD) could go *'to the park and to the corner shop next to my house. I'm not*

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<sup>12</sup> Scott *et al.* found that only a few of the younger children (aged 9-12 years) in their study had heard of stories in newspapers relating to sexual risk and some described local incidents – sex, however, was seldom spoken about directly. Although the term 'rape' was used by a number of children at Howland School, it is possible that their understanding of the meaning of this word was limited (see Taylor, 1998).

*allowed to go down Howland on my own*'. Thus, as Kelley *et al.* (1997) found, children's unsupervised access to streets, parks and other facilities was denied or restricted. Children's access to public space often had to be negotiated (Mayall, 2002) – parental permission was therefore usually required. Thus, for example, if Ricky (Moorcroft, PD) wanted to go to the park, *'I've got to ask'*. Whilst some children appeared to have much greater outdoor freedom, parental conditions were often still evident. For example, *'My Mum doesn't really care what I'm doing so long as I tell her where I'm going'* (Annette, Moorcroft, PD); and *'Usually, I'm allowed to play anywhere, but all I need to do is tell my Mum where I'm going and when I'm going to be back, so she knows where I am'* (Tony, Moorcroft, PD). However, the number of children with greater outdoor freedom was small compared to those whose outdoor freedom seemed to be considerably curtailed.

Whilst the children's opportunity for unsupervised outdoor freedom existed on a continuum, it was also apparent that some children did not wish to go out on their *own*, preferring instead to be with friends. For example, Sian (Moorcroft, PD) stated *'I wouldn't want to go on my own because it's boring'* and Peter (Moorcroft, PD), whilst allowed to go out on his own, commented *'I prefer to go in groups'*. My evidence suggested that any desire children had for outdoor freedom was primarily connected to a wish for social contact with friends. Such opportunities, as Kegerreis (1993) argues, are important as they permit access to shared peer cultures and help to promote self-esteem. However, it is possible that some children may wish to be with a friend, or in a group, as it makes them feel safer. Being with a friend, or within a group, was a condition that parents sometimes attached to children's outdoor freedom, or for extended boundaries. For example, Nicholas (Moorcroft, PD) stated, *'I can go out by myself, but not very far. I can go further with friends'* and if Samantha (Howland, PD) wished to go out she had to be *'in a group of, say, four people'*. In such instances it appeared that parents' need for their child to be in the company of friends was based on protection rather than social development. A further form of 'protection' came in the form of mobile phones, which children viewed as being useful for personal safety in case of an emergency. Additionally, mobile phones appeared to permit and extend (in terms of time and boundaries) children's opportunities for independent outdoor freedom as, for example, *'you can just phone up your mum and tell her where you are'* (Anna, Howland, PD). Taken as a whole, it can be seen that children's scope for independent outdoor freedom was subject to control by more powerful adults (see, for example, Jackson and Scott, 1999).



Whilst many children objected to the restrictions on their outdoor freedom some children, as Hillman *et al.* (1990) also found, were amenable to such restrictions, actually preferring to stay indoors. A picture that began to emerge was of a valued indoor freedom in that many children valued the personal freedom their bedroom offered. Since bedrooms were a place where secrets were kept and usually housed an array of electronic technology, Jonathan (Howland, PD) spoke for many others in stating '*my bedroom is my life*'. Michelle (Howland, GI) considered, '*I've already got a lot of freedom, because when I go home I go straight in my bedroom, close my door, turn my music on so I can't hear my Dad shout, and I've got freedom*'. Thus bedrooms also enabled children to cut themselves off from other family members, so providing personal space to '*sit down and think*' (Vicki, Howland, GI). These findings suggest that a freedom the children particularly valued was, therefore, that of privacy (see Selwyn, 2000) within the family home.

### ***Factors affecting outdoor freedom***

A range of factors can be seen to be responsible for both providing and constraining opportunities for children's independent outdoor freedom.

#### *Paedophiles/'stranger danger'*

Children revealed an awareness of parents' – usually mothers – preoccupation with the issue of paedophiles/'stranger danger'. For example, Carl (Howland, GI) stated, '*Paedophiles kill children. That makes our parents scared, so we're not allowed out very far*'. Flowerdew and Neale (2003) argue that safety issues can cause tension between children and parents because they entail control of children's bodies and space. Some children, such as Becky (Howland, GI), appeared to identify the news media as a contributory factor in creating such tension: '*My Mum believes the news and newspapers and I hate her for that*'. According to Roberts *et al.* (1995) children might adopt restrictive behaviour themselves. This appeared to be the case for Keith (Moorcroft). The incident of the man seen taking photographs at Moorcroft School (page 135 refers) had disturbed Keith (GI), causing him to become suspicious of a man in a red van: '*Whenever I used to see this red van I used to go back to my house*'. However, Moorcroft children's experiences of 'stranger danger' appeared to be few compared to the experience of Howland children (page 134 refers). Incidents involving 'strangers' in the Howland area, which were reported on in the local news, served to constrain some children's outdoor

freedom, as evidenced by Anna's (PD) comment that *'I'm not allowed to go (to the park) because of all the rapes and flashers down there'*.

### Immediate environment

The immediate environment also influenced children's opportunities for children's outdoor play. The accounts of Howland children revealed that many lived near a park or an open area, such as Chloe (PD), who stated, *'I live right next to it (a park)'* and Kevin (PD), who commented, *'opposite my house there's a little field where I play football'*. Howland children mostly lived in a town, perhaps helping to explain why their outdoor play appeared more restricted in comparison to Moorcroft children, who lived in a variety of settings. For example, Peter (PD) remarked, *'It's like a farm where I live. When we ride our bikes there you can see all the cows and walls'* and Frank (PD) commented, *'Where I live there's this rally track with deep hills where they stunt and I go up there on my scooter'*. Children also raised the issue of traffic and for Melissa (Moorcroft, GI), for example, this meant that she was not allowed to go too far when out because *'I live right next to a main road'*. Thus environmental location appeared to be an important factor in determining the opportunities that existed for outdoor play (see Valentine and McKendrick, 1997).

### Gender, siblings and age

Whilst the outdoor freedom of both girls *and* boys was often restricted, or denied, a picture that emerged was of boys generally having *more* freedom than girls. This supports the findings of other studies, such as Hillman *et al.* (1990) and Kelley *et al.* (1997). This may cause tension for, as Melissa (Moorcroft, PD) complained, *'they let my brother in the front garden, but not me – he's seven'*. However, the presence of a, usually older, sibling appeared to permit, or extend, some children's outdoor mobility free of *parental* supervision. For example, Kevin (Howland, PD) could travel further from home *'with someone else, like my brother, 'cos he's fifteen'* and Kirsten (Moorcroft, PD) stated, *'I can go on my bike with my brother, but not too far'*. For children at Howland School, the incidences of rape in the local park may have served to further constrain the freedom of some girls, as evidenced by Rachel's comment: *'I'm not allowed down there because of what happened, plus I'm a girl. Boys it's alright because it doesn't happen to boys so much as it does to girls'*. Despite Rachel's apparent recognition that, as a girl, she was more vulnerable, she did want to go out. However, parental constraint dictated that, at this stage,

she could not. Age therefore emerged as a further factor determining the opportunities for children's outdoor freedom (see, for example, Hillman *et al.*, 1990). Consequently, some children looked forward to a time *future* when they would be old enough to have the independence to, for example, '*play outside a lot*' (Karl, Howland, Q).

#### Changes in the local environment

Children at Moorcroft School reported some changes in their local environment that were affecting opportunities for outdoor play. For example, Katrina had lived in a cul-de-sac, which had enabled her to play outdoors safely, but the road had been made into a through road. This had affected her outdoor play, causing Katrina (PD) to state:

*'The government people are complaining that children are just sitting down watching TV all the time, but if they hadn't opened up that road down our road we'd be out after school the whole time'.*

Tanya (PD) offered another example:

*'There's these woods down by the park and we used to play in there, and we went up there a few weeks ago and it was closed off. A couple of weeks later it was all chopped down and they've started building houses'.*

These lost play spaces had reduced children's opportunity for *being* in the world and, as Blakely (1994) points out, children have little control over where they live and in the planning of their environments. Moorcroft children lived in an area that was undergoing rapid housing development and this also required new traffic routes to be found. Katrina and Tanya appear to provide evidence for Mayall's (1996) view that the physical environment, constructed by *adults*, neglects children's interests and is hostile to them.

#### Overprotective parents

Some children considered parents to be overprotective. For example, Caroline (Moorcroft, GI) argued that children need '*space to grow up*', parents '*can't keep them at home all the time they're growing up*' as children '*need time and space to themselves, like adults do, to go and play and anything you want to do*'. Joanne (GI) supported her friend's comment,

stating *'you need some time on your own'*. Although Joanne recognized that parents needed to be *'a bit protective'* the message appeared to be that overprotection was unhelpful for children's healthy development, so lending support to the views of Furedi (2001). The comments of Caroline and Joanne provide a clear representation of a type of freedom that was desired by many children in this study.

***Judy: a vignette***

Judy (Moorcroft) considered herself to be very overprotected. She appeared to be unhappy with many aspects of her life, feeling constrained both indoors and outdoors. Although Judy's outdoor freedom was restricted *'because where I live there's a busy road'*, the problem ran deeper than this for on the rare occasion she was allowed out on her own *'I'm only allowed to walk about ten minutes and then I have to come back'*. On her mother's instructions a trip into town could only be made under the escort of her family. The previous year Judy's elder sister had gone missing for several hours. Judy's situation was compounded by the fact that her parents were separated (see page 121) and her father, whom she saw at weekends, *'lets me go anywhere basically'*. Whilst there did not appear to be conflict between Judy's parents, their parallel parenting (Flowerdew and Neale, 2003) on this issue appeared to cause conflict for Judy. Her mother's strict rules and regulations also constrained Judy's indoor freedom and, if not followed, could lead to being *'grounded'*. Such were the restrictions that she was not allowed to, for example, make a cup of tea or do some ironing, tasks which she felt competent to do.

Judy's story provides an interesting insight into the complexity of the situation: Judy is a girl; national news items regarding child abduction and/or murder may have been internalized by her mother; the local *'scare'* of the man seen taking pictures of children at the school and the incident of her sister's temporary disappearance may also have heightened her mother's concern; Judy may have felt overburdened with homework (see page 150); the break-up of her parents' relationship and her parents' different parenting styles caused difficulties for Judy; and she lived near a busy road. All these factors may have impinged on Judy's life in terms of her freedom. Judy's message appeared to be that she had little control over her life. Some children in this study were content with their level of freedom (whether it be indoors, outdoors, or both). Others, whilst perhaps showing some acceptance of their situation, were resentful of restrictions on their freedom. And some, such as Judy, were clearly unhappy. As the writing-up of this theme occurred, it was

the complexity of a situation, such as Judy's, and of the way in which a number of themes in this chapter interrelated, that I came to realise was not so unusual.

## EXPOSURE TO 'ADULT' KNOWLEDGE

### *How children access 'adult' knowledge*

Postman's (1982) concern about the 'disappearance of childhood' centred on children's exposure to 'adult' secrets – predominantly, death, sex, violence and illness – through the television. The children's accounts revealed that they were exposed to these topics and others, such as circumstances surrounding family break-up, in several ways: through electronic technology such as games consoles, computers, videos and television programmes; through the news media – newspapers, television and radio (local and/or national); and through personal experience (involving either a family member or someone known to the family). For example, Year 5 boys at Howland School gave graphic descriptions of violence and death in videos and computer games; Colin (Moorcroft, GI) heard about death on the radio news (see page 133); Joanne (Moorcroft, PD) spoke about the break-up of her Aunt's marriage the previous July/August, *'and I wasn't told until November. Even now (the following July) I'm finding out all these tiny little bits'*; and Tim (Moorcroft, GI) stated that a relative had been killed in the terrorist attack on September 11<sup>th</sup>. Whilst most of these examples reveal that children acquired 'adult' information from one source – either electronic technology, news media or parents – Tim's example revealed a more complex range of factors: it encompassed knowledge acquired through the news media and personal experience, and involved both violence and death. This complexity may explain Tim's action: *'I went into a bookshop. There was a book called, like, Bin Laden's'<sup>13</sup> biography – I just threw them all on the floor 'cos I was so annoyed'*. This negative behaviour may have been a response to Tim's personal situation (see Kroll, 1994, for related discussion).

The fact that the children in this study had access to a range of electronic technology, such as television, radio, games consoles, computers<sup>14</sup> and video/DVD players shows, as Buckingham (2000) and Corsaro (1997) suggest, that 'adult' knowledge is now easily

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<sup>13</sup> Osama Bin Laden is the leader of the Al-Qaeda group considered to be responsible for the September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 attack on the World Trade Centre in America.

<sup>14</sup> Children's use of computers seemed to largely centre on playing games. There was no evidence to suggest the children were using computers to access Internet chat rooms or 'adult' material, and I did not raise this issue myself.

available to children of all social classes and at an increasingly younger age. Additionally, children often had access to many of these items in their bedroom. Some children also accessed 'adult' knowledge through newspapers and the radio (at home and/or while travelling in the car).

Newspapers may play an underrated role in exposing children to 'adult' knowledge as the following poster group discussion with some Howland children reveals:

Interviewer: *What's so special and important about cartoons?*

Sonia: *They're funny and lots of people read them in the newspapers.*

Karen: *Especially children. That's the first thing I turn to when I read the paper.*

Rosanna: *I just like flicking through the paper.*

Thus children are drawn to cartoons in newspapers and in the process of '*flicking through the paper*' may be exposed to a variety of 'adult' knowledge. Whilst some children might intentionally seek out 'adult' knowledge (Buckingham, 1996) my findings revealed that such knowledge might also be *imposed* on children, as evidenced by Colin's (Moorcroft, GI) emphatic comment: '*They cut through the programme I was watching and said Princess Margaret had died. They cut through my favourite programme just to say that*'. In this way, 'adult' knowledge was seen to cut into childhood space and time.

Acquisition of 'adult' knowledge was not confined to the home setting:

Interviewer: *So, these things that you've heard about going on – where did you hear about those?*

Susan: *We keep track.*

Stephanie: *And the news, you hear at school.*

(Howland, PD)

Thus children's exposure to 'adult' knowledge through the news was shared in conversation with peers and therefore needs to be viewed as a collective process



(Bausinger, 1984, cited in Allan, 1999) emerging within the home and school, amongst other possible places. Indeed, my own study contributed to this process.

### ***Electronic technology – the control of ‘adult’ knowledge***

Children’s accounts revealed that parents often controlled children’s exposure to ‘adult’ knowledge. For example, Linda (Moorcroft, GI), referring to news coverage of the terrorist attack on September 11<sup>th</sup> stated, *‘my Dad switched it off and said it weren’t suitable ... he sent me out of the room and then turned it back on’*; and Tony (Moorcroft, GI), in a discussion about videos reported, *‘sometimes I watch a 15, but my Mum has to watch it and tell me if I can watch it. If there’s anything unsuitable I have to look away’*. Whilst it was apparent that many parents regulated their children’s viewing it was also apparent, as argued by Buckingham (2000), that some children were discriminatory viewers themselves and regulated their own viewing. For example, Gary (Howland, PD) talked excitedly about a new PlayStation game he had acquired that involved zombies, humans, machine guns and a lot of shooting, but that when he got to a particular point in the game *‘I was too scared, so I turned it off because I didn’t want to know what happened next’*. In this way children display a competency, which situates them as *beings*, rather than as the passive victim that is inferred by authors such as Postman (1982).

### ***Gender and age differences***

For many of the boys at Howland School, computer/PlayStation games, films and videos that involved death and violence appeared to be an important part of their childhood experience. Indeed, one of the Year 5 all-boy discussion groups spoke with considerable relish about this particular genre and when I felt it was time to move the discussion on to another topic there was a loud *‘ohhh!’* from the group! As Sonia (Howland, PD) explained, *‘Boys like vicious things – blood and guts’*. This genre was not so popular with girls. The ‘Lord of the Rings’ film was considered by Becky (Howland, PD) to be *‘quite vicious ... I don’t think it’s very good for children’*. The film had been given an age 8 rating but some children considered this to be too low. For example, Sonia (Howland, PD) remarked, *‘I think it should be over 12, because it’s quite vicious’*. This provides further evidence that some children are discriminatory viewers (Buckingham, 2000). Children may themselves have clear views about what they consider to be appropriate material at a certain age, and here their view can be seen to differ from that of the adults who certified the film. The issue of viewing age also emerged in discussions about ‘EastEnders’, which many children

at both schools liked to watch. Storylines involving murder, violence, prostitution and inter-familial abuse were mentioned, with Julia (Howland, PD) commenting that the programme '*should be on about half past eight, 'cos usually younger children are in bed by then*'. Here, Julia appeared to refer to a time *past* that no longer belonged to her. Her view also supports Buckingham's research (see, Buckingham, 2000) in that older children may argue that younger children should not be exposed to certain material.

### ***September 11<sup>th</sup> and other news items***

The news media provide a specific avenue through which children might be exposed to 'adult' knowledge. Buckingham (1996) argues that the common perception that children rarely watch the news is an assumption that should be challenged. Thus, as mentioned previously, a planned discussion with the children focused on the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attack as well as other news items that concerned them.

The vast majority of children had seen television coverage of the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attack and some had also seen newspaper reports. The event had instilled feelings of anger, worry, excitement (as it was a new experience) and compassion (including, from one child, compassion for the hijackers, who had given up their life for their cause) in the children. Many children recalled specific details about the event, such as people making their last phone calls to their loved ones, the planes crashing into the buildings, burnt people and people jumping to their death from the Twin Towers. I wished to know whether the children thought they should be exposed to this type of news at their age. Many children felt they wanted to know because, for example: '*It's getting you prepared, getting you ready for when you're an adult*' (Becky, Howland, GI); '*He's (Osama Bin Laden) killing thousands of people and I think I should know who did it so if ever I come across him I know who to kill*' (Tony, Moorcroft, GI); and '*You can deal with the truth*' (Toby, Howland, GI). These responses reveal that some children may themselves construct the uniformed child as being the child 'at risk' (see Calvert, 1998). There is a focus both on children's *being*, their time *present*, in stating a competency to cope with the truth, and on their *becoming*, in acknowledging the need to know about such events in order to protect their, and others, time *future*. Some children would have preferred not to know about the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attack because, for example, '*It can scare you*' (Fiona, Moorcroft, GI) and '*I didn't know what was going to happen*' (Susan, Howland, GI). Thus it was the uncertainty, of not knowing the outcome (see Hargrave, 2003), that appeared likely to

contribute to children's fears discussed on page 136. Whether or not children wanted to know about such news can perhaps be attributed to individual difference for, as Karen (Howland, GI) pointed out, *'It depends what your personality is like. If you're like me, really worrying ... then you get really worried'*. Some children also felt that *'younger children shouldn't hear about it'* (Sian, Moorcroft, GI), thus once again appearing to refer to a *past* they considered no longer belonged to themselves. The news saturation on this specific event was also problematic for some children because, for example, *'I wanted to watch cartoons, but it was on all the time'* (Geoffrey, Moorcroft, GI) and *'There was no kids' programmes on'* (Christine, Moorcroft, GI). Thus the extensive coverage of this 'adult' knowledge was seen to cut into childhood space and time.

Discussions about other news items that concerned the children included aeroplane, train and car crashes; murders (particularly if the murderer had not been captured); rapes; wars; death of children; attacks on children/adults for their mobile phone; negative reports about older children/teenagers; IVF blunders, disease and other health related issues. Thus the emphasis was on news reports in which people were *victims* (predominantly) or *aggressors*. A rare bit of light relief was provided by Sian (Moorcroft, GI) who stated that she was concerned about *'David Beckham's pink nails'*<sup>15</sup>. Children at Howland School made greater reference to *local* news items due to the geographical proximity (see Buckingham, 1996) of dangers within their neighbourhood (see page 134). However, the type of news story mentioned most often centred on the abduction and/or murder of children, such as the cases of Milly Dowler<sup>16</sup>, Damilola Taylor, Sarah Payne and James Bulger. Thus news stories that located children as *victims* appeared to be at the forefront of children's minds. Although these stories scared some children (see pages 136-7), a strong message was that they wanted to know about such events as, for example, *'It could happen to us'* (Lawrence, Moorcroft, GI). It is this centring on the self, the fact that these news items involved other children, and thus someone with whom they could identify (Hargrave, 2003), that appears likely to have also contributed to children's fears (pages 136-8 refer). Once again, children themselves constructed the uninformed child as being 'at risk' (see Calvert, 1998, whose discussion, however, relates to *parents*); exposure to such knowledge is therefore important and so *'it's like protection really. If other people don't know, you*

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<sup>15</sup> David Beckham, at the time of my writing, is an English international footballer, whose fashion sense has been followed closely by the media.

<sup>16</sup> Milly Dowler was a 13-year-old girl who was abducted in March 2002. Her body was discovered in September 2002.

*can tell them and you can be aware and know for your own life*' (Rosanna, Howland, GI). Thus, as Buckingham (1996) found, the 'need to know' generally outweighed any negative effect that exposure to such knowledge might have.

Taken as a whole, it was evident that the children learnt a lot from news stories and since Andrew (Howland, GI) felt that *'We should know what's going on in our planet'*, children may well feel that they have a *right* to know about 'adult' issues.

## PRESSURES

### *Tests and homework*

Concerns about young children's learning experiences have largely centred on issues relating to the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1988 (see, for example, Blenkin and Kelly, 1994) and associated policies, such as testing (see, for example, Drummond and Nutbrown, 1992). However, the children's constructions of homework and testing contained important messages.

For some children, tests (11+ and Standard Assessment Tasks – SATs) brought pressure that caused them to worry *'in case I fail them'* (Kayleigh, Howland, GI) and, as Gary (Howland, GI) explained: *'I'm really like ... I can't describe it. I'm really like nervous about the tests – that I might get it wrong or right. I go 'yes!' when I've got it right'*. Although tests did undoubtedly cause worry for some children, such examples appear to provide evidence for Pollard's (2000) view that children are becoming increasingly instrumental in that they may be more concerned with the score they will get in a test than with developing deeper understanding. Year 6 children in this study had recently undertaken their SATs and these raised other issues for the children. For example, Kayleigh (Howland, PD) complained that before SATs *'the morning consisted of English and maths SATs papers to practise on. The afternoon was science papers'*, seemingly providing evidence for Elkind's (1981) concern about the 'hurried child' due to the pressure on schools to produce 'better products'. However, Dean's (Moorcroft, PD) comment that the SATs *'were quite easy actually ... the practice tests just made you more nervous really'* was an example of the view that children may object less to 'real' tests than they do to the testing culture that was evident in the children's accounts. Some children observed that it was only now that SATs were over that they were able to do some *'fun stuff'* (Nicholas, Moorcroft, PD) in Year 6 at school.

When discussing homework, however, it was evident that many children constructed this very differently, as the following conversation (Howland, GI) reveals:

- Craig: *Tests are alright because they're in school. But homework, I don't like that. You miss out on your free time.*
- Dan: *You're missing all your fun time. I might have a homework tonight and it might take me all night and I might have to miss football.*
- Interviewer: *So, you think you shouldn't have to do homework?*
- Craig: *We should only have to do work in school.*
- Michelle: *It's quite good in a way because you're learning, but in another way I just want to go out and play.*

Other children echoed this objection. This concern was particularly noticeable at Moorcroft School, where academic expectations of the children appeared to be higher. For example:

- *'We don't really get time to go round each other's house because we've got loads of homework'* (Owen, Moorcroft, PD);
- *'The amount of homework we get now, it takes up most of our social time, 'cos we do have a social life'* (Joanne, Moorcroft, GI);
- *'I was having this really good game with my friend and then I had to do my homework'* (Philippa, Moorcroft, PD).

Thus children appeared to make a clear distinction between the time they spent at school, which involved *work*, and the time which they spent out of school, which *should* entail being able to have some choice about how they would like to spend *their* time. It is possible children observe that adults go to work but do not, generally, bring work home with them and so may consider that schoolwork should not impinge on their home life. It appears that children considered they had a *right* to play and fun, but homework cut into childhood space and time. Such concerns served to highlight the issue of government intervention in the children's lives, so raising issues about power and control (Smith, 2000a).

### ***Consumerism and the commercialization of childhood***

Buckingham (2000) argues that widening inequalities affect the ability to purchase the consumer goods and services that critics look upon as the defining symbols of contemporary childhood. However, children at both schools reaped the benefits of consumerism and the commercialization of childhood. This was evident in terms of items like games consoles, televisions, computers, video recorders, DVD players, mobile phones and toys, as well as experiences such as leisure pools, cinemas (to see the latest film, such as *Monster Inc* or *Harry Potter*), theme parks (both in the UK and abroad), other attractions and fast food outlets (such as McDonald's). These possessions and experiences were evident in the accounts of children at both schools and so social circumstances did not appear to impact *significantly* on this particular aspect of their lives.

'Must haves' appeared to be an important part of children's constructions of contemporary childhood for, as Annette (Moorcroft, PD) explained, *'We've got what we want, but we still want things that we haven't got, and you have to have something that you want that you can't have'*. Gender played a significant role in the 'must haves'. Whilst electronic items were an important feature in the accounts of children at both schools, games consoles – such as PlayStation and GameBoy – took a more central place for boys. For Tony (Moorcroft, GI) one thing that would make his childhood a better experience for him was

*'To have the X Box – a new console that comes out soon. It's got really good graphics and really good games. We only got our PlayStation at Christmas and I was asking for it ever since the first day it came out, so it would be really good to have the X Box the first day it came out'*.

This appears to provide evidence that games consoles, which have often been targeted by manufacturers at young adults, induce an aspirational factor in younger children as well (Buckingham, 2003)<sup>17</sup>.

Whilst music (pop/rock) was evident in the accounts of both boys and girls, it appeared to take a more central place in girls' lives, as evidenced by Karen's (Howland, PD) comment:

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<sup>17</sup> Although Buckingham refers only to Sony's PlayStation, it seems possible that the aspirational factor could be applied more generally to 'sophisticated' games consoles.



*'I was very devoted to Steps (a pop group). I had Steps everything. I was so gutted when they broke up'*. Pop magazines, and other magazines such as 'Sabrina' and 'Girl Talk', along with television programmes such as 'Pop Idol', seemed to play a part in stimulating and maintaining girls' interest in pop music. Fashion also played an important part in girls' lives (and, to a lesser extent, that of boys), with shopping being a favoured pastime for many. Vicki's (Howland, PD) statement that *'Girls wear higher heel shoes, a lot of make-up, older clothes and stuff to make them look older'* appeared to provide evidence for Hymowitz's (1999) concern about tweens – that 8-12-year-olds have a teen fashion and image consciousness. However, Anna commented (Howland, PD) that *'it makes you feel grown-up'*, whilst Kayleigh (Howland, PD) considered that *'children are trying to act like adults'*. I find the use of the words *'feel'* and *'trying'* interesting, as they are very different to the *wanting* to be grown-up that is inferred by authors such as Hymowitz (1999). It should be clearly stated that the majority of children (Q, boys and girls: 73%) stated that they were *not* in a hurry to grow up because, for example, *'I want to enjoy being a child'* (Vicki, Howland, Q) and *'it isn't a big rush'* (Aidan, Moorcroft, Q).

Many children appeared to want an idol to look up to, to respect, perhaps look like and admire. For girls this was more likely to be a pop idol, although Vicki (Howland, GI) considered that the desire of girls to *'want to look like Britney (a singer) at 6, 7, 8 years old'* was *'taking away your childhood by being something that you're not'*. Boys were more likely to want to be like a sporting idol, such as the racing driver Michael Schumacher for Stefan (Moorcroft, PD). Some boys at Howland admired certain footballers and desired to have the same football boots as their idols. Indeed, these appeared to be important for boys' self-image because *'If you have cheap ones people take the mickey out of you'* (Jack, Howland, PD). Jack's situation was compounded by the fact that he came from a single-parent family and so

*'My Mum can't afford that kind of stuff and I'm getting bullied for it, and it's not Mum's fault that she hasn't got a proper job. I get boots – they're nice, but they're not the ones that I admire'*.

Jack's comment provides evidence not only for Hymowitz's (1999) concern about the power of the peer group to oversee what children wear, but perhaps also that he has learnt

to reduce his expectations as a result of his family's economic situation (Selwyn, 2000). Jack's comments may therefore have relevance for children in a similar situation.

### PLAY ... AND FUN!

Winn (1983), and others, have expressed concern about the disappearance of childhood play. This concern appears to have been based on how adults think children *should* spend their time, where they *should* be and what they *should* be doing (Hill and Tisdall, 1997). However, an important characteristic of play is that it must be *freely chosen* by the player (Hughes, 1999). Huizinga (1949, cited in Mayall, 2002) states that the essential quality of play is that it is fun but that most studies of play ignore what play means for the player. This theme therefore seeks to discover the children's constructions of 'play' and 'fun' and to explore *some* of the ways in which they played and had fun. It should be noted, however, that some children considered that opportunities for play and fun were restricted by school homework requirements (page 150 refers).

#### *Defining 'play' and 'fun'*

In my discussions with the children we often tussled with 'play' and 'fun' – were they the same thing or different? It was generally agreed that fun was a vital characteristic of play, thus supporting Huizinga's (cited in Mayall, 2002) view above. However, whilst *playing* football might be fun, Ryan decided (Howland, GI) that *'I don't think football is a playing thing because you have to attack each other'*. Since play means different things to different people (Fawcett, 2000), making sense of 'play' and 'fun' was complex. Play was generally described as *'when you do things'* (Dan, Howland, GI); *'when you've got friends'* (Jacky, Howland, GI); and *'having fun'* (Penny, Howland, GI). On this basis play is active, enjoyable and often social. With fun *'you don't need to be playing something'* (Tony, Moorcroft, GI) and *'you enjoy yourself'* (Anne, Howland, GI). These views, when placed alongside Jacky's (Howland, GI) comment that *'you can't really describe it, can you? F.U.N spells fun!'* suggest that fun is essentially a positive, happy, feeling that may be a part of play as well as something separate from play. 'Fun' experiences, such as theme parks, were an important part of the children's constructions of contemporary childhood. Fun could also be quite simple. For example, in the poster activity a group of children at both schools formed a picture of a person made up of two halves e.g. a man's head with a woman's body. Steven's (Moorcroft, PD) explanation for his group's picture was *'it looks fun'*, and the children at Howland School had written beneath their picture, *'Children like*

*having fun*'. Fun was a matter of personal choice. For example, whilst Colin (Moorcroft, GI) considered that climbing trees was fun, Frank's (Moorcroft, GI) response was, *'that's a bit boring'*. Fun was, however, an important part of the construction of contemporary childhood, as evidenced by the fact that 74% of the children used the word 'fun' as a positive descriptor for childhood on their questionnaires.

### ***Home-based play and fun***

Electronic technology, such as television, videos/DVDs, computers, PlayStation and GameBoy, played a central role in keeping children amused. In particular, boys seemed happy to spend long periods of time playing computer/PlayStation games for the simple fact that *'it's what we like doing'* (Niall, Moorcroft, PD). Such activities conformed with children's idea of play as they required active involvement in terms of pressing controls, and the fun factor might have been increased if playing with a sibling or friend. Jenkins (1998, cited in Buckingham, 2003) argues that these virtual 'play spaces' compensate for the reduction in children's outdoor play space and offer the same pleasures as outdoor play: the exploration and mastery of space, goal-driven activity, self-control rather than parental control, and male bonding. Perhaps this is why Harry (Moorcroft, PD) stated *'they're our lives, man'*. Watching television and videos/DVDs did not conform with children's definition of play, as it did not require active involvement: *'you're just sitting down ... you're not doing anything'* (Tony, Moorcroft, GI). However, television and videos/DVDs provided fun as, for example, cartoons such as the Flintstones and the Simpsons were *'funny'* (Karen, Howland, PD) and the 'Rush Hour 2' video was *'really brilliant'* (Steven, Moorcroft, PD). A number of boys at Moorcroft School were very interested in playing Warhammer<sup>18</sup>. Board games, such as Jenga, Cluedo, Monopoly, Twister, Guess Who and Operation were a favoured pastime for boys and girls but, like computer/PlayStation games, could become frustrating and lead to boredom.

Whilst girls also enjoyed playing games on items such as computers, PlayStation and GameBoy, their enthusiasm for this activity was not as great as that of boys, a finding that concurs with the view of Cassell and Jenkins (1998, cited in Buckingham, 2003). Girls appeared to spend more time than boys listening, singing and dancing to music. For example, Caroline (Moorcroft, PD) stated that she liked *'making up dances'* to music and

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<sup>18</sup> Warhammer is a table-top strategy war game. It is quite expensive to purchase and thus requires considerable financial investment to be able to play the game to an absorbing level. Warhammer did not emerge in the accounts of Howland children.

considered that she was *'doing it all the time'*. The way in which Howland girls burst into song during some of the poster discussions was an indicator of the place music held in their lives. Another important way in which girls liked to spend their time was talking to friends. Rachel's (Howland) comment that she would *'much rather chat'* than play computer games brought agreement from the other members in an all-girl group interview. This supports Roffey *et al.*'s (1994) finding that from approximately the age of 9 conversation is an important element of girls' friendship groups.

The dominance of electronic technology helps to explain why other toys appeared to play a dwindling role in children's lives. It seemed that other toys were often only played with when children were bored. For example, Keith (Moorcroft, PD) stated, *'sometimes I play with my action figures when I get a bit bored'*. Since technology has been blamed for its perceived detrimental effect on children's imaginative play (see, for example, Winn, 1983; Stutz, 1996), I sought to discover if children still played in this way. It appeared that for children in both year groups this was not a *significant* aspect of their play. Aaron's (Howland, GI) comment, *'I don't do that, it's for littler kids'* and Lauren's (Moorcroft, PD) statement, *'I used to when I was young, but don't now'*, once again hinted at a time *past* that children no longer perceived as theirs. Whilst some Year 5 girls still engaged in pretend/imaginary play, a conversation (PD) with Year 6 girls at Howland School revealed an interesting insight:

- Rachel: *I don't play with Barbies, I don't play with dolls.*
- Susan: *You do, Rachel.*
- Rachel: *I don't.*
- Susan: *I do. I play babies.*
- Stephanie: *Sometimes when we go round to her house we play games because we get a bit ...*
- Susan: *Very stupid.*
- Interviewer: *Play games – what sort of games?*
- Stephanie: *Babies.*
- Interviewer: *Imaginary, pretend type play?*
- Stephanie: *We do actually get teddies. We don't like pretend we've got a baby growing.*
- Susan: *We actually have, not proper babies, but teddies*

*or dolls.*

Rachel: *But that's just when you get bored.*

Stephanie: *I can't believe we just said that on tape!*

Stephanie seemed embarrassed to admit she still played in this way. This is supported by Amy's (Year 5, Howland, PD) comment that '*As you get older you get embarrassed at doing it*'. It seems possible that peer pressure dictates that at a certain age this type of play is no longer acceptable, so highlighting Hymowitz's (1999) concern about the power of the peer group to oversee behaviour in contemporary childhood. However, the presence of younger siblings, or other relatives, appeared to significantly increase the likelihood of children engaging in imaginary play.

### ***Play and fun outside the home***

Whilst items such as television, videos and games consoles held an important place in children's lives, only 12% of the children (Q) cited this type of activity as something they most enjoyed doing. What children most enjoyed doing was being more active: such as playing football, cycling, dancing, roller skating, roller hockey, swimming, horseriding and skateboarding. The desire to be more active, rather than the more sedentary activity offered by electronic technology, supports the findings of McNeish and Roberts (1995), Sanger *et al.* (1997, cited in Leather *et al.*, 2000), and Valentine *et al.* (2000). However, it appears that children's opportunities to do some of these more active things are affected by restrictions on their outdoor freedom (see pages 138-44).

A strong football culture was evident amongst the boys – and some girls – at Howland School. Friends played football together at school and sometimes met up for a game elsewhere. Additionally, some boys played for local teams. As with *all* activities, the word '*fun*' was often used to describe why football was their favourite activity. However, playground football also, on occasions, caused intense rivalry and conflict between opposing teams (FN), which appeared to reduce the fun factor. Whilst Howland children's interest in football was largely constructed in the *present*, a time *future* was also evident in Toby's (Q) desire to become a professional footballer. Although boys at Moorcroft School played football, there appeared to be a stronger skateboarding culture, particularly amongst Year 6 boys. These boys showed awareness and understanding of the damage the sport caused, '*because when you do a grind you like chip paint*' (Robert, PD), but complained

about the lack of suitable provision in their area. Since the nearest skateboard park was about 18 miles away boys often resorted to skateboarding in roads but, as Harry (PD) pointed out, *'Our road is so busy, you can't do it'*. Such was Shane's (PD) concern that he had written a letter to the local council, thus clearly demonstrating his active *being*<sup>19</sup>.

The interests of girls away from home were largely similar at the two schools and centred on swimming (which a number of boys also enjoyed), shopping, dancing and, for a few girls, horse-riding. Whilst girls often went swimming with friends it was also, on occasions, a time for shared fun with parents. Shopping might also involve shared fun with parents, particularly mothers. Girls' interest in music and dancing extended to dance clubs, with Judy (Moorcroft) attending sessions three nights a week. Although Judy believed her life was very restricted (page 143 refers) to the point that she was wondering when she could leave home, dancing was a positive aspect in her life and therefore an important consideration in deciding whether to stay. Sonia's (Howland, Q) statement that she could ride a horse at her local stables *'on my own'* perhaps indicated a sense of personal achievement. In contrast, Catherine's (Moorcroft, PD) enjoyment appeared to be marred by her *'protective'* mother commenting *'don't fall off now, Catherine'*. Catherine's statement was made in histrionic fashion, mocking the voice of the adult authority figure – her mother (see Corsaro, 1997).

Despite children's many negative comments about school, such as *'the lessons are so boring'* (Owen, Moorcroft, Q), another picture emerged:

Kay: School is, um ...

Jacky: Fun basically!

(Howland, PD)

In particular, *'playtime is fun'* (Stefan, Moorcroft, PD). For some Howland boys this was a time when they sometimes engaged in imaginary play, pretending to be monster Pokémon characters chasing each other round the playground, thus revealing the influence of children's media culture (see, in particular, Buckingham, 2003). Year 6 boys at Moorcroft School sometimes met at lunchtime to practise their music and singing for rock bands they

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<sup>19</sup> In October 2004 I learnt that the local council had approved funding to build a skateboard park in Shane's hometown. I subsequently learnt, in July 2005, that this plan had been shelved and that a skateboard park would be built in a neighbouring town to serve a wider area.



had formed. Following a poster discussion some further Moorcroft boys decided to approach the headteacher to seek permission, which was granted, to organize a Warhammer club at the school. School also provided opportunities to take part in a range of after-school activities, such as football, rugby, netball, cricket and choir practice. These, along with other out-of-school activities, such as roller hockey, karate, swimming, football, brownies, cubs, scouts, guides and judo, meant that many children at both schools took part in a range of activities. Children appeared to be willing participants in these activities as Niall (Moorcroft, GI), for example, commented '*we want to do it*'. Thus, whilst concerns have been raised about 'hothousing' (see, for example Furedi, 2001) and the highly structured and closely supervised nature of organized activities (see, for example, Corsaro, 1997), children themselves may not object as they provide opportunities for them to be more active. For the children in my study, being active was generally preferable to being inactive.

The topic of theme parks produced animated conversation from children at both schools, with Billy (Howland, GI) stating '*I love them!*' It was evident that this was an experience the majority of children at both schools had shared, with many having visited theme parks in both England and abroad. Additionally, it was apparent that this fun experience was usually shared with parents, so supporting the study of Hunt and Frankenberg (1997). Although theme parks provided a lot of fun there were also many other places that children had visited that were also considered to be fun, such as wildlife parks, adventure playgrounds, pubs, museums and laser gun game centres. Whilst McKendrick *et al.* (2000) argue that commercial play centres, such as those attached to pubs, exist to meet the needs of parents and are further evidence of children's loss of control of their own play space, the fact remains that for the children in my study such places were fun to visit. Another extremely popular outing for children was a trip to the cinema to see the 'latest' children's film. Many of the Year 5 children had recently seen the *Monster Inc* film, which rated very highly in their estimation. For example, Karen (Howland, PD) stated, '*It's really funny ... I couldn't stop laughing*' and Billy (Howland, PD) exclaimed, '*What a brilliant movie!*'

### ***Closing comment***

This theme has provided a focus on the meaning of fun and play from the children's perspective. What is very clear is that discussion about the ways in which they played, and had fun, emphasized a time *present*, a *being* in the world. Play and fun were significant

factors in the majority view (Q: 73%) that children were *not* in a hurry to grow up<sup>20</sup>. The extent to which play and fun were valued needs to be seen as a way in which these children celebrated contemporary childhood. It is also interesting to note that following conversations I had with some children about my own childhood, they generally considered that whilst the apparent greater outdoor freedom of the past was something they might envy, the electronic technology that was a feature of their childhood and the fun experiences they now had, made their experience of childhood a better experience.

### CONCLUSION: IS CHILDHOOD IN CRISIS?

*'I hate being a child'* (Lauren, Howland, Q)

*'Childhood is quite precious. You haven't got that long to be a child and you want to spend it your way and you want to choose what to do'* (Mary, Moorcroft, GI)

This chapter has examined the construction of childhood from the perspective of children. It has sought to explore how childhood was constructed and why it was constructed in the way that it was. The task that now remains is to consider whether, from the children's perspective, childhood is in crisis. Mary and Lauren's words above show that contemporary childhood is viewed as both problematic and precious. This is not to say that childhood is *either* problematic *or* precious for each child, as the individual accounts of children generally revealed a range of positive and negative aspects. In seeking to identify what the notion of 'childhood in crisis' might mean to children I return to the words of Harry (Moorcroft, GI) on pages 118-9, for he considered that a benefit of the research was that *'we can sit and say things that's troubling us'*. Thus it is the 'troubles' of childhood that may well represent 'crisis' points.

'Crisis' points were often different for different children. For example, a possible crisis for John (Howland) was his fear of death and dying (pages 132-3 refer); for Harry (Moorcroft) it was the difficulties surrounding the relationship with his teacher (page 125 refers); for Jack (Howland) it was the difficulties surrounding the break-up of his parents' marriage and his anger towards his father (pages 121-2 refer); for Caroline (Moorcroft) it was the way in which she considered her parents did not always understand her feelings (page 123 refers); and for Lauren (Howland) it was the physical abuse she was being subjected to at

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<sup>20</sup> For those children who were in a hurry to grow up there often appeared to be a desire for a certain freedom/advantage that adulthood would bring – for example: *'I want to drive a car'* (Billy, Howland), and *'I will have more independence and freedom and can do things for myself'* (Annette, Moorcroft).

home (page 122 refers). These few examples also highlight some of the ways in which children seemed to construct themselves as feeling vulnerable. This is important for, as Prout (2005: 107) comments, children's '*actual experiences, those that they experience as vulnerability, are not much listened to by adults*'.

At this stage we only have a partial picture for, as Judy's (Moorcroft) example showed (pages 143-4 refer), a number of factors contributed to what appeared to be her 'crisis' concerning the restrictions on her freedom. However, the issue of 'crisis' needs to be developed yet further, for my decision to include Year 5 and Year 6 children in this study centred on the notion of 'tweens' (see Hymowitz, 1999). Within this, childhood is viewed as becoming more compressed as a result of 'teen' culture impacting on children between the ages of 8-12 years. This, on the face of it, was a narrow starting point for the study as it fails to take account of other important events at this particular time in children's lives, and significant events for the Year 6 children were SATs and impending transition to secondary school.

A range of concerns have been presented by children in this chapter centring on, for example, adult-child relationships, parental relationships, testing, homework, transition to secondary school, restrictions on outdoor freedom, lack of provision for skateboarding, death and dying, local dangers, other children, bullying and overprotection. The picture that gradually emerges is one of children potentially having a number of 'crisis' points in their lives. The singular form that the notion of 'childhood in crisis' assumes (Wyness, 2000) is therefore problematic in itself and so it is more pertinent to think about 'childhoods in crises'. For example, for Peter (Moorcroft) there were issues concerning his parents' relationship, he was being bullied as a result of his friendship with girls, he had recently undertaken his SATs and he would shortly be moving on to secondary school. This profile, which is quite possibly incomplete, may be similar for other children, or very different. Although Flowerdew and Neale's (2003) work centres on post-divorce family lives, their arguments have relevance for my study. From their perspective, it is important to take account of children's cumulative life experiences and, therefore, the different 'crises' in children's lives in my study should be interpreted as multiple challenges that can have synergistic effects. Thus, for example, in Peter's case, we cannot *assume* that one issue has more salience than any other in what might be his 'crisis'. Rather, what seems more likely is that any 'crisis' that might exist is as a result of the interplay of various

crises. Indeed, it is this complexity that this chapter has helped to highlight. Children's concerns frequently interrelated and trying to separate them out into the individual themes was often a difficult task.

Hughes (1999) comments that the play of children tells us much about the values of the culture in which we live. Children liked to be active and yet a number of factors were seen to limit children's opportunities for outdoor play. In particular, Howland children identified a range of dangers in their area, including rapes and murders, whilst Moorcroft children shared a concern about a stranger seen outside their school and also raised concerns about changes in their local environment and lack of provision for skateboarding. News media stories that were uppermost in children's minds centred on the abduction and/or murder of children. This is perhaps not surprising given that relevance is a known news value (see, for example, Allan, 1999). Children thus identify with these stories as they are about 'someone like me'. Such stories, which construct children as victims, appeared to heighten the belief of some children that they were 'in danger' outdoors. This, in turn, had a negative impact on some children's lives. Restrictions on children's outdoor freedom, whether self-imposed or imposed by parents, required children to spend more time within the home. Here, electronic technology played an important part in children's lives (particularly boys). Bedrooms often housed an array of electronic technology, and whilst concerns have been raised about the process of insulation and segregation by children's bedroom culture (see Lindon, 1999), for the children in this study the bedroom represented a much-valued indoor freedom. The children, however, largely wished to be more active.

I was surprised to find the extent to which death appeared to shape childhood experience. Children referred to various issues relating to death and dying on their questionnaires. Follow-up conversations appeared to reveal fears and complex anxieties for some children. The extent to which these fears were triggered by exposure to death in various media, such as computer/PlayStation games, television programmes and the news, is difficult to ascertain. However, death in the news is *real* death and further news stories that children referred to often related to those in which people were victims, such as in train and car crashes, wars and murders. However, as Hargrave (2003) points out, the media is but one part of children's experience and many children had also experienced the death of a family member and, in the case of Year 6 Moorcroft children, also a child in their year group.

Death of a family member, and/or someone known to them, appeared to be more prevalent at Howland School. Although children at both schools came from a range of social backgrounds, Howland children lived in an area of social disadvantage and social class correlates highly with mortality in *all* causes of death (Hillman *et al.*, 1990). Thus the specific area in which Howland children lived may also have contributed to any concerns children held about death. Death was, most often, associated with adulthood and was therefore a reason why some children were not in a hurry to grow up.

Qvortrup (2000) argues that a limitation of the social constructionist approach, which was adopted for this study, is that it hinders the opportunity to identify what is common to the many childhoods. In seeking to identify common factors about the condition of contemporary childhood in the multiple childhoods in this study, and the extent to which they might promote or oppose a construction of 'childhood in crisis', it is useful to draw upon Foucault's (1980) work on power and power relations. Foucault maintains that the language we use shapes and directs our way of viewing and understanding the world. Within the children's accounts two particular strands were dominant. These two strands can be seen to represent the 'good' childhood and the 'bad' childhood. Firstly, *relationships*, although not a term actually used by the children, were an important feature in their accounts. Children expressed particular concern about parental relationships and showed care and concern for other family members, friends and pets. However, children's accounts made the power differential in the adult-child relationship explicit. This is evidenced clearly by Russell's (Moorcroft, Q) view that a key difference between children and adults is that children are '*non powerful*' and adults are '*in charge*'. Children's lives were controlled by parents in a number of ways, such as restrictions on their outdoor freedom, restrictions on their television/video viewing, time and space within the family home and, in the case of Lauren (Howland), it appeared, through physical abuse. Additionally, the accounts of Moorcroft children exposed tension surrounding vertically structured teacher-child relationships. Adult agendas were also seen to cut into children's space and time in the form of homework, environmental planning and television viewing. The issue of power and control was thus constructed as a clear boundary marker between childhood and adulthood. Children's lack of control over their own lives can perhaps, from children's perspective, be seen as promoting a notion of 'childhood in crisis'. It should be remembered, however, that a different cultural script seemed to be in place at the two schools: whilst at Moorcroft School the adult-child boundary seemed to be clearly marked,

adult-child relationships at Howland School seemed to reflect the notion of equality and respect for children and childhood that is inherent in the UNCRC. Secondly, *play* and *fun* were also dominant features in children's accounts and were words that were used extensively and frequently by children in their constructions of contemporary childhood. Whilst the way in which children played might not agree with some adults' ideas about the way in which they think children should play (see Hill and Tisdall, 1997), for the children themselves, the way in which they played and had fun was a precious part of their childhood experience. The play and fun of contemporary childhood were often cited as reasons to explain why the majority of children (Q: 73%) were not in a hurry to grow up. From the children's perspective the electronic technology and fun experiences available to them appeared to make for a 'better' childhood than that of the past. Thus the high value attached by children to play and fun appears to provide a construction of childhood that opposes the notion of 'childhood in crisis'.

In utilizing Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory for this study to explore the macro, exo and micro levels of the system, it is possible to see that children's constructions of childhood – particularly with regard to *their* concerns about the condition of childhood – were most evident in the following ways: at the macro level in the form of education policy; at the exo level in the form of the media (including the news media), local education policy and local authority environmental planning (including lack of provision); and at the micro level in the form of issues relating to the home, school, friends and neighbourhood. Children's construction of childhood was not, therefore, isolated to the individual within the microsystem, but interacted with other levels and players in the system. In thinking about the chronosystem it can be seen that the different influences on children's concerns about childhood were not likely to be constant, and occurred separately, or collectively, at different moments in time with varying degrees of intensity for different individuals. Any 'crisis' points in children's lives may therefore have been fleeting or longer lasting.

This chapter has revealed multiple representations of childhood, thus highlighting the fact that childhood is socially constructed (see James and Prout, 1990). Children's constructions of childhood relied predominantly on a *present* and a *future*, thus on a *being*



and a *becoming*<sup>21</sup>. The *past* played a lesser role and often appeared to be constructed as something that no longer belonged to these children. In this way, age dynamism (Elkind, 1981) appeared to be evident. It seemed that children often did not wish to be identified with a younger age group of children and some wished instead to adopt behaviour that made them feel more grown up. Wanting to *feel* grown up is very different to wanting to *be* grown up. The majority of children in this study were *not* in a hurry to grow up. For those children who were in a hurry to grow up there was generally a desire for certain freedoms that adulthood was considered to bring. The benefits of childhood were that you lived, you played, you had fun and you had few responsibilities. These benefits generally appeared to outweigh any negative factors about childhood. Therefore, for the majority of children it appeared that childhood was constructed as ‘a privileged time of life’, a finding that accords with Mayall’s studies of childhood (see Mayall, 2002: 164). It is this construction of childhood that, from a Foucauldian (Foucault, 1980) perspective, holds power and which thus, from the children’s perspective, represents the regime of ‘truth’. However, while this chapter has reported on what the children chose to tell me about their lives it is important to consider what the children did *not* say. Lauren’s (Howland) account that she was being subjected to physical abuse at home was a lone disclosure. It is quite likely, however, that it was not a lone experience<sup>22</sup>. Sometimes what we are not told is more significant than what we are told (Boyden and Ennew, 1998).

## SUMMARY

This chapter has explored how children constructed contemporary childhood and has sought to provide explanations of why they constructed it in the ways they did. This task was undertaken in order to consider whether, from children’s perspective, childhood is in crisis. It concludes that the ‘troubles’ of childhood represented crisis points in children’s lives. Since these crisis points were different for different children, and there may have been more than one crisis point, it is more pertinent to think about ‘childhoods in crises’. In seeking to find general points of consensus about the condition of contemporary childhood, two key issues emerged. Children’s accounts made the power differential between children

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<sup>21</sup> An emphasis on time *future* appears to indicate that the children’s constructions of childhood were partly based on a developmental and socialization framework.

<sup>22</sup> The Year 5 teacher at Howland School had informed me that some children in her class had suffered various forms of abuse. She did not reveal the identity of the children and I did not ask her to disclose their names. Although I consider that the ‘friend role’ I adopted enabled me to establish good research relationships with the children at both schools, I did not take it for granted that this meant the children would reveal everything about their lives to me.

and adults explicit. Children's seemingly relative lack of control over their own lives might be seen as promoting a notion of 'childhood in crisis'. However, the high value that children placed on play and fun and, specifically, the way in which they played and had fun, appeared to outweigh any negative aspects about childhood, thus opposing a construction of 'childhood in crisis'. The dominant construction of childhood therefore appeared to be that it is 'a privileged time of life'. However, some particular features emerged in the children's accounts that served to highlight different constructions concerning the condition of contemporary childhood. Moorcroft children had some particular concerns about the adult-child relationship in school, the way in which homework cut into childhood space and time, changes in the local environment that had affected opportunities for outdoor play and the lack of provision for skateboarding. Howland children lived in an area in which a number of local dangers existed and seemed more likely to have experienced the death of a family member and/or someone known to them. Children at both schools expressed particular concerns about the threat and realities of family break-up. Children's opportunities for independent outdoor freedom (at both schools) were limited, restricted or denied for a range of reasons. News media stories that appeared to hold most relevance for the children were those centring on the abduction and/or murder of children. These appeared to heighten the belief of some children that they would be 'in danger' when outdoors. The next chapter explores the way in which parents construct contemporary childhood and why they construct it in the way they do, in order to consider whether, from their perspective, childhood is in crisis.

**CHAPTER SIX**  
**MESSAGES FROM THE PARENTS**

**INTRODUCTION**

This chapter explores parents' concerns about contemporary childhood in order to establish whether, from their perspective, childhood is in crisis. In utilizing Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory the chapter provides a further focus on the microsystem, whilst also considering how it influences, and is influenced by, other layers and other players within the system (see pages 28-30). Parents have been included in this study for two main reasons. Firstly, I wished to follow up a finding in my undergraduate research, in which 60% of parents either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, 'Childhood is in a bad state – I am concerned for the future of childhood' (page 4 refers). I felt that this merited further exploration into parents' concerns about contemporary childhood. Secondly, within UK society childhood is closely connected with the family (see, for example, Makrinoti, 1994) and I therefore consider that parents play an important part in children's constructions of childhood. The inclusion of parents' views thus provides a more complete account of the childhood experience and is in keeping with the desired holistic approach for this study (see Chapter Four). In reporting the parents' findings after that of the children, the thesis follows the chronological order in which the fieldwork was essentially undertaken – children, parents, news media. In addition, I wished to report the findings from the children first as they are central to this study (pages 2-3 refer). Reporting the findings from the parents after those of the children also recognizes the theoretical understanding within Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory that children are at the centre of the system.

Parents involved in this study were parents of the children also taking part. However, this study does not seek to match up a parent's construction of childhood with those of their child, as this would have raised direct issues concerning confidentiality and anonymity. The findings in this chapter are based on self-completion questionnaires and interviews. Whilst the questionnaires helped to inform the interviews, they also contained rich data themselves. Findings from both the questionnaires and interviews have therefore been pooled and, as far as possible, can be identified by the following codes: Q = questionnaire, I = interview. These research methods were employed in order to establish *how* the parents of the children at the two schools constructed childhood and *why* they constructed it as

they did. This enabled consideration, from the parents' perspective, of the question at the heart of this study: Is childhood in crisis? Time and care was taken to involve parents in the study. Building good relationships with the children involved in the research was considered important for motivating parents to participate, as was the careful construction of any letters sent out to them. Interviews were carried out at a time and place convenient to parents so that they would hopefully feel comfortable and in control. During the interviews I maintained a friendly, sensitive, non-judgemental and open stance in striving to produce a reciprocal research relationship based on trust (Cannold, 2001).

The two schools selected for this study were chosen to provide contrasting socio-economic settings: Howland School (pseudonyms have been applied to the schools and all individuals) was situated in a socially disadvantaged area and Moorcroft School in a more advantaged area. However, both schools received children from a range of social backgrounds. Parents completed a total of 86 questionnaires – 38 at Howland School (response rate 71%) and 48 at Moorcroft School (response rate 86%). Demographic information on the questionnaires revealed, for example: 1) that questionnaires were mostly completed by mothers. This is perhaps not surprising as Mayall (1996: 17) states that due to women's social positioning as home-makers they are *'the main informants on the home and on children's lives'*. However, in the subsequent interviews with parents it became clear that completion of the questionnaire had sometimes been a joint enterprise and the extent of paternal input in this research is therefore unknown; 2) a higher number of one parent households at Howland School; 3) a higher number of households (one or two parent) at Howland School with no earned income. Indeed, all households at Moorcroft School had some earned income; 4) a higher number of males at Moorcroft School in full-time employment; 5) the average number of children per family was similar at the two schools. (Please refer to Appendix 15 for more detailed demographic information).

Eleven parents at Howland School (two joint interviews made a total of thirteen parents) and eight parents at Moorcroft School were selected randomly for an interview from volunteers identified on the questionnaires. Although this may appear to be a relatively small number of interviewees, I was not looking for statistically significant results but a deeper insight and understanding of their constructions of contemporary childhood. Interviews with Howland parents included parents in both one- (3 interviews) and two-

parent households, with a variety of work patterns (part-time, full-time, non-working), and in a variety of employment (for example, sales assistant, midday meal supervisor, learning support assistant, mental health worker, technical manager). Interviews with Moorcroft parents included parents in both one- (1 interview) and two-parent households, with the same variety of work patterns as Howland parents, and in a variety of employment (for example, dental nurse, senior pre-school development worker, local government auditor, teacher). A full list of the parents involved in the *interviews* can be found in Appendix 16. During the interviews I was made to feel very welcome and all the parents were very generous in terms of the time they gave to the research. In addition, a number of parents made favourable comments about the research with regard to their child's participation and several also commented that they had enjoyed participating in the research. Parents appeared to *want* the research. This positive reception was very encouraging.

This chapter is organized into the same themes as Chapter Five. These themes were guided by my exploration of the literature in Chapter Three (page 110 refers), but are purposely broad and open to enable exploration and explanation of the constructions of childhood from both the children's (see Chapter Five) and the parents' perspective. However, the themes are presented in an order that endeavours to reflect their level of importance to the parents, especially in relation to 'crisis':

- Fears and dangers
- Freedom and constraint
- Pressures
- Relationships
- Exposure to adult knowledge
- Play ... and fun?

A further theme is added after these six key themes – 'Parents' relationship with the news media'. This permits a more specific focus on how this aspect of the exosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) interacts with parents' constructions of childhood. It is through an exploration of all these themes that I am able to address the main research question: Is childhood in crisis? A key finding from the parents' questionnaire guided the order of the six key themes in this chapter and it is to this that I first turn.

**PARENTS' LEVELS OF ANXIETY/CONCERN ABOUT CHILDREN AND  
CHILDHOOD**

Question 1 in section 3 of the parents' questionnaire (Appendix 6 refers) asked parents to rate their level of anxiety/concern about a number of given issues relating to children and childhood. The full findings for this question can be found in Appendix 17 but are simplified here by ranking parents' concerns in order of their importance:

**Table 6.1 Parental anxiety/concern in order of importance**

<b>Howland School</b>	<b>Moorcroft School</b>
1 <sup>st</sup> Paedophiles/'stranger danger'	1 <sup>st</sup> Paedophiles/'stranger danger'
2 <sup>nd</sup> Intensity of traffic on the roads	2 <sup>nd</sup> Intensity of traffic on the roads
3 <sup>rd</sup> Academic pressure at an ever earlier age	3 <sup>rd</sup> Academic pressure at an ever earlier age
4 <sup>th</sup> Lack of action by the Government	4 <sup>th</sup> Poor parenting skills
5 <sup>th</sup> Behaviour of children	5 <sup>th</sup> Genetic engineering
6 <sup>th</sup> Poor parenting skills	6 <sup>th</sup> Behaviour of children
7 <sup>th</sup> Genetic engineering	7 <sup>th</sup> Lack of action by the Government
8 <sup>th</sup> Family break-up, new family groupings	8 <sup>th</sup> Family break-up, new family groupings
9 <sup>th</sup> Consumerism and the commercialization of childhood	9 <sup>th</sup> Consumerism and the commercialization of childhood
10 <sup>th</sup> TV/computer/PlayStation etc	10 <sup>th</sup> 'Hot-housing' – filling children's time with numerous activities
11 <sup>th</sup> 'Hot-housing' – filling children's time with numerous activities	11 <sup>th</sup> TV/computer/PlayStation etc
12 <sup>th</sup> Working mothers	12 <sup>th</sup> Working mothers

The above table reveals striking similarities at the two schools in the top three and bottom five concerns, with some differentiation in-between. The table also reveals that it is the 'outdoor child' (Ward, 1994) that features as parents' highest level of concern. This stands in stark contrast to the low level of concern expressed for the 'indoor child' (Ward, 1994), as evidenced by the finding for the category of 'TV/computer/PlayStation etc'. One further finding from the parents' questionnaire (section 3, question 11) requires reporting at this stage:



**Table 6.2 Parents' response to the statement 'Childhood is in crisis. I am concerned for the future of childhood'**

	<b>Howland School</b>	<b>Moorcroft School</b>
<b>Strongly agree</b>	26%	15%
<b>Agree</b>	26%	23%
<b>Unsure</b>	39%	21%
<b>Disagree</b>	5%	31%
<b>Strongly disagree</b>	0%	2%
<b>No response</b>	3%	8%

These findings are included in Appendix 18, which also informs this chapter. The above table reveals that the notion of 'childhood in crisis' had greater support amongst parents at Howland School and that a much higher percentage of Moorcroft parents disagreed with the notion of 'childhood in crisis'. These findings required me to remain alert to differences between the two sets of parents with regards to suggestions of 'crisis'. I return to this point on pages 202-3.

### **FEARS AND DANGERS**

The findings in Table 6.1 (see page 169) and Appendix 17 confirm that parents' main anxiety/concern about children and childhood centres on the issues of paedophiles/'stranger danger' and traffic, thus lending support to the findings of Hillman *et al.* (1990), 'Kidscape' (1993, cited in Moran *et al.*, 1997), McNeish and Roberts (1995), Valentine (1996), Dixey (1999) and Scott *et al.* (2000). This section focuses on these two key areas and also considers other issues for inclusion in this theme.

#### ***Paedophiles/'stranger danger'***

Parents' high level of concern on this issue cut across all social groups. Within the questionnaires and interviews, paedophiles were variously described as '*nutters*', '*weirdoes*', '*perverts*' and '*child molesters*'. Some further powerful emotive feelings were expressed. For example: '*I think there should be a big number stamped on their head, then you know*' (Ms Ellis, Howland, I) and '*My attitude towards these people is 'I'll kill them'. I've got no qualms about that*' (Mr Dale, Moorcroft, I). Mrs Brooks (Moorcroft, I) described a local incident in which some parents had '*got hold of*' a man thought to have been taking photographs of children outside the school. Such comments and action may suggest that parents expect a certain level of protection to be provided by the government (see Bell, 2000). In addition, from Drotner's (1992, cited in Burton, 2000) perspective, the use of emotive language on this issue is a sign of anxiety and of its cultural significance.

News media reporting about paedophiles/‘stranger danger’ (particularly the abduction and murder of children, most notably that of Sarah Payne in 2000) influenced parents’ high level of concern on this issue. This level of concern was confirmed by a further response on the questionnaire: a total of 70% considered the issue of paedophiles/‘stranger danger’ to be one of their two *greatest* concerns and news media reporting contributed to parents’ anxiety/concern in all cases. The fact that children are at greater risk from someone they know (see, for example, Corteen and Scraton, 1997) was largely missing from parents’ accounts. This appears to reflect news media reporting on this issue as Critcher (2003) argues that the media’s construction of paedophilia misrecognizes the real threats to children’s safety. The following examples suggest how news media reporting might cause parents’ concern about paedophiles/‘stranger danger’ to evolve: ‘*The media manipulate the public and gives the information they want you to have*’ (Mrs Elson, Moorcroft, Q); ‘*They’ll whip it up*’ (Mrs Matthews, Howland, I); ‘*It sells newspapers*’ (Mrs Parker, Moorcroft, I); ‘*The media, straight away, is slapping it in your face*’ (Ms Ellis, Howland, I). Such comments provide support for the view that the news media are instrumental in agenda setting, that is, they tell their audience what to think about (see Singer and Endreny, 1993).

Whilst Furedi (2001) describes parents’ fears about paedophiles/‘stranger danger’ as irrational it is, nonetheless, important to acknowledge the *extent* to which these fears appeared to exist in parents’ minds (Appendix 17 refers) as well as the fact that news stories ‘*get you worried, scared and panicky*’ (Mrs Elliott, Howland, I). However, during the interviews four parents made five disclosures about sexual assault/abuse involving themselves or a family member (in two of these disclosures the perpetrator had been a family member) and the questionnaires revealed that for at least a further nine parents personal experience had also influenced their concern. This lends support to Critcher’s (2003) view that parents’ concerns about risks to their children are deduced from their own experience as well as messages about risks from authoritative sources.

Although some parents acknowledged that concern would be higher for daughters, the level of parents’ concern on this issue suggests that parents were also significantly concerned for their sons, as confirmed by Mrs Parker (Moorcroft, I): ‘*I’ve got a boy and a girl and it doesn’t seem to matter anymore*’. The apparent lack of difference with regard to gender concurs with Dixey’s (1999) findings on parents’ (primarily mothers) concerns for

their children, although Valentine and McKendrick's (1997) study found that parents were *more* concerned about girls' safety<sup>1</sup>. Personal circumstances also impacted on parents' concern: *'I'm an only parent. I often feel that if anything happened to them it would be all my fault ... I've nobody to bounce it around'* (Mrs Parker, Moorcroft, I). Lone parents may therefore feel an increased burden with regard to their child's safety.

In seeking to understand parents' high level of concern on the paedophile/'stranger danger' issue, Mrs Felton (Moorcroft, I) provided a useful insight: *'we don't know who they are, where they are ... it's the unknown'*. Thus it appears that while the danger the paedophile represents is known, exactly who he is might not be (see Collier, 2001, cited in Critcher, 2003). Parents have a *'protective instinct ... you don't want any harm to come to yours'* (Mrs Proctor, Moorcroft, I). Children were perceived to be trusting, innocent, vulnerable and defenceless and therefore dependent upon parents to protect them, as *'We would never be able to live with ourselves if something happened'* (Mrs Pearce, Moorcroft, I). Parents felt a duty to protect the *being* of their children in order to preserve their time *future*. Thus the developmental paradigm, in which childhood is conceived as a linear path towards the future, may have heightened parents' concern (Jackson and Scott, 1999). However, despite concerns about news media reporting of paedophiles, parents did also value the role that the news media played in raising awareness of the issue, and although it may raise their level of concern, *'every time you hear of another case you feel justified'* (Mrs Griffin, Moorcroft, I). In this way, although some parents realised that the risk to their children from paedophiles/strangers was slight, the fact that the risk existed at all produced fear (Scott *et al.*, 1998).

Although the questionnaires revealed an identical level of concern about the paedophile/'stranger danger' issue at the two schools, a significant difference emerged in the parent interviews. At Moorcroft the notion of 'stranger danger' was defined narrowly: three parents referred to the incident of the man taking photographs of children outside the school (page 170 refers), an incident which *may* have heightened the concern of Moorcroft parents; one parent mentioned an assault on his daughter; and one parent commented on local vandalism. These were the only local incidents involving 'strangers' and all other discussion by Moorcroft parents on this issue centred on national incidents. In comparison,

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<sup>1</sup> In Valentine and McKendrick's study, however, 51% of the parents (out of the questionnaires completed by 400 parents in northwest England) stated that they considered *all* children to be equally at risk of abduction.

Howland parents interpreted 'stranger danger' more broadly, making many references to things they had seen in their town or heard about their town in the local and national news. For example: the high number of paedophiles living in the town (as identified in the *News of the World's* 'naming and shaming' campaign in 2000<sup>2</sup>, brought to my attention by Mr and Mrs Gerrard, I); glue sniffers; rapes in the local park and '*perverts by the toilets*' (Mrs Farrant, I); '*so many drunks ... a drunk gentleman started on the children*' (Mrs Fenton, I); local murders; used syringes in the street and parks. This supports Valentine's (1997a) research, which identified specific local concerns for children relating to the social characteristics of their neighbourhood and also Dixey's (1999) research, which found that parents did not just respond to media reports, they were also aware of dangers in their neighbourhood. However, my finding appears to stand in contrast to media coverage of strangers where, Jackson and Scott (1999) state, the threat is widely assumed to be sexual.

On the basis of the above it might be possible to conclude that for Moorcroft parents, concern about paedophiles/'stranger danger' was more likely to be a *perceived* fear and for Howland parents it was more likely to be a *real* fear. This is supported by Mrs Proctor's (Moorcroft, I) comment that '*you imagine there's all these bad people around us*' and Ms Ellis's (Howland, I) statement that '*every time you go out you've seen something*'. However, whilst some Howland parents believed they lived in a '*dangerous area*', others were locked into a belief that their town was probably no different to other areas in the UK.

### **Traffic**

The issue of traffic ranked as parents' second highest concern at both schools. However, given that road accidents are the major cause of death among children (Buckingham, 2000) one might have expected concern to be higher. Historical time played a part in parents' concern as there is now '*more traffic on the roads*' (Mrs Felton, Moorcroft, I) and '*it's not just one car per family now, it's two or three*' (Mrs Elliott, Howland, I). Increased affluence therefore appears to have made cars more affordable than in the past. Whilst Dixey's (1999) study identified speed as the key traffic problem, for the parents in my interviews the *volume* of traffic appeared to be an equally significant, if not greater, factor<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> This campaign was launched by the *News of the World* after the abduction and murder of 8-year-old Sarah Payne in July 2000. It aimed to inform the public of the appearance, age, crime, punishment and whereabouts of those identified by the newspaper as paedophiles (see Bell, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> This finding *may* have been influenced by my use of the phrase 'intensity of traffic on the roads' on the parents' questionnaire (Appendix 6, section 3 question 1 refers).

Additionally, some parents raised the issue of the threat to children's health from vehicle emissions. The issue of volume of traffic appeared to be a particular concern for Moorcroft parents. This may have been due to the rapid housing development in the area, as evidenced by Mrs Brooks's (Moorcroft, I) comment that '*literally every time you blink there's another housing estate*'. Changes in the local environment may therefore have impacted on some parents' concern on this issue.

Few parents in my study rated traffic as a higher concern than paedophiles/'stranger danger' on their questionnaire, although Mr Samson (Howland, I) justified his decision to do so on the basis that children met the dangers of roads on a daily basis and one of his sons had indeed been knocked down by a car. However, for the vast majority of parents danger was attributed to unknown people – paedophiles/'strangers' – rather than to places (see Parton, 1985, 1991, cited in Roberts *et al.*, 1995). Additionally, whilst concern about traffic was undoubtedly high, only 8% of the parents cited it as being one of their two *greatest* concerns (Q). Ms Jessup's (Howland, I) comment that '*You're never going to do anything much about traffic are you?*' may help to explain this finding. It may be that, as Dixey (1999) found, parents are aware of the risks of traffic but see them as environmental ones about which they can do very little.

### ***Older children***

The questionnaire revealed that the majority of parents (63%) were most concerned about children in the 13-17 years age group (8% opted for the 6-12 years age group, and 1% for the 0-5 years age group, with other parents making multiple choices). Thus parents considered that their concerns would increase as children became older. Indeed, my study supports Dixey's (1999) finding that parents expressed *more* concern for their older children<sup>4</sup>. Howland and Moorcroft parents were thus particularly concerned for the *future* of children. Such concerns centred predominantly on drug and alcohol issues as well as sex, violence and antisocial behaviour. Peer pressure was the main factor for this concern, with other people's children being seen as a corrupting influence. In seeking to understand parents' concern about this age group the following comments are illuminating:

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<sup>4</sup> This part of Dixey's study, which was undertaken on a housing estate in Leeds, explored mothers' concerns about child safety. However, the point made in Dixey's study is that parents who *had* older children expressed more concern for them. I do not know how many of the parents in my study had children in the 13-17 years age group. It is quite possible that a significant number did not, thus increasing the emphasis on concern for time *future*.

*'At the earlier ages they are more under your control and protection'* (Mrs Baxter, Howland, Q); *'Parents have to start to let go and give them some freedom'* (Mrs Davies, Howland, Q). Thus it appears that parents' concern centres on the requirement to surrender their 'control' and to re-negotiate the parent-child relationship. Parents are forced to transfer their parental focus to outside the home as children learn to deal with more complex social situations, and it is this complexity that raises some parents' concern (Wyness, 1994).

### ***Genetic engineering***

Parents' ranking of this issue (Table 6.1 on page 169 refers) was something of a surprise. My decision to explore parents' concern on genetic engineering stemmed from an initial sweep of newspaper articles to discover emerging issues relating to children and childhood. Since it is not an issue that appeared in my examination of the literature in Chapter Three it is important to consider why it has been elevated as a topic of concern in parents' minds. It appears that genetic engineering is an issue that has been brought to the public's attention in recent years by the news media. Whilst *all* parents have direct experience of certain issues, such as education and traffic, the same cannot be stated for genetic engineering. It appears, therefore, that parents' information on this issue, and thus their concern, originates from the news media. Ms Atkins (Moorcroft, I) lent support to this point: *'I only know what I know about that from the news'*. In this way it can be seen that significant agenda-setting effects are those that usually lie outside parents' personal experience and for which the media offer almost the only frame of reference (Zucker, 1978, cited in Singer and Endreny, 1993).

Cloning and designer babies took a central place in parents' concerns. Parents appeared to fear the unknown, raised questions about ethics, and suggested the possibility of a conspiracy in that human cloning may already have occurred. Further, due to the scientific nature of the topic some parents considered themselves to have limited understanding of the issues. Since Prout (2005) comments that reproductive technologies are destabilizing the taken-for-granted assumptions as to how human life is brought into being, it may be that the concerns raised by parents in my study represent concerns about a loss of control.



## FREEDOM AND CONSTRAINT

### *Outdoor play*

Historical time was central to parents' concern regarding the changing nature of children's outdoor play. Many parents idealized their own childhood, looking back nostalgically on a time when, for example, *'the world was a safer place, allowing exploration of our home area'* (Mrs Dixon, Moorcroft, Q), whereas *'children today have less outdoor freedom'* (Ms Jessup, Howland, Q). Parents' remembered childhoods were thus used as a vehicle for expressing concern about the lack of outdoor play in contemporary childhood (Valentine and McKendrick, 1997). Particular issues caused some parents to constrain children's outdoor play: *'The freedoms we had to venture away from home and play are restricted due to traffic dangers and the fear that your child will be abducted'* (Mrs Griffin, Moorcroft, Q). This lends support to the findings of, for example, Hillman *et al.* (1990), Roberts *et al.* (1995), Dixey (1999) and Valentine (1997a). However, a subtle difference emerged in the language used in parents' questionnaires: whilst Moorcroft parents' usage of terms such as 'more/less freedom' and 'safe/less safe' were spread fairly evenly, that of Howland parents was weighted in favour of 'safe/less safe'. This helps to confirm that the fears of Howland parents were perhaps *real* and based on direct experience. The importance of outdoor freedom was not clear. Whilst some parents recognized the benefits it provided for developing children's independence and socializing with friends, many parents simply mourned the fact that contemporary children were unable to repeat the experiences they had as children. Thus the reduction in outdoor freedom was considered to have had a harmful effect on the quality of childhood experience. Since parents' fears played an important role, this lends some support to Furedi's (2001) views about the damaging effects of what he terms 'parental paranoia'.

### *News media influence*

Parents' concerns about paedophiles/'stranger danger' were influenced by news media reporting (page 171 refers), so giving rise to the question of whether this impacted on parenting behaviour, particularly with regard to restrictions on children's independent outdoor freedom. Findings on this issue were mixed. Some parents considered that the news media had not affected their parenting and so *'He'll be out all day playing football if I let him, which I don't mind'* (Mrs Ferguson, Howland, I). In this instance there appeared to be no restrictions on Mrs Ferguson's son. Ms Jessup (Howland, I) placed restrictions on

her son's freedom but refuted the idea of news media influence because *'I know what this area's like'*. However, Mr Samson (Howland, I) stated:

*'If something's said enough, vociferously enough and argued enough and enough people think it – like how do I decide at what age I let my children play out independently, or have a key – whether you like it or not it's not your own independent thought that determines it. To some extent, when I was 4,5,6,7,8, if most people let their children out then that would have an effect on you, your individual choice. And today the age has gone up, I think, at which you let your children roam about and that has an impact on you. You use others as your guidance. As much as you think 'I'm the most independent thinker in the world' it must impact, and part of that's the media. It must, you know, drip, drip, drip, have some effect'*.

The news media may therefore play a part in shaping and altering parenting styles over time. Whilst parents *may* believe they are able to resist individual media messages, it is the cumulative and subliminal effect – the *'drip, drip'* effect described by Mr Samson – that may be significant (van Ginneken, 1998). Proving that such effects exist is, however, difficult (Burton, 2000).

The *'drip, drip'* effect appears to have impacted on the parents in this study in two ways. Firstly, if parents owned a car they often taxied children to ensure they arrived at their destination safely. Secondly, the days of limitless freedom, evident in some parents' reconstructions of their childhood, appeared to have been replaced by a regime in which parents often *controlled* contemporary children's independent outdoor freedom, for example: *'He has his little liberty; he knows he can go to the shop up the road. I've just started to let him go to the park with a friend'* (Ms Jessup, Howland, I); and Mrs Brooks (Moorcroft, I) allowed her daughter *'to go down the town with her friend. One of us mums always takes them and always brings them back'*. My findings support those of Valentine (1997a) in that some parents seemed to develop children's autonomy by giving them special 'licences' to make certain journeys. However, the covert surveillance that Valentine (1997a) found in some of the parents' accounts in her study did not emerge in

my study. Some parents did, however, keep their children under *close* surveillance. For example, Mrs Proctor (Moorcroft, I) stated of her son, *'I don't let him go out much by himself ... you're frightened to let them out of your sight'*. It is important to point out that whilst some parents positively agreed that news media reporting had caused them to impose restrictions on children's independent outdoor freedom, some Howland parents reinforced the fact that it was a case of what they heard about in the news *as well as* what they *saw* in their locality.

### ***Parental control and parenting 'norms'***

Parents usually required children to seek their permission for outdoor freedom. Parents *needed* to know *where* their children were, *what* they were doing, *whom* they would be with and *what* time they would be back (usually stated by the parent). Outdoor freedom was negotiated but was considered to be under parents' control (see also Kelley *et al.*, 1997 and Valentine, 1997a). Some parents felt under pressure to conform to current parenting 'norms' concerning children's outdoor freedom. For example, Mr Samson (Howland, I) spoke about *'the pressure that is there to not let your children into dangerous situations'*. In this way it appears that striving to be the 'good parent' means succumbing to what Valentine (1997a) refers to as the 'watchful gaze' of others. Parenting 'norms' in contemporary society prompt parents to be *'more cautious'* (Mrs Austin, Moorcroft, Q) and may mean that children have to be *'constantly supervised and entertained for safety reasons'* (Mrs Farrant, Howland, Q). However, some parents also acknowledged the benefits of mobile phone technology (see also page 139) as a means for keeping in contact with their children and monitoring their time away from home. As such they had helped to alleviate parents' worry and were, in Miss Forster's (Howland, I) view, *'a godsend'*. The role that mobile phones have played in giving back to contemporary children some of the outdoor freedom that had been 'lost' is an issue that may be unexplored in others' research.

### ***Parents' cost-benefit analysis***

Parents appeared to conduct a cost-benefit analysis of contemporary childhood: a message that emerged more extensively in the questionnaires of Moorcroft parents was that it was a question of *'reduction of freedom against more varied opportunities'* (Mrs Kennett, Moorcroft, Q). Although parents at both schools considered that children have far more opportunities today (87% of Moorcroft parents and 76% of Howland parents either strongly agreed or agreed with this statement, Q), some differences emerged in the

interviews. Moorcroft parents spoke mainly in terms of opportunities available to children in the *present*: a wider range of activities, such as after-school clubs and out-of-school activities, were now available to children and increased car ownership (particularly for mothers) meant that accessing these opportunities was easier. In contrast, some Howland parents also discussed opportunities in relation to the *future* in terms of the greater choices now available at secondary school, college and university. However, with regard to the *present* some Howland parents identified gaps in provision, such as insufficient after-school care facilities, lack of safe areas to play and free areas that children could simply go to. Additionally, some Howland parents revealed racist views with regard to an influx of refugees in their area. These people were perceived as being given free resources by the UK government, such as housing, money and food, in preference to local families. These factors may help to explain why Howland parents ranked 'lack of action by the Government' (Table 6.1 on page 169 refers) higher than Moorcroft parents. Further, in contrast to Moorcroft parents, *some* Howland parents did raise issues concerning the cost of activities. My findings suggest that Moorcroft parents, who lived in a more affluent area than Howland parents, were in a better position to provide compensatory experiences (Boushel, 2000) for their children's restricted independent outdoor freedom.

The fact remains that a wider range of activities now appears to be available for contemporary children. Parents cast children as *social actors* in terms of the choices that could be made, thus recognizing their *being*. However, from the parents' perspective there has also been a very significant benefit, as emerged in this interchange between Mr and Mrs Gerrard (Howland, I):

Mrs: *She wants to start doing choir after school. You can't tell them they can't do these things.*

Mr: *It's giving them the freedom but ...*

Mrs: *It's giving them a safe freedom.*

Mr: *Yeah, give them freedom, but in a safe environment. Let them think they've got the freedom.*

Mrs: *But at least you know that where they are, they're safe.*

So, whilst such activities do provide some freedom for children, their value to parents may be that of *controlled freedom*, with control remaining with the parent. Organized activities

may therefore enable parents to protect their children from dangers such as traffic and paedophiles/‘stranger danger’ whilst also providing them with a range of opportunities outside the home (Adler and Adler, 1994, cited in Valentine and McKendrick, 1997).

## PRESSURES

The term ‘pressure’ appeared extensively and frequently in parents’ accounts at both schools (Q and I) and most often related to two key areas – academic pressure<sup>5</sup> and consumer pressure.

### *Academic pressure*

Chapter Three highlighted the fact that concerns about contemporary childhood with regard to education centred on the issues of the nature of the curriculum and testing (see, for example, David, 1996; Blenkin and Kelly, 1994; Nutbrown, 1998). ‘Academic pressure at an ever earlier age’ ranked as parents’ third highest level of concern at both schools (Table 6.1 on page 169 refers). However, in seeking to unravel parents’ concerns on this issue it is important to note that in the interviews parents often referred to pressures their older children (if they had any) had experienced, or were still experiencing at secondary school. Parents’ concern on this issue was therefore seen as one occurring within a long time-span, usually starting when children entered primary school, and ending only when they left secondary school.

For the parents in this study the issue of academic pressure was particularly topical as the Year 6 children had recently undertaken their Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs) and many had also sat the 11+ ‘exam’. Year 5 parents could foresee the pressures that would arise in the coming year. The issue of academic pressure was interpreted widely and included the cost of secondary school uniform and equipment (Mrs Elliott, Howland, I), as well as the pressures parents faced in making decisions about their child’s forthcoming admission to secondary school. This was particularly problematic for some Moorcroft parents as the increasing popularity of the local secondary school, coupled with the increasing population in the area due to housing development, meant that some parents were unable to secure a place for their child at their local, preferred, school.

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that I used the term ‘academic pressure’ on the parents’ questionnaire (Appendix 6, section 3, question 1 refers).

Mr Eastland (Moorcroft, Q) summarized parents' main concern: *'Today's child is under more pressure to achieve'*. Pressure on children was seen to come in the form of homework and tests. Schools were viewed as being under pressure to meet the government's expectations in SATs, *'otherwise they end up dropping down the list of popular schools and nobody wants their child to go there'* (Mrs Farrant, Howland, I). Although parents expressed sympathy for their school's predicament, some felt under pressure from the school to aid the process. Parents were therefore aware of governmental intervention in children's lives and of their own implication in the process (Smith, 2000a). Children were thus recognized as being under pressure from parents, the school and the government, with little control over the situation. SATs in Years 2 and 6 (at ages 6-7 and 10-11) were seen as setting up a place for children to feel a failure at an early age and, in Mrs Griffin's (Moorcroft, I) view

*'It really does nothing for their self-esteem and it does nothing to give them the impetus to want to learn and to want to do better. It just makes them want to give up'*.

This appears to confirm David's (1998) concern as to what may be 'killed off' if the curriculum is too narrowly focused on 'surface learning' in literacy and numeracy. Parents' criticism therefore rested on the belief that schools should play to children's strengths by finding out *'what the child is good at'* (Mrs Pearce, Moorcroft, I) as the current system did not provide *'a true assessment of the child'* (Mrs Felton, Moorcroft, I). This lends support to Drummond and Nutbrown's (1992) concern that the emphasis on only certain areas of learning in SATs provides limited assessment as it does not reveal children's other abilities. Parents' concerns about the stress and worry for children caused by constant testing and homework provided plenty of evidence to support Medforth *et al.*'s (2000) notion of the 'hurried, processed, developed and tested child'. Although Mr Randall (Howland, I) considered that since testing has become part of school culture such stress and worry might be negligible, Mrs Parker's (Moorcroft, I) comment that the stress and worry is *'taking childhood away'* epitomized the more commonly held view.

### ***Consumer pressure***

Parents recognized that contemporary children live in an increasingly materialistic society. Consumer pressure was seen to lead to peer pressure, which transferred to pressure on



parents to buy certain products for their children. It was the *peer pressure* at the centre of this process that featured *extensively* in parents' accounts, with children largely viewed as wanting to be like their friends. Mr Randall (Howland, I) summed up the situation:

*'I think that children have been targeted as an easy sell by the companies – 'I must have this'. You then create groups that have got stuff and groups that haven't got stuff, and that causes a lot of problems at school. If you want to be with the 'in' group you've got to have the right socks, the right trainers, and that puts pressure on parents. 'I want this, I want that, and I must have it now''.*

The 'must haves' extended to a range of items, such as food, toys, clothes, games consoles and mobile phones. Children were largely seen to be passive bystanders of a process in which they were manipulated and exploited by the media, particularly through television advertising, with Mrs Pearce (Moorcroft, I) describing her son as *'a marketing man's dream'* (see Medforth *et al.*'s, 2000, discussion concerning the 'marketer's dream child'). Parents' concerns thus tended to support Postman's (1982) view that children are passive and defenceless in the face of media manipulation. The concern about 'tweens' (page 43 refers), raised by Hymowitz (1999), had particular relevance for girls, who were now considered to wear *'more grown-up clothing, high heels and low-cut tops and G-strings from Argos!'* (Ms Atkins, Moorcroft, I). A perceived gap in the market meant that 10-year-old girls were under pressure to pursue a teen culture, causing Ms Britton (Howland, Q), to state of her daughter that it was difficult *'trying to keep her ten, instead of trying to act and dress like a teenager'*. 'Age dynamism' (Elkind, 1981) was thus evident: children were perceived to want to be like the next older group and not the next younger group. However, for both boys and girls, an effect of consumer pressure was, from the parents' perspective, that children were in a hurry to grow up (a view that was not shared by the children in this study – pages 152 and 158-9 refer).

Historical time was an important factor influencing parents' concern about consumer pressure. Whilst parents recognized that peer pressure to have certain items existed in their childhood, contemporary children were seen to have *'everything now, whereas we had nothing'* (Mr Gerrard, Howland, I). This created tension for some parents; children were considered to be growing up with high expectations and a failure to show respect and

appreciation for what they have got, as well as for 'simple' things in life. Although children's 'pester power' (see, for example, Buckingham, 2000) also caused tension, parents generally considered that the decision to make purchases was within their *control*. Finances were, however, a consideration. Parents at Howland School made greater reference to the issue of cost than did the parents at Moorcroft School, so helping to understand Mrs Matthews's (Howland, I) view that *'I think the media and advertising puts much more pressure on children and there's far too much pressure because of where we live'*. Parents at Howland School, who live in an area of social disadvantage, may feel more acutely the consumer pressure generated by television advertising. The financial situation of some Howland parents seems likely to have restricted their purchasing power (see Smith, 2000b).

## RELATIONSHIPS

Alanen (2001: 129) argues that children and adults are interdependent and that *'change in one is tied to change in the other'*. This theme provides a more specific focus on parents' concerns about the impact of children's rights on adult-child relationships, concerns about the parent-child relationship and, briefly, the issue of family break-up.

### *Children's rights: the impact on adult-child relationships*

Children's rights, as enshrined in the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Children Act 1989, may have contributed to a positive effect on the adult/parent-child relationship in that contemporary children are *'treated more as individuals'* (Ms Atkins, Moorcroft, Q) and *'gone are the days of seen and not heard'* (Mrs Brooks, Moorcroft, I). Such responses, however, do not tell me if this is how children are actually treated in the home setting (see Sinclair, 2004; for the children's views see, for example, pages 122-3). Parents also valued the role that children's rights have played in helping to protect children from abuse. This factor may be particularly relevant for parents who have themselves been abused as children. For example, Mrs Elliott (Howland, I) disclosed that she had been sexually abused as a child but that *'when I told everybody they didn't take no notice ... whereas nowadays they take notice of what a child says'*.

However, there was much evidence in my data to provide support for Lansdown's (1996) view that children's rights are generally regarded with hostility in the UK. 'Discipline' and 'respect' were two keywords used extensively by parents at both schools (Q). For example,

Mrs Killick (Moorcroft, Q) stated that childhood was worse today due to *'lack of discipline and respect'*. Mr Ellen (Howland, Q) summed up the issue: *'Because of all the rights, children are less respectful to adults and more unruly'*. Contemporary children were perceived to lack respect for adults in authority, such as parents, teachers and the police.

Historical time played an important part in parents' perception that children's rights have had a negative effect on adult-child relationships. Implicit in parents' statements was nostalgia for the 'golden age' of their childhood when children did respect adults (Valentine, 1996). Also implicit in these statements appeared to be the notion that physical discipline helped gain this respect. On occasions this was stated more explicitly:

*'When we were kids, if I spoke to my mum the way he (her son) spoke to me, I'd get a right big slap round the face, 'You don't speak to me like that'. Whereas nowadays you can't do that can you? You wouldn't ever speak to your Mum like that again. I wouldn't slap my son round the face like my Mum did to me. It didn't do me any harm because I respected her'*

(Mrs Elliott, Howland, I).

Thus, in the past, it appears that respect was predicated on fear (Valentine, 1996). Contemporary children were viewed as being aware of a right to not be physically disciplined. Concern centred on the way in which this right might be used as a weapon: *'It's making them so powerful, and it's distorting the real meaning of the word by using it as a weapon against parents and the school'* (Mr Deakin, Howland, Q). Thus, as Buckingham (2000) discusses, the issue at stake appears to be parents' concern about children crossing the adult-child boundary and, as a consequence, the loss of adult power. Children were considered to believe they can *'do whatever they want'* (Ms Ellis, Howland, I) because of the 'you can't touch me' notion. However, some parents still believed they had a *right* to physically discipline their children, as evidenced by Mrs Randall's (Howland, I) view with regard to her son: *'I can smack you, I'm your mother'*. Parents' hostility towards children's rights revealed support for the biological discourse within developmental psychology, which tends to maintain the subordination of children (Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 2000). Interestingly, parents at both schools referred to cases in America, which they had heard about in the news, concerning children who had sued their parents.

This was seen as taking the children's rights issue *'out of context'* (Mrs Felton, Howland, I). Such news stories appeared to contribute further to parents' hostility on the rights issue.

However, whilst the 'you can't touch me' notion that children's rights has engendered was undisputed in terms of protecting children from abuse, it also appears to have had a significant negative impact on adult-child relationships. Mrs Proctor (Moorcroft, I) commented: *'Nobody is allowed to touch them, because it can be misconstrued as sexual maybe, or abuse'*. Thus Mrs Gerrard (Howland, I) considered that *'when we were at school your teacher put their arms round you and said "well done", whereas now it's like a distant "well done"'*. A number of the parent interviewees also commented on their felt need to maintain a physical distance with other people's children, for example:

- Mrs Elliott (Howland), reflecting on her role as a midday meal supervisor at another primary school stated, *'at lunchtime they hold my hand, but you can't hold their hand, but they're allowed to hold yours'*.
- Miss Forster (Howland) commented on some voluntary work she had done with children at the school, *'I didn't know how to deal with it all and you do end up standing there like a cold piece of cardboard'*.
- Mr Dale (Moorcroft) recounted an incident at the swimming pool involving the friend of one of his sons, *'she kept crawling over my neck all the time. And her Mum and Dad were over there and I was saying 'go over there, go back to your Mum and Dad' and yet she was really cuddling me. I was saying 'go away' ... she's just being affectionate and she doesn't know different. It could go horribly wrong'*.
- Mrs Griffin (Moorcroft) referred to a time she had comforted a distraught child when helping at the school, *'you're not supposed to handle the children, you're not supposed to comfort them physically'*. On this particular occasion she had felt justified in comforting the child but added that such instances make adults *'into nervous wrecks ... because you're petrified of saying or doing the wrong thing to a child. It should be the most natural relationship in the world, an adult and a child'*.

Such comments lend support to Moss and Petrie's (2002) concern regarding the institutionalization of adult-child relationships whereby it is laid down when and how it is appropriate to touch a child. However, during my fieldwork I was given no guidance regarding either school's policy on 'touch'/physical contact with the children. I

subsequently wrote to both headteachers (after the fieldwork had ended) to try and ascertain whether such a policy existed, but received no reply. I also wrote to the local education authority to inquire whether there was a general policy on this issue for schools in their area, but again received no reply. It seems possible that parents helping in their child's school may not actually receive any guidance on this issue. Certainly, in my role as a parent helper at my sons' infant school in the mid 1990s, I received no guidance on this matter. This raises the question as to the extent to which this issue is, as Moss and Petrie (2002) state, formally laid down, or whether parents simply *assume* it is laid down. Parents' comments above appear to support Furedi's (2002) view that risk aversion has influenced interpersonal behaviour. I found no evidence in my data to openly contradict parents' views on this issue. Parents appear to have become suspicious of themselves as well as of others:

- Mrs Elliott (Howland, I) commented, *'people don't trust anybody nowadays ... you wouldn't let just anybody look after your child now would you?'*
- Ms Jessup (Howland, I), referring to her son, remarked *'it's not him I don't trust. It's whoever else is out there I don't trust'*.
- Ms Ellis (Howland, I) stated, *'you just can't trust anybody'*.
- Mrs Proctor (Moorcroft, I) considered that generally *'everyone's bad until they're proved good and it should be the other way round'*.

Such views appear to be couched firmly within a protectionist discourse. Within this children are constructed as dependent and incompetent and therefore in need of protection both from, and within, the adult world (Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 2000). Parents' views also lend support to Furedi's (2001) thoughts concerning the breakdown in adult solidarity, the absence of community shared responsibility, which leads to parents viewing others as potential predators of their children, rather than as allies. However, feelings of mistrust were not evident amongst all parents. For example, Mrs Felton (Moorcroft, I) considered it important to *'put things in perspective – that you can't live your life like that and you've got to get on with your life'* and Mr and Mrs Gerrard (Howland, I) spoke very warmly about their daughter's friendship with a 65-year-old male family friend whom they trusted *'implicitly'*. It is possible that news media reporting of issues relating to paedophiles/'stranger danger' may contribute to feelings of mistrust for, as Mr Samson (Howland, I) commented, *'I think the media has a fairly large part to play'*. However, Mr

Samson proceeded to comment, *'It's not just the media, it's the whole of society'*. It is therefore important to remember that news media reporting is but one part of an individual's experience (see Muncie, 1999).

The suspicion shrouding intergenerational relationships raises concern about the possible outcome if adults feel that they need to take a cautious approach with other people's children. If one of the attributes of being a 'good parent' is the *'modelling of desirable adult behaviour'* (Campion, 1995: 255), then it would seem that part of that modelling should include the *'affection and trust'* that Champion lists as a further attribute. What will children make of a situation in which their displays of warmth and affection are not returned? The danger is that if it is not reciprocated then, in time, it may no longer be given out. What then will be the likely implication for relationships in adulthood?

### ***The parent-child relationship***

Parents appeared to think about the parent-child relationship in three ways: involved, uninvolved (help *should* be provided) and stressed (help *was* needed).

Historical time played an important part in the notion of the 'involved parent'. Parents reflected on a time past when children were 'seen but not heard'. Parents' views concurred with those of, for example, Thurtle (1998a) and Ambert (1994), that the family has become more child-centred in its approach. For example, whereas children were once a minor part in the family, they are *'up there in importance now'* (Mrs Brooks, Moorcroft, I). Mrs Matthews's (Howland, I) comment encapsulates the notion of the 'involved parent': *'Parents are much more 'hands-on' and tuned into the needs and rights of children'*. Within this relationship parents take, for example, an active interest and involvement in children's education, and also provide a range of opportunities for their children, such as music, sporting and theatrical – in this way parents appeared to construct children as an 'educational project' (Vincent and Ball, 2001)<sup>6</sup>; they take pleasure in spending time with their children, playing and sharing experiences with them; they talk to their children about a range of issues and disclose information about themselves; they demonstrate physical

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<sup>6</sup> The construction of children as an 'educational project' (Vincent and Ball, 2001) ties into the notion of 'hothousing', which was a low concern for parents (see Table 6.1, page 169). Whilst some parents recognized that they engaged in 'hothousing', by structuring and filling children's time with activities, the benefits (in terms of the opportunities they offered) were seen to outweigh the costs (that children may have little time to themselves). 'Pester power' placed some parents under pressure to yield to children's requests to take up activities of their own choosing, thus positioning children as social actors and as *beings*.



warmth and affection towards their children and reinforce this verbally. Parents thus took pleasure from children's *being* in the world, and through being a part of and observing their development, also their *becoming*. The 'involved parent' seems to take responsibility for their child/ren. Factors such as finances and working patterns did, however, affect parents' level of involvement. This perspective on the 'involved parent' provides support for Humphries's (1988, cited in Buckingham, 2000) view that relationships between children and parents are perhaps now more friendly and intimate. However, this more intensive involvement raised the concern '*are we smothering them nowadays?*' (Mrs Fenton, Howland, I) and whether children '*as a result have lost some of their childhood due to this invasion*' (Mrs Matthews, Howland, I).

The 'uninvolved parent' was not generally a label that parents attached to themselves but was intimated in reference to 'other' parents. The 'uninvolved parent' was the opposite of the 'involved parent' i.e. they were not 'hands on' and were not in tune with the needs and rights of their children. Within this framework children tended to be constructed as innocent victims and parents as culpable. However, it was recognized that such parents needed guidance and support to prevent the cycle from repeating itself and the government was seen to have an important responsibility in this area. The 'uninvolved parent' was perhaps more likely to have been affected by changes in society, such as increased geographical mobility, which was considered to have reduced the likelihood of a chain of support being available. The issue of 'working mothers' produced the lowest level of concern for parents at both schools (Table 6.1 on page 169 refers), but was a topic that produced some self-criticism. For example, Ms Atkins (Moorcroft, I) was '*wracked with guilt*' and changed her working pattern so that she could be more 'involved', as did Mrs Brooks (Moorcroft, I), who considered that a trial at working full-time had caused the '*really quality times*' with her daughter to suffer. In addition, some parents made value judgements about mothers who worked full-time, seemingly questioning levels of involvement: '*There's a lot of children who come home and there won't be a parent there. I think that's wrong*' (Mrs Proctor, Moorcroft). Such views about working mothers assume a harmful effect on children but, as James *et al.* (1998) point out, this may appear different if viewed from the child's perspective<sup>7</sup>. Taken as a whole, parents' beliefs about the 'involved' and 'uninvolved' parent can be seen as contributing to a 'folk psychology'

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<sup>7</sup> This was not an issue that I raised with the children and was not a specific issue that was raised by the children either. See Solberg's (1997) research for a useful discussion.

(Hallden, 1991) about what it means to be a 'good' or 'bad' parent. Interviews with some Moorcroft parents revealed a heightened class-consciousness regarding the parenting that would, in their view, produce the 'ideal childhood', as judgements were made about 'other', supposedly inferior, childhoods.

A final consideration is the 'stressed parent'. In this situation parents recognized difficulties in their parent-child relationship and required guidance and/or support. Such difficulties may be temporary, as in the case of Mrs Farrant (Howland, I) who considered herself to be in a '*stand-off*' situation with her son, or more ongoing, as in the case of Mrs Elliott (Howland), who appeared to struggle with her parenting role; she would have appreciated more help and guidance in the past and still considered herself in need of some support. Indeed, it was Mrs Elliott (I) who exclaimed: '*You must see how the parents feel though? Very stressed out half of us, because we don't know what we're supposed to do wiv 'em*'<sup>8</sup>. Within this construction parenting appears to be seen as a shared responsibility with the state. In seeking to understand the 'stressed parent' it is likely that certain 'stress' factors were involved. For example, in Mrs Farrant's case her situation was compounded by the fact that her marital break-up meant she had to deal with the situation herself. The loss, or absence, of a support figure can have dramatic implications for the household (Shaw, 1991). At Howland School, 18% of the sample were single parents but at Moorcroft School only 4% were (Appendix 15 refers). This factor and finances (evident in previous themes in this chapter) were possible stress factors that were more prevalent amongst Howland parents. It is perhaps significant that only Howland parents (some) presented themselves as 'stressed'.

Taken as a whole, the parent-child relationship needs to be viewed as being on a continuum, from 'uninvolved' to 'involved', and with 'stress' potentially appearing at any point on the continuum.

### ***Family break-up, new family groupings***

Given the possible stresses that family break-up and new family groupings might bring to family relationships (see, for example, Mitchell, 1985; Shaw, 1991), coupled with the high

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<sup>8</sup> Some parents may, therefore, be desperate for advice. The Channel 4 television series, 'Supernanny', achieved considerable popularity in 2005. The series offered a number of case studies, where 'supernanny' entered the home setting to teach parenting techniques that helped parents to alter children's 'bad' behaviour. Televising these programmes enabled the parenting techniques to reach a wide audience.

level of this incidence in my sample (evident in both the children's and parents' accounts), it was surprising to find that this issue only ranked as parents' eighth highest concern at both schools (Table 6.1 on page 169 refers). Ms Atkins (Moorcroft, I) provided a possible explanation: *'We're looking at it from the parental point of view'*. Whilst acknowledging that it was likely to be an issue of greater importance for children (and, indeed, it was – pages 120-2 refer) the commonly-held view amongst parents was that family break-up and reconstituted families are part of life in contemporary society and so *'Why be greatly concerned for something that is the norm'* (Mr Samson, Howland, I).

## EXPOSURE TO 'ADULT' KNOWLEDGE

### *Electronic technology*

Postman's (1982) view that television, in handing over to children vast stores of 'adult' information, is responsible for the 'disappearance of childhood', found some sympathy in the parent interviews, though parents generally referred to a *blurring* of the adulthood-childhood boundary, or a *shortening* of childhood. However, on the issue of 'exposure to adult knowledge', the findings reveal that television, as well as other forms of electronic technology, has both positive and negative effects.

The vast majority of parents believed that contemporary children are exposed to the harsh realities of the adult world at too young an age (Appendix 18 refers) and one way in which this was seen to occur was through electronic technology. Specific concerns relating to children's exposure to 'adult' knowledge centred on the issues of death, sex and violence. Television 'soaps', such as 'EastEnders', 'Emmerdale', 'Hollyoaks' and 'Coronation Street', which their children liked to watch, as well as films and videos, were mentioned as containing unsuitable storylines for children. This suggests parents are concerned that contemporary children are not restricted to material that is designed for them (Buckingham, 2000) despite the 9pm 'watershed'<sup>9</sup>. However, with regard to death, some specific concerns were raised about the news, with one parent highlighting the fact that the news is not censored and so:

*'If it was in a film it would be an 18 and yet, because it's news, it's coming on the telly ... I sometimes put the telly on and think, no, I*

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<sup>9</sup> Television programmes in England before 9pm are considered to be suitable for 'family' entertainment and those after 9pm for 'adult' entertainment.

*would have liked to have had warning almost if this was coming on, and then I could have had a choice as to whether I let them see this or not'* (Mrs Parker, Moorcroft, I).

Mrs Parker's concern echoes that of parents in Buckingham's (1996) research.

Historical time contributed to parents' concern. For example, *'Whereas we were down playing in the park, on the beach, children now are on the Internet<sup>10</sup>, watching telly'* (Mrs Randall, Howland, I). Such comments represent an expression of concern about changes over time of the way in which children spend their time, as well as the increased availability of electronic technology. In this way, the arguments of Postman, and others, speak to parents' fears and desires about childhood and to an idealized nostalgia for their own past (Buckingham, 2000).

### ***Parental control***

Whilst parents expressed concern about children's exposure to 'adult' knowledge through television and other electronic technology, it is important to note that they largely assumed this to be under their control. This contradicts the view of Holland (1996), who believes that such technology is outside parental control. Indeed, the notion of control featured on a number of occasions and was often stated explicitly: *'You do have control'* (Mrs Felton, Moorcroft, I) and *'If it's that explicit or scary you don't let them watch it anyway'* (Mrs Ferguson, Howland, I). Operating within this framework raised the concern *'why do they need to know?'* (Mrs Pearce, Moorcroft, I) since it *'stops them from having a carefree childhood'* (Mr Gerrard, Howland, I). This indicates a protectionist philosophy whereby parents view children as dependent, vulnerable and incompetent to make decisions for themselves about what they are exposed to. Such a view expresses a modern belief in the 'innocence of children', the belief that children should be protected from certain aspects of life (Berger and Berger, 1991). However, due to the availability and accessibility of electronic technology, which appeared to be evident in all households, some parents viewed children's exposure to 'adult' knowledge as inevitable and therefore it was not possible to protect children: *'there's no way of ever stopping it, is there, really?'* (Mrs Fenton, Howland, I). In this sense, parents seemed to feel that the matter was, to a certain

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<sup>10</sup> Whilst some concern was expressed about the possibility of children accessing 'adult' material through the Internet as well as the possibility of paedophiles using chat rooms to access children, parents seemed to express more concern about children's exposure to 'adult' knowledge through television.

extent, out of their control, so lending some support to the view of Holland (1996) and others, such as Postman (1982). The issue was compounded by children's access to a television, and/or other electronic technology in their bedroom since *'you don't know what they're watching'* (Mrs Elliott, Howland, I). However, Mr Samson (Howland, I) recognized children's competences, and thus their *being*, suggesting that *'children themselves are pretty good at shutting up'* if there is something on television they do not wish to see, something he had observed with his own children.

Children may also be indirectly exposed to the media through their day-to-day life experience of mixing with other children at school. Mrs Felton (Moorcroft, I) raised the fact, as Hallden (1991) mentions, that parents hold a range of views about children and parenting:

*'We all have different parenting skills, we all have different thoughts, we give our children different information. They all go to school together, so they're having a mix then. They're going to hear different things from different children, words they perhaps haven't heard'.*

In this sense, as a result of different parenting styles, parents appeared to acknowledge a certain loss of control and this contributed further to their concern about children's loss of innocence at an earlier age than in the past.

Some parents highlighted the positive aspects of the mass media. Television 'soaps', television news (particularly the children's news programme, 'NewsRound'), other programmes and newspapers, were praised for the way in which, on occasions, they provided important learning points for raising children's awareness on issues such as paedophiles/'stranger danger', drugs, teenage pregnancies, problems in 'other' countries, death and health issues such as HIV and AIDS. In this way the mass media were valued for opening up issues for parents to discuss with children on a *'need to know'* basis (Mrs Brooks, Moorcroft, I). This appears to position children within a competence paradigm and thus as active, human *beings*. However, within this perspective the uninformed child is viewed as the child at risk (Calvert, 1998) and parents prepare children rather than protect

them (Winn, 1983), so providing an emphasis on both the time *present* and the time *future* of children.

### ***Media effects***

The effects of children's exposure to 'adult' knowledge cannot be clearly stated. Previous research concerning media effects on children has often centred on the issue of violence (see, for example, Gunter and Harrison, 1997)<sup>11</sup>. Whilst parents in my study did not neglect this concern, a more pressing concern emerged in the parent interviews. For example, Mrs Fenton (Howland, I) reported how she had to call out the doctor at one o'clock in the morning due to her son's nightmares following the news about the abduction and murder of 8-year-old Sarah Payne in 2000: *'He was waking up, seeing a white van outside the house, 'cos he'd heard on the news that a man had taken her in a white van'*; Mrs Parker (Moorcroft, I) also referred to the effect of the Sarah Payne case on her son:

*'it became very worrying for him as to what had happened to her. So, it went beyond using it as an illustration as to why I was concerned, to the point where I was almost turning the radio off each morning because I didn't want it addressed again';*

Ms Ellis (Howland, I) commented how her 3½-year-old niece was watching television when news of the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers came on:

*'All she kept going on about was the towers, the aeroplane going into the towers and what happened to all the people. And that's a 3½-year-old. That was scary – 'cos you could see, not so much the pain in her eyes, but she couldn't quite understand what had happened ... and that went on for three weeks. Every time you saw her she mentioned it, and that was quite frightening'.*

These comments support Buckingham's (1996) research findings that the main concern for parents with regard to their own children (or, in Ms Ellis's case, a close family relative) is

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<sup>11</sup> Gunter and Harrison's study looked at violence in *children's programmes*. It concluded that the violence in these programmes was far removed from children's everyday reality and, therefore, there was less likelihood of adverse effects. However, the study is limited, as it does not take into account 'adult' television programmes/videos/DVDs that children may watch.



about the emotional effect that exposure to such knowledge will have on them. Additionally, Mrs Parker (Moorcroft, I), in a discussion about news media, commented: *'There's quite a lot of visual stuff that you can't take away from them once they've seen it, can you?'* The concern here appears to be for what Moeller (1999: 44) describes as the *'indelible impression'* that photographs can have, as we remember events by reference to the pictures of them. However, the issue of exposure to 'adult' knowledge also contributed to parents' view that children are in a hurry to grow up as, for example, it is a world they want *'to be exposed to ... they want to soak it up'* (Mrs Farrant, Howland, I).

### PLAY ... AND FUN?

#### *The destructive influence of electronic technology*

The restrictions on contemporary children's independent outdoor play brought fresh concerns about the way in which children do play:

*'I can remember as a child playing with Barbie dolls, and pretending this and pretending that. Nowadays, I've got a niece who's seven, and she doesn't want to play with Barbie dolls, she wants PlayStation games. I just can't get my head round it, they're not playing as children play'* (Ms Ellis, Howland, I).

Concern therefore centred on the fact that contemporary children *'do not seem to have the ability to make their own entertainment or amuse themselves'* (Mrs Dixon, Moorcroft, Q) and instead rely on entertainment that is *'instant and gratifying'* (Mrs Pearce, Moorcroft, I). Some parents considered that television, computers and games consoles had destroyed children's power of imagination. Such concerns support the belief that children no longer play (see Ennew, 1994), that creative, spontaneous play has disappeared (Stutz, 1996). Historical time, once again, influenced parents' concern. Parents of varying ages reflected on the 'golden age' of their childhood as a time in which they used their imagination and made their own entertainment, often outdoors. Contemporary children seemed to be viewed as incompetent in that they lacked the ability to be creative, although Mrs Proctor (Moorcroft, I) appeared to be a relatively lone voice in speaking of her son's *'wonderful imagination'*. Further concern centred on the addictiveness of computer/PlayStation games. Additionally, Mrs Parker (Moorcroft, I) considered that such games involved children in *'a lot of individual playing'* and, as a result, *'they're missing out on some of the*

*childhood stuff*". What all of these views represent is the fact that it is parents who are defining *how* children should play and, that is, that they should play in particular ways (Hill and Tisdall, 1997). Such views ignore what play means for the player (Huizinga, 1949, cited in Mayall, 2002) and how children would like to spend their time, and where, if given the choice.

### ***The benefits of electronic technology***

Whilst the concerns raised above lend support to the notion of the 'death of childhood' (see Buckingham, 2000), parents also highlighted some benefits of electronic technology. For example, computer/PlayStation games were recognized as being of value to some *parents* as '*a baby-sitting tool*' (Mrs Matthews, Howland, I) and for helping to develop children's hand-eye coordination. Ms Atkins (Moorcroft, I) painted a very positive picture of the educational and entertainment value of modern day electronic technology, arguing that '*the things that are aimed for children now knock spots off things that were aimed for children when I was a child*', a view which appears to support the view of electronic technology as a means of children's liberation (Buckingham, 2000).

### ***Parental control***

Whether electronic technology was viewed as harmful or beneficial, parents largely considered that this form of play required restriction and was thus under their control. In this way my findings disagree with Holland's (1996) view that the electronic pleasures that contemporary children desire are outside parental control. Indeed, for Mr Samson (Howland, I) the issue of control justified why he had *no* anxiety about television, computers and games consoles with regard to his own children: '*I don't allow them as much access as they would want. The reason there is no anxiety is because I do restrict that*'. In some cases parental control appeared to be based merely on the fact that this was deemed to be an inappropriate way for children to pass their time. Other concerns were raised about exposure to 'adult' knowledge, health and socialization. For example, Mrs Matthews's (Howland, I) high level of concern about television, computers and games consoles was triggered by newspaper reports that '*we're creating this society of children that will grow up to be adults that can't interact with each other*' and Mrs Clark (Moorcroft, Q) was concerned about '*children's leisure time becoming less active, leading to poor health, thus unhealthy adults*'. Such concerns indicate a focus on the time *future* of children and were sometimes used by parents with their children to justify restrictions on

this type of play. The fact that electronic technology appeared to feature in all households may explain why there were no discernible differences between parents' views at the two schools.

### ***Childhood culture – electronic technology***

The discussion so far has focused on the advantages and disadvantages of electronic technology for contemporary children. Mr Samson (Howland, I), however, provided another perspective:

*'With my own children, if they were completely disinterested in computers, TV, PlayStation, that would be a concern because it's so prevalent amongst children. So, I'm not concerned that they're in with the 'in' crowd – they talk about PlayStation 2 – I would be concerned if they weren't. I'd much rather they were reading a book or going down the beach or the park, but they've got to have their own world, that I don't like or agree with'.*

Such a view recognizes that modern day electronic technology may form part of children's culture. It provides a form of social action, a way of *being* amongst other children, so identifying a particular cultural style that is typical of a specific time and place (James *et al.*, 1998).

### ***The 'safe child'***

The category of 'TV/computer/PlayStation etc' provided a low level of concern (Table 6.1 on page 169 refers). Despite parents' concerns, it appears to be something they accept. Part of this acceptance centred on, as identified above, the recognition that such technology is part of children's culture. However, what the findings also suggest, when placed alongside the level of concern regarding 'paedophiles/'stranger danger' and 'intensity of traffic on the roads', is that the 'indoor child' (which might be seen to concern the physical control of children) is the 'safe child' (Ward, 1994; Selwyn, 2000). Mr Gerrard (Howland, I) lent support to this view during a discussion about computer games: *'Well, the good thing there is it's keeping them in, so that they're not on the street'*. Parents' acceptance of such technology may, therefore, centre on the alternative it provides to the perceived risks of the outside world (Livingstone, 1998, cited in Buckingham, 2000). Parents appear to have

conducted a cost-benefit risk assessment and whilst electronic technology concerned some parents, there were more important issues to worry about.

### ***Fun?***

In bringing this theme to a close, I wish to consider the issue of 'fun'. Play is an important characteristic of modern Western childhood and Huizinga (1949, cited in Mayall, 2002) states that the essential quality of play is that it should be fun. It was therefore with some surprise that on the parents' questionnaire the word 'fun', as a means for describing contemporary childhood, was only used by 30% of parents (this also included some descriptions of joint fun between parents and their children and '*funny moments*' as a parent). This provides a sharp contrast to the 74% of children using the word on their questionnaires (see page 154)<sup>12</sup>. A few parents also seemed to consider that fun is actually less evident in contemporary childhood. For example, Miss Cannon (Howland, Q) hoped that '*Childhood could be fun again like when we were children*' and Mrs Brooks (Moorcroft, Q) considered that childhood is worse today than when she was a child, with one reason being that contemporary children do not have '*as much "simple" fun*'. Views such as these appear to tell us more about adults' constructions of fun rather than what fun means to children themselves (see pages 153-9 for the children's views).

## **PARENTS' RELATIONSHIP WITH THE NEWS MEDIA**

This chapter has already highlighted some ways in which the news media may have influenced parents' constructions of childhood. This section provides a more specific focus on parents' relationship with the news media and considers whether these media impact on parents' constructions of childhood with regard to suggestions of 'childhood in crisis'.

### ***Availability and access***

Parents echoed Eldridge's (1993) belief that we live in a media saturated society. For example, news is '*everywhere*' (Mrs Pearce, Moorcroft, I) and parents at both schools stated, '*we're bombarded with it*'. Appendix 19 provides details regarding parents' levels of access to different news media. However, news was also perceived to be a shared activity in that it is a topic for conversation, thus supporting Bausinger's (1984, cited in

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<sup>12</sup> Although the questions on the parents' questionnaire were mostly different (a few were the same) to those on the children's questionnaire, there were still a significant number of questions that offered the possibility to use the word 'fun'.

Allan, 1999) comment that the news is a collective process that transpires in the context of family, friends and colleagues.

### ***General feelings about the news***

The national news was perceived as being full of *'doom and gloom'* (Mrs Brooks, Moorcroft, I), with parents at both schools using the words, *'it's depressing'*. This is perhaps not surprising given that negativity is a recognized value in the construction of news (see, for example, Allan, 1999). Bad news was therefore considered to be good news where the news media were concerned. News media may therefore *'blow things out of proportion'* (Mrs Ferguson, Howland, I) and be *'economical with the truth'* (Mrs Griffin, Moorcroft, I). To this end it was recognized that news is constructed to manipulate the consumer to listen, view or read it, and is therefore a product. Some awareness therefore existed that news contained bias (see, for example, Burton, 2000). Despite parents' predominantly negative comments about the news media, they also appreciated the significant role it played in informing parents and raising awareness about important issues. In this way the news media appear to have opened up areas for discussion that were previously regarded as taboo.

Television news was considered to provide a more balanced view than newspapers and may therefore have more credibility. This supports van Ginneken's (1998) claim that television news is often mentioned as the most trusted news source. For Ms Jessup (Howland, I) this trust perhaps arises because *'they can't sensationalize it as much as newspapers can, as they're actually talking to you'*. This acknowledges the presence of a relationship with the audience (Burton, 2000). Whilst the moving image was considered by some parents to potentially have a dramatic effect on the viewer, Moeller (1999) suggests that such images are subsumed into the flow of time and bypass the mind. Mrs Griffin's (Moorcroft, I) experience, however, seems to contradict Moeller's view; reflecting on the video footage shown on the television news concerning the James Bulger case she commented: *'I found that absolutely haunting, absolutely haunting. That really did impact on me'*. Significantly, this news item appeared to have had a particular impact on this parent as her son was, at the time, a similar age to James Bulger.

Radio news was the least likely of the three news media to impact on parents' constructions of children and childhood. Mrs Randall (Howland, I) considered this might

be because *'they don't have news about children on the radio'*. However, radio's subliminal influence (see Hendy, 2000) may be its most potent force, as indicated by Mrs Parker (Moorcroft, I):

*'I think probably what affects me most, that is it sort of goes in without me knowing, is some of the stuff I hear on the radio, because sometimes I hear myself in conversation saying something and I'm thinking 'where have I got that from?''*

Whereas television and radio can offer live news, newspapers can only provide news the day after it has occurred. This gives newspapers more time to develop stories but perhaps also time to *'bump it up to something that maybe it wasn't'* (Ms Jessup, Howland, I). Newspapers were therefore considered more likely to sensationalize than other news media. Newspaper pictures may have a significant effect on parents' emotions because if *'you're staring at it for ages and ages, you can't get it out of your head'* (Ms Ellis, Howland, I) and so *'something you can pick up and look at, that would hit me more, and that has made me cry'* (Mrs Proctor, Moorcroft, I). Such views support Moeller's (1999) beliefs about the power of still images: whilst television images can blur and melt away, still images resist dissipation and the viewer can continue to look. Thus it appears that still pictures, which have usually undergone a process of editing, could have a significant impact on parents. Whilst the majority of parents were unsure as to whether newspapers provided accurate/fair reporting of children, this is perhaps not surprising as Allan (1999) states there is an ongoing debate as to whether news media, generally, reflect social reality truthfully.

### ***How parents internalize news about children and childhood***

Some parents considered the news media did not influence their concern about children and childhood because, for example, *'My concern comes from experience and day to day life'* (Mrs Gardner, Howland, Q) and *'they inform me of what is going on. I make my own mind up'* (Mrs Felton, Moorcroft, Q). However, Mrs Matthews (Howland, I) stated that *'newspapers, etcetera, is how we get our information'* and so, for Mr Samson (Howland, I) the reality is that *'it has an impact because you can't stop it ... over a period of time things seep into your mind'*. These comments suggest that differences within the news audience, such as upbringing, cultural values and relationships (Burton, 2000), will affect the way in



which individuals process news media stories. However, it is important to acknowledge that whilst news media representations *are* considered to have an effect they need to be viewed as but one element in an individual's lived experience (see Muncie, 1999). Therefore, separating out news media effects from those of other social influences is, Burton (2000) argues, an impossible task.

Two parents at Howland School recognized that their increasing age, and that of their children, had altered their perception of the news:

*'the last 6-7 years I've really took notice of what's on the television, on the news, and I take it in more. I don't know why, but before it used to go over me head. I was still going out and having a laugh, the kids are still young, I'm alright. Now they're going out on their own it makes me think about what is out there'* (Ms Ellis, Howland, I).

*'The younger you are ... you're not so aware. You don't really care. You're just living and you do what you want to do. It's only as you get older you actually start feeling compassionate to what's going on out there and what you see'* (Miss Forster, Howland, I).

To these can be added Mr Gerrard's (Howland, I) view that the news has the effect of *'frightening people and parents like us'*. Parenthood may, therefore, sensitize parents to news items relating to children and childhood, a view that was supported by Mrs Randall (Howland, I): *'We tend to remember those stories – we're parents, so we tend to remember those instances. If you said 'What else was on in the news on that day?' you'd have no idea, you wouldn't remember it'*. Relevance is a further news value (see, for example, Allan, 1999). News needs to be related to an individual's experience in order for it to be internalized (Moeller, 1999). Indeed Moeller (1999: 38) offers the example of a child: a photograph of a child might prompt the empathic response, *'That is a picture of a child; I, too, have a child'*. Moeller also raises the issue of proximity, which can have a physical as well as a psychological dimension. As parents, children are physically close to us and news stories about children therefore appear likely to have greater emotional appeal. The issue of proximity is also likely to have relevance for local news: if it is 'bad' news (about children,

or dangers to children) it may affect parents more because *'that's in your backyard so to speak, and it's happening around you and it's very real'* (Ms Atkins, Moorcroft, I).

### ***Changes in the way in which children and childhood are reported on in the news***

Parents believed there are now more child-related stories in the news compared to perhaps ten years ago. Ms Jessup (Howland, I), reflecting on her employment in a newsagent in the early 1990s, stated that *'hardly anything was written about children in those sort of days'*. This may be so, but since Ms Jessup was not a parent at the time it may be that she was not sensitized to child-related news stories. Significantly, the majority of parents I interviewed considered that children and childhood are portrayed negatively by the national news media. The news media are in the business of trying to *'shock us'* (Mrs Griffin, Moorcroft, I) and, therefore, *'I think everyone is a lot more aware that younger children do worse things than they used to years ago ... the worse the better the younger the better'* (Mrs Brooks, Moorcroft, I). This may be because novelty, or unexpectedness, is a further news value (see Allan, 1999; Moeller, 1999). In order for an event to be newsworthy it needs to be perceived as 'new'. However, negative portrayals of younger children appeared to contribute to parents' view that children are growing up at a younger age. Mr Samson (Howland, I) took the discussion a step further in considering that the news media like to *'raise the anti-social element of children'* and may take *'a highly unusual case and then try and work out that all children have become like that, and then play on fears of that'*. Thus the news media were perceived to stereotype children. It may be that stereotyping (generally) is a particular feature of newspapers, as suggested by Young (1974, cited in Muncie, 1999). However, if stereotyping of *children* does occur, the following comment strikes a powerful note: *'they're not necessarily giving false information, they're just not covering the whole picture'* (Ms Atkins, Moorcroft, I).

### ***Are children and childhood portrayed positively by the news media?***

I was concerned that my questionnaire and interview questions perhaps emphasized a negative view of the news media and therefore sought to elicit ways in which children and childhood were portrayed positively. However, for a number of parents I interviewed this was a difficult task! For example: *'How long have I got to think about that one?'* (Mrs Proctor, Moorcroft, I) and *'I'm struggling'* (Miss Forster, Howland, I). Mr Samson (Howland, I) offered a possible explanation, arguing that the news media would be too frightened to say that *'qualitatively, children today are better than they were 20-30 years*

ago' since that would not be what the main audience wanted to hear. Further, Mrs Proctor (Moorcroft, I) commented that the positive stories '*kind of go to the back of the mind and all you can think about is all of the disaster things*'. A finding from the questionnaire supports this comment. Parents who bought, or read, newspapers were asked to describe at least one story (positive, negative or both) concerning children or childhood that stood out in their memory. Responses revealed a strong emphasis on stories relating to the abuse, abduction and murder of children, such as James Bulger, Milly Dowler, Damilola Taylor, the 'Moors Murders'<sup>13</sup>, Victoria Climbié<sup>14</sup> and Sarah Payne. Significantly, these stories construct children as 'victims', thus providing an alternative to the construction of 'aggressor' that seemed to be evident in the previous sub-section. Critcher (2002) argues, however, that it is the construction of the child as innocent victim that is the more pervasive theme within the media. Any positive news stories that parents mentioned on the questionnaires, or in the interviews, most often related to the 'Children of Courage' awards or children's academic achievements. However, what became evident in my interviews was that parents at both schools considered that children were more likely to be portrayed positively in *local* newspapers. Indeed, there seemed to be a recognition, and an appreciation, that local newspapers reported on the *being* of children, as evidenced by Mr Gerrard's (Howland, I) comment: '*A local paper portrays children as doing. Like them kids that have won a Scrabble tournament. Well done!*'

### **CONCLUSION: IS CHILDHOOD IN CRISIS?**

*'See what I mean about being a good parent. It's very hard to get it right'*

(Mrs Brooks, Moorcroft, I)

The task that now remains is to consider whether, from the parents' perspective, childhood is in crisis. As outlined on page 170 the notion of 'childhood in crisis' found greater support amongst parents at Howland School. In addition, a much higher percentage of parents at Moorcroft School disagreed with the notion of 'childhood in crisis'. The findings reported on in this chapter suggest that the area in which families lived, and financial situation, were significant factors in this equation. Howland parents appeared to live in an

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<sup>13</sup> The 'Moors Murders' refer to the murder of four children (between the ages of 10-16) by Ian Brady and Myra Hindley during 1963-4 and whose bodies were buried on Saddleworth Moor in northern England.

<sup>14</sup> Victoria Climbié was 8 years old when she died as a result of abuse over a period of time by her guardians – a great aunt and her partner. The inquiry into Victoria's death contributed to emphases within the Children Act 2004.

area in which they *saw* and/or *heard* of dangers on a regular basis and some also raised issues relating to finance. Moorcroft parents appeared more likely to *perceive* dangers for their children and did not raise financial issues with regard to securing the opportunities that appeared more readily available, and accessible, for their children. In addition, the accounts of some Moorcroft parents appeared to reveal a heightened class-consciousness (page 189 refers). As mentioned previously, childhood assumes a singular form in the notion of ‘childhood in crisis’ (Wyness, 2000), which is problematic. The fact that there was not uniform agreement on the issue of whether childhood is in crisis, along with the range of concerns that have been discussed in this chapter suggest that, from the parents’ perspective, it is necessary to think about ‘childhoods in crises’, since any perceived notion of ‘crisis’ held different, often multiple, interpretations and priorities for different parents.

From the parents’ perspective the notion of ‘childhood in crisis’ needs to be translated as an expression of their multiple concerns about the condition of contemporary childhood and about what constitutes a ‘good’ childhood. The vast majority of parents believed that ‘children are exposed to the harsh realities of the adult world at too young an age’ (Appendix 18 refers). These harsh realities came in the form of a) academic pressure, through which children are exposed to the adult world of competition, stress and worry; b) consumer pressure, through which children are subjected to the ‘adult’ world of manipulation and exploitation, and which manifested itself in peer pressure; and c) the media, including the news, through which children are exposed to ‘adult’ knowledge. These ‘harsh realities’ appear to be the reason behind parents’ high level of agreement that ‘children are in a hurry to grow up today’ (Appendix 18 refers), although the comment by Ms Jessup (Howland, Q) that children are *‘forced to grow up quickly’* also captures the essence of parents’ concern. The concerns highlighted above, when placed alongside the other concerns raised in this chapter, most significantly that of paedophiles/‘stranger danger’ and traffic – which provide a construction of children as ‘in danger’ – but also children’s independent outdoor freedom, adult/parent-child relationships (including the impact of children’s rights), lack of government action, the nature of indoor play and genetic engineering appeared to be the main factors at the root of any perceived notion of ‘childhood in crisis’. However, it is important to remember that the majority of parents also expressed more concern about older children in the 13-17 years age group. Whilst the vast majority of parents agreed that childhood is an innocent and carefree time (Appendix 18 refers), the general message was that contemporary childhood lasts for a shorter time than

in the past and so the age at which 'childhood' ended was coming down but was not, as Postman (1982) suggests, 'disappearing'.

A limitation of the social constructionist approach used in this study is that it hinders the opportunity to identify what is common to the many childhoods (Qvortrup, 2000). In seeking to identify the most significant factor that promoted a construction of 'childhood in crisis' from the parents' perspective, the issue on which there was the highest level of anxiety/concern was that of paedophiles/'stranger danger' (Table 6.1 on page 169 and Appendix 17 refer). The high level of concern for the 'outdoor child' (supported by the findings with regard to the issue of traffic) provides a dominant construction of children as being 'in danger'. From a Foucauldian perspective (see Foucault, 1980) this dominant construction is the one that holds power and which thus, from the parents' perspective, represents the regime of 'truth' about childhood. However, given the statistics relating to the number of children abducted and killed by 'strangers' (page 38 and 54 refer), parents' level of concern on this issue is worrying as it masks the reality that the real threat to children is from inter-familial sexual abuse (Silverman and Wilson, 2002) and that more children are killed by traffic than by 'strangers' (see, for example, Buckingham, 2000). Parents' level of concern on the paedophile/'stranger danger' issue appears to stem predominantly from news media influence. Parents appear to become sensitized to child-related news stories and these can play on parents' fears. Mrs Matthews's (Howland, Q) comment sums up the concern on this issue: *'Paedophile hysteria is whipped up by papers and this is damaging for children's freedom, but although I know there are no more or less attacks than in the past, I feel more worried for my children's welfare'*. Drawing once again on the work of Foucault (1980), the power of the paedophile discourse appears to have resulted in a form of self-governance; the 'watchful gaze' alluded to by Mr Samson on page 177 seems to have caused many parents to restrict children's outdoor freedom due to the perceived threat from paedophiles/'strangers'. News media reporting on issues relating to paedophiles/'stranger danger' may also have had a detrimental effect on interpersonal relationships (between adults and other people's children, and between adults and other adults). What needs to be remembered, however, is that news media reporting is but one part of parents' lived experience and other factors, significantly personal experience and legislation relating to children's rights, may also have influenced parents' concerns and, consequently, their behaviour. However, the way in which the national news media were viewed by parents as providing a predominantly one-dimensional, negative,

image of children suggests another example of media power regarding the construction of childhood and forces one to consider the possibility of whether, from a news media perspective, the singular form of 'childhood in crisis' might hold true.

Foucault (1980) maintains that language plays an important role in power relations – the language we use shapes and directs our way of viewing and understanding the world. With this in mind, it is important to note that the word 'control' was a significant feature in parents' accounts (questionnaires and interviews) and has been raised on a number of occasions in this chapter. Parents' statements were often explicit. For example, Mrs Ramsden (Moorcroft, Q) observed that whilst there were some similarities between children and adults, *'hopefully adults can control them more'*. Childhood was thus a time in which parents' generally perceived children as needing to be under their control. It was the possibility of the loss of parental control, or of challenges to adult/parental control that appeared to also contribute to any perceived notion of 'childhood in crisis'. However, parents' recognition of this power issue contradicts Bardy's (1994) viewpoint, which states that adults usually avoid the question of power between adults and children.

In using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory for this study to explore the macro, exo and micro levels of the system, it is possible to see that parents' constructions of childhood – particularly with regard to their concerns about contemporary childhood – were most evident in the following ways: at the macro level in the form of policy relating to education, immigration, children's rights and the protection of children, as well as lack of government action; at the exo level in the form of the media, including the news media, and the local authority with regard to issues on environmental planning and education policy at a local level; and at the micro level in the form of issues relating to home, school and neighbourhood. Parents' concerns cannot, therefore, be isolated to the individual, but need to be seen as interacting with, and influenced by, other elements in society that lie outside their own microsystem. In thinking about the chronosystem it can be seen that the various influences on parents' concerns about children and childhood were not necessarily constant, but occurred separately or collectively at varying moments in time with varying degrees of intensity for different individuals.

Historical time was a significant influence on parents' concerns for contemporary childhood. Although an historical approach was purposely utilized as part of the research



methodology, parents' reconstructed childhoods did appear to weigh heavily on the present. Parents' own childhoods were often idealized and used as a measuring stick, as the norm, against which to evaluate contemporary childhoods, which were often criticized. In this way contemporary childhood often appeared to be constructed as a less enjoyable experience than in the past and was also a significant factor in any perceived notion of 'childhood in crisis'. Change was thus often seen as decay and, as Prout (2005) observes, such thinking is often marked by a nostalgic longing for childhood to remain the same, or as it was imagined to have been in the 1950s. Indeed, Miss Forster (Howland, I) remarked: *'I like the idea of the old '50s childhood personally, all sitting round and singing songs and not having so much TV'*. Historical time seemed to present difficulties for parents' understanding of contemporary childhood since historical sensitivity (Silverman, 1998) was often not evident in their accounts. The fact that parents' childhoods were influenced by a different constellation of social, political and historical forces (see Mayall, 2000) to those that influence contemporary children was largely unrecognized. In this way perhaps history itself needs to be seen as being partly responsible for the notion of 'childhood in crisis'. Perhaps the cause of this difficulty is the lens through which the parents viewed childhood. Clandinin and Connelly (1994) raise the question of whether it is the adult or the child who speaks in childhood autobiography. In my study, parents' nostalgic memories of their childhood (implicit and explicit in both the questionnaires and interviews) appeared to be viewed through a child lens and sat uncomfortably alongside their concerns, as a *parent*, for contemporary childhood. The lens through which parents viewed contemporary childhood was coloured by their role as a parent: the fears, dangers and pressures which they considered did not exist to the same degree in their childhood perhaps only emerged on becoming a parent. Parenthood thus appears to sensitize individuals to anxieties and concerns related to children. This was evidenced in this study by the way in which parenthood appeared to sensitize individuals to child-related news items (page 200 refers). Such news items, in the national news at least, were generally seen to construct children in a negative light – as 'aggressors' or as 'victims', and thus as 'dangerous' or as 'in danger'.

Parents' recognition that their own childhood was different to that of their children's, as well as their awareness of 'other' childhoods, revealed the socially constructed nature of childhood; it is constantly in flux and is affected by time and place. Parents' constructions of contemporary childhood were often based on a developmental and socialization

framework in which the main concern was for the time *future* of children, but was also strongly influenced by nostalgia for time *past*. The *being* of children, whilst evident, played a lesser role and was, on occasions, the cause of tension in the adult-child relationship, as with the case of consumer pressure and the impact of children's rights. The views expressed by parents in this chapter can be seen as contributing to a cultural script about the 'good childhood' and the 'good parent' (see Hallden, 1991, for related discussion). Childhood and parenting are deeply intertwined (Valentine, 1997b). Trying to provide children with the 'good' childhood required measures of parental control, thus perhaps helping to explain Mrs Brooks's comment at the start of this section.

### SUMMARY

This chapter has explored how parents constructed contemporary childhood and has sought to provide explanations of why they constructed it in the ways they did. This task was undertaken in order to establish whether, from a parental perspective, childhood is in crisis. It concludes that it is more pertinent to think about 'childhoods in crises' since any perceived notion of 'crisis' held different, often multiple, interpretations and priorities for different parents. Parents' expressed a wide range of concerns about contemporary childhood. These often appeared to focus on the belief that children are exposed to the harsh realities of the adult world at too young an age. However, parents' highest level of concern centred on issues relating to the 'outdoor child' – paedophiles/'stranger danger' and traffic – thus providing a dominant construction of children as 'in danger'. In comparison the 'indoor child', whilst raising certain concerns about, for example, electronic technology, was constructed as the 'safe child'. News media reporting on the paedophile/'stranger danger' issue appears to have played a part in restricting children's independent outdoor freedom and may have had a negative effect on interpersonal relationships. Parenthood appears to sensitize parents to child-related news stories and these can play on parents' fears. News media reporting is, however, only one part of parents' experience. Personal experience of issues relating to paedophiles/'stranger danger', and legislation relating to children's rights, may also have influenced parents' concerns and behaviour. Two issues emerged in the parents' accounts that served to highlight different constructions concerning the condition of contemporary childhood. Howland parents appeared to live in a more dangerous area, in which they *saw* and/or *heard* of dangers on a regular basis, and also raised issues relating to finance. Moorcroft parents appeared more likely to *perceive* dangers for their children and did not raise issues

relating to finance. The accounts of some Moorcroft parents seemed to reveal a heightened class-consciousness. A significant feature in parents' accounts (both schools) was the belief that children needed to be under parents' control. The possible loss of parental control, or of challenges to adult/parental control, also seems to contribute to any perceived notion of 'childhood in crisis'. The next chapter provides a specific focus on how childhood is constructed by the news media.

**CHAPTER SEVEN**  
**MESSAGES FROM THE NEWS MEDIA**

**INTRODUCTION**

This chapter examines the constructions of childhood in a variety of news media samples – newspapers, television and radio, national and local – in order to consider whether, from their perspective, childhood is in crisis. News media in the United Kingdom operate independently from the government and thus are not subject to state control. However, the news media play a central role in mediating between policy and public agendas – they construct the public agenda and try to influence policy (Cricher, 2002). In making use of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory this chapter therefore provides a specific focus on the exosystem. It offers the opportunity to see what messages about children the news media transmit into the microsystem of the children and parents in this study. The news media have been included in this study for two main reasons. A starting point for this study was the killing of two-year-old James Bulger in 1993 by two ten-year-old boys. The news media response to this murder, particularly that of newspapers, became generalized into an attack on the whole of childhood (Franklin and Horwath, 1996). The idea of childhood innocence was replaced with the notion that children were innately evil and the case served as a catalyst for the belief that ‘childhood’ was in ‘crisis’ (Scruton, 1997a; Davis and Bourhill, 1997). The fact that media reporting is considered by Franklin (1999) to be central to the construction and reporting of crisis was therefore a significant factor regarding the inclusion of a news media element within this study. Secondly, I had, in particular, become concerned about the manner in which children were portrayed in newspapers: it appeared that barely a week would pass by without readers being exposed to pictures of dead, dying, injured, malnourished or missing children. I wondered how the audience internalized news media reporting of children and what, if any, effect this might have on contemporary childhood experience. In reporting the findings from the news media last the thesis continues to follow the chronological order in which the study was essentially undertaken – children, parents, news media. Further, it continues to recognize the theoretical understanding of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory – that children are at the centre of the system – and I have therefore worked outwards through the system in reporting the findings.

The findings in this chapter are based on an ethnographic content analysis (Altheide, 1996) of a range of news media samples (see also page 100 with regard to the influence of semiotics and media discourse analysis). This method was particularly useful for my purpose as it utilizes both quantitative and qualitative elements. The quantitative element helped to address my possible bias, whilst the qualitative element enabled the discovery of emergent meanings. This method has been employed in order to establish *how* the news media constructed childhood and *why* they constructed it in the way they did. Findings from the various news media samples have been pooled and are clearly identified where necessary. Similarities and differences within, and across media, are highlighted where they occurred. My analysis sought to discover both what the news media do tell us in their constructions of children as well as what they do not tell us. Thus it sought to trace both the overt as well as the covert messages, to make visible the invisible.

After introducing the news media samples and categories used for this study, the issue of news values is considered since these play a central role in understanding *why* news is constructed in the way that it is. The chapter is then organized into the five key themes that emerged from the data:

- Children as victims
- Children as positive beings
- Children as beneficiaries
- Children out of place
- Voice: seen but rarely heard

The first four themes are presented in an order that reflects the level of incidence within the news media samples. The fifth theme arose after a consideration of the first four themes. Exploration of these five themes then facilitates consideration, from a news media perspective, of the question at the heart of this study: Is childhood in crisis? The themes in this chapter are different to those used in reporting the findings from the children and parents. The fieldwork with the children and parents required me to generate the data. In doing so I was guided by the literature examined in Chapter Three, which is reflected in the themes used in Chapters Five and Six. However, in the case of the news media the data already existed and analysis of this data produced different themes.

## THE NEWS MEDIA SAMPLES AND CATEGORIES

Decisions about which news media to include in this study were based largely on a desire to explore the world that my research participants were exposed to. Therefore, the news media most commonly accessed by the parents involved in this study were used as the basis for determining the samples. Chapter Four provides further information regarding the research methodology in relation to the news media. The different time spans for the various news media samples was largely due to the practical difficulties of purchasing and recording a range of news media products.

### *National newspapers*

The most popular daily tabloid newspaper for parents involved in this study was the *Sun*, which was generally bought, or read, at least once a week, by 13 parents (out of 38) at Howland School and 14 parents (out of 48) at Moorcroft School. This was followed by the *Daily Mail*, which was bought, or read, by 5 parents at Howland School and 17 parents at Moorcroft School. The most popular Sunday tabloid newspaper was the *News of the World*, which was bought, or read, by 14 parents at Howland School and 9 parents at Moorcroft School. For comparative purposes, two broadsheet newspapers, the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Sunday Times*, were included in the sample, although these were only accessed by a small number of parents. Newspaper supplements were not included in the analysis. The time span for the sample was pre-determined: a decision was made in March 2002 to focus the newspaper analysis on the month following the completion of my fieldwork at the two schools. The newspapers to be included within the sample were purchased on a daily basis and retained until they could be analysed.

Time span of sample:	1 <sup>st</sup> – 31 <sup>st</sup> August 2002
Newspapers included in sample:	<u>Tabloid</u> Monday – Friday: <i>Sun</i> Saturday: <i>Daily Mail</i> Sunday: <i>News of the World</i>
	<u>Broadsheet</u> Monday – Saturday: <i>Daily Telegraph</i> Sunday: <i>Sunday Times</i>
Total number of newspapers in sample:	62



### *Local newspapers*

My original intention was to explore only national news media. The decision to include local news media was based on parents' belief that local newspapers portrayed children in a more positive light than national newspapers (page 202 refers). A small number of local weekly newspapers, covering both areas in which Howland and Moorcroft Schools were situated, were purchased and retained for analysis.

Time span of sample:	November – December 2003
Newspapers included in sample:	<u>Local newspaper – Howland School</u> 21st November 28 <sup>th</sup> November 5 <sup>th</sup> December <u>Local newspaper – Moorcroft School</u> 20th November 27 <sup>th</sup> November 4 <sup>th</sup> December
Total number of newspapers in sample:	6

### *National television news*

The television news channels accessed most frequently by the parents were BBC1 and ITV. A number of news programmes were therefore recorded so that they could be analysed at a later stage. The news programme used for the recording was the last main news of each day (usually 10pm on weekdays and slightly earlier, or later, at weekends).

Time span of sample:	1 <sup>st</sup> – 31 <sup>st</sup> August 2003
Television news included in sample:	BBC1 – 14 news programmes ITV – 16 news programmes
Total number of programmes in sample:	30 (due to a technical problem I found that one programme – 9 <sup>th</sup> August – had failed to record)

### ***Local television news***

A number of parents stated that they watched the local television news programme. This programme covers a wide geographical area and was therefore applicable for both Howland and Moorcroft Schools. The news programme used for this sample was broadcast at 6pm each evening.

Time span of sample: 1<sup>st</sup> September – 10<sup>th</sup> September 2003

Total number of programmes in sample: 6

### ***National radio news***

The radio channel accessed most frequently by parents was Radio 2. Since radio news is brief, I recorded 2-3 programmes at various times of each day included in the sample.

Time span of sample: 8<sup>th</sup> – 26<sup>th</sup> September 2003

Number of days included in sample: 14

Total number of news programmes in sample: 37

### ***Local radio news***

The local radio channel included within the sample was applicable for both Howland and Moorcroft Schools. I recorded 1-2 news programmes at various times of each day included in the sample.

Time span of sample: 10<sup>th</sup> – 28<sup>th</sup> May 2004

Number of days included in sample: 18

Total number of news programmes in sample: 28

### ***News media categories***

All the news media samples were scrutinized for *any* representations of children (text/spoken and/or visual) and also for any general issues relating to children. The age span for this search was from conception through to 12 years of age. In news items where a child's age was not mentioned I made a calculated guess based on the information given. A total of 552 news items were found: 483 newspaper items, 46 television news items, and 23 radio news items. Each news item was then assigned to a category based on the newsworthiness of the story. The newsworthiness of the story entailed a consideration of

the reason the child/ren or issue had entered the news. Separate sets of categories were used for the UK and international news items (see Appendix 20). These categories provided quantitative data (see Appendices 21-26) that was examined for emergent meanings. It is these discoveries that form the five themes that will be explored after a consideration of news values.

## NEWS VALUES

In seeking to understand *why* the news media constructed childhood in the way they did it is important to consider the news values held by them, since these determine which events will be selected to reach the news. The following has therefore been compiled from a range of literature – Allan (1999); Burton (2000); Hartley (1982); Moeller (1999); and van Ginneken (1998) – and can be used to provide a point of reference for further reflection on the findings presented in this chapter:

### Fig. 7.1 News values in the United Kingdom

- *frequency*: recent events are preferable, in particular those that have taken place within the previous 24 hours. This short time-span helps an event to acquire meaning;
- *threshold*: the event will need to be of a certain size in order to be recorded at all. Once included, there is an additional threshold of drama: the bigger the story, the more added drama is required to keep it going;
- *clarity*: what has happened needs to be relatively unambiguous in order to limit possible interpretations;
- *relevance*: the event needs to be meaningful for the audience. Cultural proximity is a related factor: events that resonate with the cultural background of the news audience will be viewed as more meaningful than others;
- *personalization*: events which focus on human actors are preferable to ‘faceless’ structures, forces or institutions, since they can evoke empathy or disapproval and thus have emotional appeal;
- *continuity*: if an event has already been in the news there needs to be a reasonable chance that it will remain there;
- *conformity*: certain events may be predicted, or desired and, therefore, there is an expectation by news workers that they will happen;

- *unexpectedness*: within the framework of relevance and personalization, the event needs to be ‘out of the ordinary’;
- *composition*: an event needs to be considered in relation to other events and is thus one part of a whole picture;
- *elite nations*: priority is given to events occurring in the ‘first world’ at the expense of the ‘third world’;
- *elite people*: priority is given to the actions of, for example, politicians, members of the monarchy, and celebrities, rather than those of ordinary people;
- *negativity*: bad news is more newsworthy than good news.

News values represent an ideological code (Hartley, 1982) that is shared by all news organizations and which is influential in shaping what the news is. They therefore play a significant role in agenda setting, influencing the issues that enter the public domain (Gough, 1996). The greater the number of news values present in an event, the more newsworthy the story will be (Hartley, 1982). Since news organizations are in the business of selling their product it seems apparent that this will be a significant factor as to *why* childhood is constructed in the way that it is. Thus news values guide journalists as to what will, or what will not, make a ‘good’ story (Cricher, 2003). From West’s (1999) perspective this means that particular types of story about children will appear frequently. My analysis of the news media samples used in this study therefore sought to identify these news stories and the ideological constructions behind them.

### **CHILDREN AS VICTIMS**

The *overwhelmingly* dominant construction of children that emerged in the national newspaper (broadsheet and tabloid), national television, and national *and* local radio news samples, was that of ‘children as victims’. This negates Land’s (2000: 170) view that ‘*Children – even young children – are now often seen in the media more as ‘villains’ needing punishment than as ‘victims’ needing protection*’. My findings thus build on Moss and Petrie’s (2002) statement that in the last 6 months of 2000 and the first 9 months of 2001, children as victims was a recurring media theme (see also Cricher, 2002). Within my news media samples only the local newspaper and local television news samples provided a construction that went some way towards challenging the dominant construction of ‘children as victims’. This dominant construction was evident within the

vast majority of the UK categories. Within the international categories it provided the only clear construction of children. However, within the construction of ‘children as victims’ several interpretations are possible: ‘victim’ (which covered by far the majority of news items), ‘potential victim’, ‘victim and beneficiary’, ‘victim and active being’. Drawing upon examples from the news media samples these different aspects are now explored.

### **‘Victim’**

These news items offered a clear construction of ‘victim’ since children entered the news for their sole status as a sufferer in some way. This construction represents children as objects of concern (see Davis and Bourhill, 1997). It can be seen to threaten the romantic image in the idealized discourse of Western childhood, which views childhood as a time of innocence, free of cares and responsibilities (Prout, 2005). This aspect can perhaps therefore be seen as making such a news item more newsworthy.

#### National newspapers

##### *a) Holly and Jessica*

When deciding in March 2002 that I would undertake a newspaper analysis for the month of August 2002 I could not have foreseen the events that would unfold. My newspaper sample was dominated by the disappearance, abduction and murder of two ten-year-old girls, Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman. Newspaper reporting was extensive: after the news first broke on August 6<sup>th</sup> the case continued to be front page news – often, but not always, the lead story – on all but 3 days of the broadsheet sample and all but 6 days of the tabloid sample. On days when the story did not make the front page it was usually reported on elsewhere in the newspaper. Indeed, between August 6<sup>th</sup> and August 31<sup>st</sup> there was only one occasion (*News of the World*, August 25<sup>th</sup>) when the case received no coverage. Reporting within a newspaper was also frequent: at the height of its reporting the *Sun* had 12 articles about the case on one day (August 19<sup>th</sup>). Of the 83 news items in the ‘missing and abducted children’ category in the national newspapers, 75 (90%) of these related to the Holly and Jessica case (Appendix 21 refers); and of the 130 news items in the ‘death of child/ren’ category, 95 (73%) of these related to Holly and Jessica (Appendix 21 refers). Significantly, the Holly and Jessica case also appeared to act as a trigger for other news items within the categories of ‘adult sexual deviance’ and ‘protection issues’, so adding to the overall *composition* of a newspaper. The intensity of the reporting, as well as the prime location it was often given in newspapers, seems to provide evidence for Silverman and

Wilson's (2002) view that particular crimes – most often those which involve children as victims – have a resonance that appears to grow. Since news stories that involve the abduction and murder of children have become one of the most emotive issues in contemporary UK society (Gallagher *et al.*, 2002) it seems likely that the Holly and Jessica case had particular *relevance* for parents (especially those with similar age children) and children, as well as those directly, or indirectly, working with children.

Whilst Holly and Jessica were, at the outset, perhaps cast as *potential* victims, the status of victim was applied swiftly, as evidenced by the language used. For example, on August 7<sup>th</sup> the *Telegraph* questioned whether the girls might be '*victims of abduction*' or '*victims of foul play*'. Whilst the *Telegraph* began to make an association with paedophiles, the *Sun* took a more emotive stance, incorporating terminology such as '*pervert*', '*fiend*' (August 6<sup>th</sup>) and '*beast*' (August 9<sup>th</sup>). Although different news organizations share the same news values they may have a different news culture (Allan, 1999). The different language used by the broadsheet and tabloid newspapers was evidence of this: the *Sun*'s reporting used the language of the paedophile discourse which, Critcher (2003) comments, is replete with images of evil. However, the approach taken by both the broadsheets and the tabloids in my sample seems to confirm Singer and Endreny's (1993) point about agenda setting; that is, the newspapers were instrumental in telling the audience what to think about. The message conveyed to the audience was one of children's vulnerability – children were in need of protection from others, particularly a certain type of person. In this way, the innocence (a term used in some reporting, such as the *Sun*, August 8<sup>th</sup>) and vulnerability of Holly and Jessica was perhaps intended to apply to all children in the UK. This symbolic representation invites an emotional response (Jackson and Scott, 2000). Further, since newspapers play the role of defenders of the home (Nelson, 1984, cited in Gough, 1996) the focus on paedophiles – an external threat – would have enabled the newspapers to maintain this ideal.

The *unexpectedness* of the Holly and Jessica case was raised in some of the reporting. At the outset the *Telegraph*, on August 6<sup>th</sup>, whilst raising the possibility of abduction, also highlighted the rarity of the event, as well as the even more rare event of two girls being abducted together. This served to make the story more newsworthy. Facts about the rarity of the event appeared to receive a more balanced discussion in the broadsheet newspapers. For example, the *Telegraph*'s report on August 8<sup>th</sup> that children were at more risk from



family members and people they knew than they were from strangers, was supported with relevant facts and figures supplied by the Home Office. In contrast, the *Sun* did not discuss this issue until August 19<sup>th</sup> (see, however, sampling details on page 211) and did not state the source from which their statistics had been acquired. In the meantime, the *Sun* had been mounting a campaign against '*paedophiles*' and '*perverts*'. The *Sun*'s stance was therefore more simplistic, as the facts that were needed for a fuller understanding of the event were only provided once the terms of the debate had been set (Muncie, 1999). Thus for readers of the *Sun*, the agenda that was set appeared to be more clearly defined. Such agenda setting contributes to bias (see, for example, Singer and Endreny, 1993; Burton, 2000).

The news value of *frequency* played an important part in sustaining the rollercoaster sensation of the Holly and Jessica case. Daily developments were often reported on in a dramatic way in order to keep readers' interest. Emotive headlines were employed. On occasions these took the form of pulling the reader into the story, as if to enlist their help in solving the case. For example, '*Did fiend lure them? Chatroom pervert fear as girls vanish in red Becks shirts*' (*Sun*, August 6<sup>th</sup>); '*Give them back. Please give them back*' (*Telegraph*, August 8<sup>th</sup>); '*Think hard and remember*' (*News of the World*, August 11<sup>th</sup>); '*Kidnapper could be a neighbour, locals told*' (*Telegraph*, August 16<sup>th</sup>). For the *News of the World* (August 18<sup>th</sup>) the discovery of the girls' bodies was, quite simply, '*The end*'. A final dramatic twist in the story came with the arrest of two people known to the girls – a classroom assistant in the girls' class, and her partner, the caretaker at the local secondary school. The fact that the girls had known the suspects added to the *unexpectedness* of the case and, as Critcher (2002) points out, the image of the predatory paedophile could be sustained no longer. However, it was at this point that reporting centred predominantly on the two suspects, thus helping to sustain the story's *continuity*.

Pictures played an important part in the reporting of the case and were an important element in the *personalization* of the event. Additionally, they appeared to serve to convey the innocence of Holly and Jessica. On occasions, whole pages were dedicated to pictures. Moeller (1999) comments that a photograph can provoke a tension in us – not only about the exact moment that a photograph portrays, but also about all the moments that will follow. Nowhere does this seem more evident than in the picture taken of the two girls shortly before their disappearance (see, for example, *Sun* August 8<sup>th</sup>), as for myself a clock in the background serves as a haunting reminder as to the possibilities of what might have

happened before and after the time shown on the clock. Other pictures provided a strong visual hook, such as those revealing the anguish on the faces of the girls' parents (for example, *Telegraph*, August 6<sup>th</sup>), Holly's grandmother (for example, *Sun*, August 19<sup>th</sup>), and the people of Soham, the town in which the girls had lived (for example, *Sun*, August 19<sup>th</sup>). Such pictures are likely to have added to the story's emotional appeal for, as Silverman and Wilson (2002) point out, it is difficult to ignore a human face in distress. Other children also had a strong visual presence during the reporting; discussion about 'The suffering of Soham's children' (*Sun*, August 28<sup>th</sup>) suggests that these children were also constructed as victims.

Whilst the Holly and Jessica case clearly had remarkable *continuity* within the national newspaper sample, it should also be noted that this continuity extended into the national television news sample in August 2003 (2 news items), the national radio news sample in September 2003 (3 news items) and the local radio news sample in May 2004 (1 news item). For example, the lead item on the ITV news on August 20<sup>th</sup> 2003 centred on the acquittal of a police officer charged with child pornography offences (thus providing another construction of children as victims). However, a fact central to the news report was that the officer in question had been the family liaison officer for Jessica's parents. It seems likely that the officer's trial may only have reached the news as a result of his connection with Holly and Jessica. In this way, it appeared as if the girls now held some type of status as *élite people*. This, however, had only been achieved through their death, thus revealing their more dominant status as victims.

Taken as a whole, the Holly and Jessica case fulfilled the criteria for the majority of the news values (pages 214-5 refer), many of which have been discussed. It seems that the newsworthiness of this story would have helped to sell the news product. Indeed, Masters (2002) states that newspaper sales increased during the weeks of reporting of the Soham case. If this is so, it appears to reveal something about readers' appetite for this type of news. It also seemingly provides evidence that newspaper reporting can alter people's behaviour since newspapers were purchased that would not otherwise have been bought. Holly and Jessica's entry into the news centred on their clear status as victims. Newspaper reporting conveyed an image of the innocence and vulnerability of children. As such, children were therefore deemed to be *in need* of protection. The amount of space that I have devoted to my reporting of the Holly and Jessica case is, I consider, a fair reflection

of the place that this news story held in the news media samples: of the 552 news items in the entire sample, 176 (32%) related directly to Holly and Jessica. Additionally, their case appeared to act as a trigger for further news items.

*b) Death of other children*

Apart from the reporting of Holly and Jessica, there were 43 further news items relating to the death of children within the 'death of child/ren' category (35 in the UK categories and 8 in the international categories). Many of these reports were brief, or short in length, and some of the UK news items related to the arrest, or trial, of someone alleged to be responsible for the death. Indeed, the desire to cast blame was a feature of some reports. For example, 'Lake death mother refused life jacket' (*Telegraph*, August 1<sup>st</sup>), 'Maniac killed tot in car with no brakes' (*Sun*, August 6<sup>th</sup>). The desire to cast blame, which appeared to feature more frequently in the tabloid sample, is perhaps due to the fact that, as Moeller (1999) states, it is hard to justify the death of a child. The *unexpectedness* of children's death makes such an event newsworthy. The death of a 6-year-old Spanish girl in a car bomb was the only item from the international categories to reach the front page of a newspaper (*Sun*, August 5<sup>th</sup>). Significantly, Spain, as a Western country, might be considered to be an *élite nation*. Further reports on the death of children occasionally came from the category of 'children and well-known people', such as the 3-inch headline on the *Sun's* front page on August 7<sup>th</sup>, 'Cherie loses baby'. This reported that Cherie Blair, the Prime Minister's wife, had suffered a miscarriage. However, the 'baby' had only reached the news due to a connection with an *élite person*.

*c) Adult sexual deviance*

Appendix 21 reveals that this category provided the sharpest difference between the tabloid and broadsheet samples. Many of the articles in this category appeared to be selected for their fit with media preoccupation (Cricher, 2003) with the Holly and Jessica case. There were relatively few articles in the broadsheet sample and the terminology used was that of 'paedophile'. However, the language used in the tabloid headlines was more loaded. For example, 'Child sex monster jailed for just one year' (*Sun*, August 7<sup>th</sup>), 'The grief. The beasts' (*Sun*, August 16<sup>th</sup>) and '110,000 fiends' (*News of the World*, August 18<sup>th</sup>). During the reporting of Holly and Jessica the *Sun* appeared to mount a strong campaign against paedophiles and on August 16<sup>th</sup> alone there were five items for inclusion in this category. The tabloids also appeared to focus on the misdeeds of professionals. For example, 'Vicar

*faces jail for grope*' (*Sun*, August 16<sup>th</sup>) and *'Jail for sex calls teacher'* (*News of the World*, August 18<sup>th</sup>). The tabloids' agenda setting (see, for example, Singer and Endreny, 1993) against *'predatory perverts'* appeared fierce. As mentioned on page 211, it was not until August 19<sup>th</sup> (after Holly and Jessica's bodies had been found) that the *Sun* finally acknowledged that most child sex crimes were carried out by people the victims knew, often a child's parents. However, when statistics were used, or research referred to, the *Sun* tended to give insufficient information – see, for example, August 16<sup>th</sup>, *'The net is a sewer of child porn corrupting our society'*. This stands in contrast to a report in the *Sunday Times* on August 18<sup>th</sup> – *'Sex approaches are made to one in five children'* – that gave more detailed information about research undertaken at Huddersfield University.

#### *d) Other categories*

Children were also constructed as victims within other categories (both UK and international). For example, within 'protection issues' e.g. *'Pupils hit by crisis over staff checks'* (*Telegraph*, August 30<sup>th</sup>), which centred on vetting procedures for those working with children following the Holly and Jessica case; within 'injury or accident involving child/ren and/or family member' e.g. *'Five children lost their father in fireball horror'* (*Daily Mail*, August 17<sup>th</sup>); within 'genetic engineering' e.g. *'Tests prove IVF mix-up over twins'* (*Daily Telegraph*, August 1<sup>st</sup>); and within 'abuse' e.g. *'Priest hits toddler'* (*Sunday Times*, August 25<sup>th</sup>).

#### *National and local television news*

On August 5<sup>th</sup> 2003 the ITV reported on two children taken into care – and thus victims – following allegations that they had been abused by their mother, who was believed by medical professionals to be suffering from Münchhausen syndrome by proxy<sup>1</sup>. Considerable time was given to the reporting of this case, which included secret filming by the children's grandmother of distressing scenes as the children were being taken into care. However, a significant feature of this news item appeared to be support for the mother's view that she was a victim of injustice. The possibility that the children *might* have been abused was not entertained. This appeared to provide evidence that the news media are defenders of the home since accusations of abuse may only receive such attention when they are contested (see Kitzinger, 1996, for related discussion).

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<sup>1</sup> Münchhausen's syndrome by proxy is a psychological disorder whereby a parent/guardian invents symptoms in their child in order to secure medical treatment.

On August 11<sup>th</sup> the BBC news reported on a 19-year-old trainee teacher, jailed for 3 years for trying to buy sex with a 9-year-old girl. An Internet site used by the man to find the girl had been set up as a trap by detectives. When police raided his room they found handcuffs, a knife, a police style baton and articles about famous child murders. This news report had particular *relevance* for myself for, as the story unfolded, I became aware through the accompanying visual material that the man had been a student at the university college at which I am based. My exclamation of 'Oh, my god!' was perhaps a shock reaction to the news that a danger had entered *my* world (see Hargrave, 2003).

ITV news gave considerable space on August 27<sup>th</sup> to a case of abuse in America. This centred on the arrest of parents of 5-year-old twins, following the discovery that the children had been kept in 'cages' measuring 6 feet by 4 feet for 20 hours a day. The emotional appeal of the report was enhanced by visual material showing the 'cages' and the background headline of 'Caged Children' as the report was being delivered. It seems likely that the newsworthiness of this story was heightened by the fact that it concerned an individual case in an *élite nation*. It also seems possible that the news media may not play the role of defenders of the family for children in 'other' countries.

On September 3<sup>rd</sup> the local television news reported on new measures introduced by the government to help children who were '*victims of bullying*'. This also provides an example of a macrosystem influence (see Bronfenbrenner, 1979) being transmitted into the microsystem of the home.

Further examples of children being constructed as victims were found in a number of categories, such as 'death of children' (in both the UK and international categories); 'medical and developmental health'; 'injury or accident involving child/ren and/or family member'; and 'children and war'.

#### National and local radio news

Children were, predominantly, constructed as victims through their death. For example, on September 15<sup>th</sup> 2003, Radio 2 reported on the fatal shooting of a 7-year-old girl and her father in a drug related incident (this story had *continuity* as it was reported on again on September 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>) and on May 4<sup>th</sup> 2004, the local radio station reported on the death of a 4-year-old in a house fire.

### ***'Potential victim'***

Within UK society the developmental paradigm remains a powerful influence in the discourse of childhood. Within this, threats to children's well-being must be guarded against in order to ensure their progression to healthy adulthood (Jackson and Scott, 1999). The construction of the 'potential victim' is therefore about the perception of children being 'at risk' or 'in danger' and thus as objects of concern. Such stories, from Buckingham's (2000) perspective, offer sensationalism, which helps to sell news. The construction of children as 'potential victims' was most often found in the categories of 'medical and developmental health issues' and 'protection issues', but occasionally also in the category of 'genetic engineering'. Some examples of this construction are:

#### *National newspapers*

The disappearance, abduction and murder of Holly and Jessica acted as a trigger for news items within the category of 'protection issues'. In this way it seems that certain news items may have been chosen for their fit with media preoccupations at the time (Critcher, 2003). The *Sun* took an emotive stance, calling for action in order to protect children's well-being. For example, *'Is it time to hang these monsters?'* (August 16<sup>th</sup> 2002) and *'Rid the world of monsters'* (August 23<sup>rd</sup>). Biased reporting was thus evident. The broadsheets, however, appeared to offer a different perspective of children 'at risk'. For example, *'Don't lock up your children'* (*Telegraph*, August 23<sup>rd</sup>) and *'Paedophilia mania is driving children and adults apart'* (*Sunday Times*, August 25<sup>th</sup>).

On August 2<sup>nd</sup> the *Sun* used an emotive headline – *'Don't kill my babies'* – on the front page to report a 'tug of war' case concerning some frozen embryos. A female cancer patient had eggs removed from her ovaries before undergoing surgical treatment, which were then fertilized by her partner. The breakdown of the relationship led to her partner requesting the removal of the embryos from storage. However, whilst the headline emphasizes potential victims, the case was also about *potential beings*. On August 10<sup>th</sup>, the *Daily Mail* featured a similar case on its front page, thus perhaps highlighting a difference in news culture as such stories did not receive front page coverage in the broadsheet newspapers.



### National television news

The lead item on the ITV news on August 6<sup>th</sup> 2003 centred on researchers' concern about the possibility of an outbreak of measles amongst children. Insufficient numbers of children were receiving the MMR (measles, mumps and rubella) inoculation due to parents' concerns about its possible link with autism. Background headlines of '*Measles fear*' and '*Measles threat*', as the news report was delivered, served to highlight children's status as potential victims. The case was strengthened by the inclusion of a report about a boy who, although now well, had been a *victim* of measles.

### National and local radio news

On September 8<sup>th</sup> 2003 Radio 2 reported on the government's plans to create a Children's Commissioner in England as '*part of new measures to protect children at risk of abuse*'<sup>2</sup> and on May 11<sup>th</sup> 2004 the local radio station included a report about the government's new advice to parents with a baby in order to prevent cot deaths. These two examples offered clear illustrations of a macrosystem influence (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), in the shape of government policy and advice, being transmitted into the microsystem of the home.

### ***'Victim and beneficiary'***

The construction of children as 'victim and beneficiary' applied only to children from the international categories within the national newspapers and national television news and as secondary issues within the local newspapers. Within this construction Britain – and British children in the case of the local newspapers – is cast as the saviour for providing help to 'other' children, thus perhaps helping to promote a 'feel good' factor. Children in 'other' countries provided the main foci for this construction. From Prout's (2005) perspective such news items underline a significant element of the idealized discourse of childhood, for they illustrate the vulnerability and dependency that are considered to be the natural state of childhood. However, such images also often served to highlight the fact that non-Western childhood was different to Western childhood (see Mills, 2000) and reinforced a sense of Western superiority (Prout, 2005). Children in 'other' countries were usually constructed as helpless and requiring sympathy (Jackson and Scott, 1999). Children were objects of concern for their construction as victims, as well as that of being in need of help. Some examples of the construction of 'victim and beneficiary' are:

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<sup>2</sup> The news report only centred on this aspect of the Children's Commissioner's post i.e. it did not report that the Commissioner's main function is to ensure that *children's views* influence legislation, policy and practice (see Harvey, 2004).

### National newspapers

A news item in the *Telegraph* on August 9<sup>th</sup> 2002 offered the headline: '*British aid keeps children alive in Mugabe heartland*'. The report claimed that Zimbabwean children were surviving only as a result of food aid being sent by Britain. A brief report in the *Telegraph* on August 10<sup>th</sup> was headlined '*British hope for joined twins*'. This report centred on four-year-old Malaysian conjoined twins, brought to Britain for assessment to see if British surgeons could separate them.

### Local newspapers

Although these news items are also mentioned within the theme of 'Children as positive beings', they contained a secondary construction of children as 'victims and beneficiaries'. Articles in the local newspaper for Howland School and Moorcroft School centred on schoolchildren wrapping up parcels to be sent to children in Romania. The construction of 'other' children as 'victims and beneficiaries' was clearly highlighted in one of the headlines: '*Pupils' help for needy in Romania*' (Moorcroft local newspaper, November 27<sup>th</sup> 2003). However, children in Britain may, on occasions, also be constructed as 'victims and beneficiaries': an article in the local newspaper for Howland School (November 28<sup>th</sup> 2003) focused on a fundraising event, including local children, for the Children in Need appeal<sup>3</sup>.

### National television news

On August 2<sup>nd</sup> 2003 ITV's lead story centred on the humanitarian crisis in Liberia, which had arisen as a result of long-running civil war. Britain was sending '*vital aid*' by means of a '*mercy flight*'. Children's status as victims was brought to the audience's attention with the words, '*Civilians, including thousands of children, are caught in the middle*'. This was authenticated by a brief interview with a spokesperson from the Save the Children Fund and by pictures of a father with his young son, taking evasive action from gunfire.

### **'Victim and active being'**

This construction centred on British children, who had been victims of circumstances but had, subsequently, displayed an *active being*. Thus these children reached the news both

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<sup>3</sup> The BBC organizes the Children in Need appeal each year. It involves 7 hours television time during which celebrities do things they would not normally do. Viewers can donate money online, interactively or by telephone. Money raised is used to help improve the lives of children and young people in the UK. Individuals and groups around the UK also become involved in raising money for the appeal.

for their status as victims and for their intrinsic value. However, it is their status as victim, and thus as an object of concern, that brought their story into the news. Such cases only seemed to be evident in the national and local newspaper samples. Some examples of the construction of 'victim and active being' are:

#### National newspapers

One example comes from the category of 'injury or accident involving child/ren and/or family member'. On August 22<sup>nd</sup> 2002 the *Sun* reported on an 8-year-old girl who had been orphaned one day (following the death of her parents in a car crash) and a bridesmaid at her aunt's wedding the following day. The use of the word 'brave' appeared to be used to highlight her strength of character and *active being*.

Other examples come from the category of 'medical and developmental health issues'. These children were reported to be battling against an injury, illness or disability. For example, 'Heart girl defies odds to give parents hope' (*Telegraph*, August 29<sup>th</sup>); 'Gritty ride of bicycle girl with false legs' (*Sun*, August 28<sup>th</sup>); 'The 100-1 fighter' (*News of the World*, August 18<sup>th</sup>). Significantly, a picture of the child accompanied all of the reports in this category. Such pictures often had emotional appeal. For example, the picture of the '100-1 fighter' in intensive care would, from Holland's (1998) perspective, perhaps actually serve to overwhelm the written account.

#### Local newspapers

On November 28<sup>th</sup> 2003 the local newspaper for Howland School featured a story about an 8-year-old 'brave little angel' who, despite losing her mother, brother and stepfather in a car crash, in which she was also injured, was helping her biological father to overcome his own grief. And on November 20<sup>th</sup> the local newspaper for Moorcroft School reported on a 3-year-old 'brave little cancer sufferer recovering from chemotherapy'.

These examples serve to highlight the fact that whereas British children might have been portrayed as strong, brave and determined, children in 'other' countries – as the section on 'victim and beneficiary' showed – were more likely to be portrayed as weak and needy.

## CHILDREN AS POSITIVE BEINGS

This theme centres on those news items in which children have been included for their positive intrinsic value. These items came, predominantly, from the UK category of 'active being'. However, other categories were also searched in order to try and identify further possible representations. Within the radio news sample I found no items for inclusion within this theme, thus perhaps highlighting a difference in news culture (Allan, 1999). Additionally, the newspaper and television news samples contained no *clear* representations of children's 'active being' within the international categories. This serves to confirm, as Mills (2000) suggests, that global representations of children do not provide positive portrayals of children's lives – such representations, it appears, would not be deemed newsworthy. In this way it appears that British power, and the lack of potency of 'other' countries, is highlighted further (see Holland, 2004). Within my samples, the construction of 'children as positive beings' was minor in comparison to the construction of 'children as victims'. It appears that this can be attributed to the fact that news values do not invite positive portrayals of children. The construction of 'children as positive beings' produced several possibilities: 'overt active being', 'subsumed active being', and 'potential active being'. Drawing upon examples from the news media samples, these are now explored.

### *'Overt active being'*

News items included within this sub-theme centre on those in which children were included in their own right rather than, for example, their status as a victim. These items came from the category of 'active being' and appeared to show children overtly in a positive light. The inclusion of such news items can perhaps be seen as going some way towards recognizing children's participatory rights and of providing the positive image of childhood that is enshrined in the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989). Appendices 21 and 24 reveal that the category of 'active being' was somewhat insignificant in the national newspaper and national television news samples. However, within the local television news sample (Appendix 24) it formed 30% of the sample and within the local newspaper sample (Appendix 22) it formed 50% (Howland School) and 49% (Moorcroft School).

Within the national newspaper sample there were only eleven instances in which children appeared to have been included for their own intrinsic worth. Three of these items centred

on children's academic achievement at an early age – for example, '*A GCSE at six? Not a problem*' (*Sunday Times*, August 11<sup>th</sup> 2002). Another example is an article from the *Sun* on August 5<sup>th</sup> – '*Super Hairoes*' – which reported on two boys whose hair had been cut and dyed to depict their respective heroes, Spiderman and Green Goblin. From West's (1999) perspective the two examples presented here would perhaps be included within the theme of 'children out of place' as they are stories about children's unusual or unconventional behaviour. However, I consider that they should be included within this theme as they celebrate an 'otherness', so providing an image of positive being. An item in the *Telegraph* on August 9<sup>th</sup> – '*Schoolgirl friend pleads for the girls safe return*' – actively sought the views of a friend of Holly and Jessica (see pages 216-20). Whilst this item was only included within the wider context of Holly and Jessica's status as victims, the fact remains that the friend was considered to be an authoritative source whose views merited inclusion.

Within the small sample of 6 local newspapers I identified 27 instances of children's 'active being'. These news items generally reported on the following: sporting interests and achievements (both within schools and local clubs), other achievements, activities such as brownies and cubs, and doing things in school. However, what is noticeable is that in 14 of the items children's 'active being' only took place within a construction of 'schoolchild' (Moss and Petrie, 2002). Three of these items reported on children who were helping 'other' children, who were themselves depicted as being *in need* (see 'victim and beneficiary' sub-theme – pages 224-5 refer). Pictures played a particularly important role in *personalizing* news items about the 'schoolchild', with up to 6 photographs accompanying a written report.

The national television news included only one instance of children as 'active beings'. This was the *last* news item on the ITV news on August 24<sup>th</sup> 2003 and was a report about the first day of the Notting Hill Carnival in which, it was stated, '*children are always the stars of the first day*'. Visual accompaniment included pictures of children in costume during the street parade. Children appeared more likely to be portrayed as 'active beings' within the local television news. Most significant was a report on September 1<sup>st</sup> 2003, which centred on children taking part in a film-making course. The fact that this course had been for gifted and talented children appeared to give them an *élite* status. However, children were the focus of the report and brief interviews with three children contributed to the composition of the story. Two further local television news items centred on issues in

which children were not the focus of the report but whose views were sought as well as those of adults. The inclusion of children's views on these occasions appeared to recognize children as an authoritative source within their status as members of society.

My findings within this sub-theme suggest a further difference in news culture (Allan, 1999) between national and local television and newspaper organizations. Local news organizations appeared to provide a greater focus on overt representations of children's 'active being'. However, it is perhaps important to remember that whilst all news organizations share the same news values (Allan, 1999), the net that can be cast from which to select news items will be smaller for local news organizations.

### ***'Subsumed active being'***

Items included within this sub-theme centre on those in which children were not the main focus of the news item but whose inclusion provided a positive representation of children. Some examples within this sub-theme are as follows:

On August 31<sup>st</sup> the *Telegraph* produced a close-up picture of a 5-year-old Muslim girl carrying an American flag at an anti-terrorism rally in Dallas, U.S.A. It is possible that this might have been included in order to convey an 'active being' of children. However, as van Ginneken (1998) mentions, pictures are polysemic and thus potentially carry different meanings for different people. The picture might therefore also be read as, for example, portraying children's vulnerability to terrorism. Further examples within the national newspapers could be found in articles in which children were not the main focus of the report, but whose views had been included, such as *'I owe my life to my daughter'* (*Sun*, August 28<sup>th</sup>), which centred on a mother's battle against cancer. Some news items within the category of 'genetic engineering' also appeared to provide evidence for this sub-theme, such as *'We've been trying for this baby since 1985! Couple's long ordeal ends in joy'* (*Sun*, August 13<sup>th</sup>), which seemingly conveyed childhood as a positive state of being. Examples within the local newspaper sample were most often those in which children were pictured 'out and about' at local events or helping at, for example, fundraising events. Such items seemed to serve to highlight children's status as members of the local community.

Within the national television news several news items alluded to the image of the romantic childhood within the idealized Western discourse of childhood (Prout, 2005).



These news items centred on the heatwave in Britain and included scenes such as children having fun at the seaside and at a fairground with their families (for example, ITV August 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> 2003). Such images were usually brief, but portrayed childhood as a happy, fun-filled, carefree time of life.

### ***'Potential active being'***

News items included in this sub-theme came solely from the category of 'genetic engineering' and appeared to focus on a hoped for being, thus providing a positive image of children. For example, an article in the *Telegraph*, on August 31<sup>st</sup> 2002 was headlined '*IVF for all. Plea by fertility chief*' and included statements from the chairman of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority calling for wider availability of in-vitro fertilisation treatment. On August 9<sup>th</sup> 2003 the BBC news reported on the government's possible plans for the expansion of free fertility treatment '*that could bring hope for childless couples*'. The fact that this report was the lead item on the news that day means that it was considered to be the most important news item (Altheide, 1996). Additionally, this news item provides a further example of a macrosystem influence (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) being transmitted into the microsystem of the home.

## **CHILDREN AS BENEFICIARIES**

Whilst the theme of 'children as victims' included a sub-theme of 'victim and beneficiary', this theme centres on those instances in which children appeared to have entered the news *primarily* as beneficiaries. A construction of 'children as beneficiaries' is influenced by the socialization paradigm (see, for example, Berger and Berger, 1991) as it centres on children as recipients of the 'good deeds' of adults with children, as a result, *becoming* 'better' people. Children's contribution to society is thus viewed as being '*diligent receivers*' (Saporiti, 1994: 191). Children are considered to be 'empty vessels', as incomplete beings (Mackay, 1991), to be filled with the process of socialization. Within this process children tend to be viewed as objects rather than actors (Waksler, 1991c). However, a construction of 'children as beneficiaries' only appeared to be evident within the 'moral issues' category of the local newspaper sample. This once again raises the question of a difference in news culture (Allan, 1999), whilst remembering that local news organizations have a smaller pool from which to select news items. 'Children as beneficiaries' may help the local community to feel good about what it is doing to help children. Some examples for this theme are as follows:

### Local newspaper for Howland School

An article on 21<sup>st</sup> November 2003 reported on a local bank manager involved in a story time at a toy library, to which the bank had donated £1,000. The edition on 28th November reported on children at a local football club receiving coaching from a premiership football club. An item on December 5<sup>th</sup> reported on a school's fundraising event to raise money for its playground fund.

### Local newspaper for Moorcroft School

A report on November 20<sup>th</sup> 2003 centred on another school's fundraising event to raise finance for its playground fund. A 'Class of the week' feature on November 27<sup>th</sup> reported on a class of Year 4 children (7-8 years old) receiving tennis coaching from professionals. The edition on December 4<sup>th</sup> reported on children at another primary school receiving 'taster sessions' in volleyball and handball from development officers for these sports; the headline for this news item – '*Pupils given first taste of 'new' games*' – served to highlight children's status as receivers.

Pictures played an important part in *personalizing* news stories in this theme. Outwardly these seem to work to convey a positive image of children and of children's 'active being'. However, it is the text that provides the underlying construction of 'children as beneficiaries'. Whilst children may, indeed, have participated in the fundraising events described above, such news stories appear to have been chosen for their emphasis on children as *receivers* of an act, from which they will benefit.

## **CHILDREN OUT OF PLACE**

The theme of 'children out of place' (West, 1999) focuses on those children whose behaviour does not fit with the idealized Western discourse of childhood, which emphasizes innocence. Children are thus, once again, viewed as objects of concern. News items included within this theme are influenced by the developmental paradigm since they depict children as 'deviant' or as a 'problem' in some way and thus different from the ideal, 'normal' child (Jackson and Scott, 2000). However, within my total sample of 552 news items I was only able to identify 8 possible instances of 'children out of place', thus further negating Land's (2000) belief that even young children are more likely to be seen in the media as 'villains' requiring punishment than as 'victims' requiring protection.

Further, in these 8 items the construction of 'children out of place' was often tentative, or subsumed within a stronger ideological construction of children:

National newspapers

- 1) On August 1<sup>st</sup> 2002 the *Sun* included an item headlined 'Granny at 32' and referred in its reporting to cases of pregnant 10- and 11-year-olds. Although the main focus of the article centres on two children outside the age range for this study it did not seek to condemn their behaviour. As such, the construction of 'children out of place' is tentative.
- 2) An item in the *Telegraph* on August 2<sup>nd</sup> was headlined 'Gene links abused children to violence'. This reported on research that suggested it might be possible to identify which abused children would become anti-social adults. However, the headline and report provide a focus on 'children as victims' and the research may only help to identify *future* 'deviants' in *adulthood*.
- 3) A double page feature in the *Daily Mail* on August 3<sup>rd</sup> about 'Dickensian Britain' made a brief reference to 12-year-old prostitutes in Rochester.
- 4) A report headlined 'Lad blinded by bullies' in the *Sun* on August 13<sup>th</sup> concerned an attack on a 10-year-old boy. The reader is led to assume that the attackers were of the same age since 'the gang' had apparently bullied the boy for three years at school. However, the emphasis in the headline and the report appears to be on a construction of the 'child as victim'.
- 5) A brief article in the *Sun* on August 16<sup>th</sup> was headlined '£10m to save our yob kids'. This reported on a government scheme (and thus a macrosystem influence – Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to stop 'problem' children from becoming adult criminals. However, the article only appears to infer that children are 'out of place' since the scheme centres on preventing children from becoming 'deviant' adults.
- 6) A report in the *Sun* on August 29<sup>th</sup> carried the headline 'Cops target boy racers'. This brief report focused on nursery school children receiving driving instruction from police officers after complaints about 'boy racers' driving their pedal cars on public roads!

These findings reveal that within the national newspapers a construction of 'children out of place', albeit often a tentative one, belonged almost exclusively to the tabloid newspapers, thus perhaps highlighting a further difference in news culture (Allan, 1999).

### National and local television news

- 1) On August 17<sup>th</sup> 2003 the BBC news reported on the civil war in Liberia and included a focus on child soldiers (I am unaware of the age of the children to which this report referred, but some may have been within the age range for this study). The fact that these children were possibly killing other people might suggest a construction of 'children out of place'. However, the emphasis in the report was on a construction of 'children as victims' as the child soldiers were portrayed as people whose human rights had been abused.
- 2) On September 3<sup>rd</sup> 2003 the local television news reported on the government's plans (and thus another example of a macrosystem influence – Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to introduce a zero tolerance policy on intimidation in schools. Whilst the report did offer a construction of 'children out of place' the main emphasis was on a construction of 'children as victims'. This is evidenced by the lead sentence in the report, '*Victims of bullying have welcomed ...*' and the inclusion of the views of a teenager (outside the age range for this study), who had been '*a victim of bullying*'.

### **VOICE: SEEN BUT RARELY HEARD**

Van Ginneken (1998), in writing about world news, asks the question: 'Who gets to speak?' He observes that '*Some voices are made to be loud and omnipresent, others are reduced to a whisper or completely drowned out*' (van Ginneken, 1998: 102). The issue of 'voice' concerns more than 'speech', as it is tied into power relations (see Griffiths, 1998: 126). This led me to consider the extent to which children's own voices were heard within the news.

### National newspapers

Children's views were included in 14 news items in the tabloid sample and 7 news items in the broadsheet sample. Together this represents 5% of the total national newspaper sample (428 news items). Within the 21 news items, 10 related to the disappearance, abduction and murder of Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman. However, 4 of these items related to printed messages left by children with flowers, or as messages of condolence on the Internet. Therefore, journalists only actively sought children's views on 6 occasions. These 'interviews' were usually brief, apart from the previously mentioned item in the *Telegraph* on August 9<sup>th</sup> 2002, '*Schoolgirl's friend pleads for the girls' safe return*'. Taken as a

whole, the reporting of the Holly and Jessica case centred overwhelmingly on adults' views.

In 5 of the remaining 11 news items a child's view was incorporated as part of a wider issue being reported. Within these reports, children's views were given less space than those of adults, except in the case of *'Cops target boy racers'* (*Sun*, August 29<sup>th</sup>). On this occasion a child's comment – one short sentence – was the only view included in the brief article. This now leaves 6 news items in which children were the main focus of the report and in which, therefore, one might expect their views to receive greater attention. However, once again children's views were, to varying levels of degree, outweighed by those of adults, except in the case of *'The six sense. Genius Geetha, 6, heads bumper exam passes'* (*Sun*, August 19<sup>th</sup>). On this occasion, the child's view, once again, consisted of one sentence.

#### Local newspapers

My decision to include local news within my news media analysis emerged from the parents' belief that local newspapers portrayed children in a more positive way than national newspapers – a quality that some parents in this study appeared to value. The high percentage of news items in the category of 'active being' in the local newspaper sample, as opposed to the national sample (Appendices 21 and 22 refer), as well the outward appearance of 'active being' within the 'children as beneficiaries' sub-theme did, indeed, lend support to the parents' belief. However, I was surprised to find that *none* of the news items in the local newspaper sample included children's views. Children thus had only a visual presence. This was particularly noticeable in reports relating to children 'doing' things in school. Whilst children's 'being' was very evident in the accompanying pictures, the written report contained only the view of adults, such as headteachers and teachers. This finding appears to support van Ginneken's (1998: 176) view that pictures '*can be made to elicit preferred readings and to pass other things over in silence*'.

#### National television news

Although children may have been heard speaking in the background of some of the national television news items, there were only 2 instances when children's views were actually presented. On August 5<sup>th</sup> 2003 the ITV news reported on the heatwave in Britain. Part of the report focused on health warnings, including advice about sunblock protection,

*'especially for kids'*. To highlight the fact that children were particularly vulnerable a report was included about a boy whose back had been badly burnt by the sun. A positive feature of the report was that the boy's views were included, as opposed to those of his mother (present during the interview). However, the boy's views have only been incorporated within his status as a 'victim'.

On August 6<sup>th</sup> ITV news reported on vulnerable young witnesses in court proceedings. Included in the report were the views of the girl (silhouetted in order to protect her identity) who had been a witness in the trial of the alleged killers of Damilola Taylor (page 137 refers). The trial had collapsed after the barrister for the defence undermined the girl's evidence. However, the emphasis within the report was on children's vulnerability in such cases and their need for protection.

#### Local television news

Although the sample was small, it appears that the local television news took a more proactive approach in seeking children's views. In the 10 news items in the sample, children's views were included on 3 occasions – these have already been referred to within the sub-theme of 'overt active being' on pages 228-9.

#### National and local radio news

Children's views were not included in *any* of the national or local radio news samples. The radio was, therefore, the only medium not to include children's views at all. This omission may be due partly to limited airtime as well as the nature of the reporting, in which there was an emphasis on children as 'potential victims' or 'victims' (through death) and an absence of children as 'active beings'. However, adults' views were sought in a number of the news items.

Taken as a whole it can be seen that, within the news media samples, the voices of children tended to be *'reduced to a whisper'* and, in the case of the radio news, were *'completely drowned out'* (van Ginneken, 1998: 102). This chapter has, on several occasions, highlighted a difference in news culture (Allan, 1999) between various national/local and/or different news media. However, what seems apparent in this study is that all of the news organizations, except perhaps the local television news organization, *shared* a culture of operating within a framework that did not value children's competences as reporters of



their experience. Children's 'being' within the news was predominantly a 'visual being'. As such, the construction that emerges is of 'children as seen but rarely heard'. The privileging and emphasis on adults' views forms part of the agenda setting, which contributes to bias (see Burton, 2000). In doing so, adult power appears to be reinforced and maintained.

### CONCLUSION: IS CHILDHOOD IN CRISIS?

Through the use of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory this chapter has sought to identify the constructions of childhood that existed within a specific aspect of the exosystem – the news media. These constructions are transmitted into the microsystem of the home, and thus the lives of the parents and children involved in this study. My findings revealed that some macrosystem influences, in the shape of government advice, plans and policy, are part of these constructions. News values (see pages 214-5) provide the significant underlying reason as to *why* childhood was constructed in the ways that it was, with differences in the culture of news organizations (Allan, 1999) serving to highlight some specific differences within the constructions. The task that remains is to consider whether, from a news media perspective, childhood is in crisis.

At this point it is useful to return briefly to the James Bulger case since this had been a starting point in my desire to incorporate a news media perspective within this study. The killing of 2-year-old James Bulger in 1993 by two 10-year-old boys appeared to result in a systematic attack by the media – particularly *newspapers* – on the whole of childhood. Children were perceived as being out of control, and the 'evil' of the two young killers was applied to all children (see, for example, King, 1995; Hay, 1995; Davis and Bourhill, 1997). The construction of children within the news media at the time was firmly on that of 'children out of place' – children were perceived as *aggressors*, as a threat to others. Indeed, Scraton (1997a) suggests that the Bulger case was the catalyst for the notion of 'childhood in crisis' in the 1990s. However, a construction of 'children out of place' occurred very rarely within my news media samples, and when it did, it was somewhat ambiguous. Thus, if this chapter is to conclude that, from a news media perspective, childhood is in crisis, then the crisis would appear to be different to that which applied during the 1990s.

As an outsider seeking to gain an insider's perspective it is therefore necessary to consider further how childhood *was* constructed by the news media and whether this can be seen to represent a crisis. Whilst acknowledging that the news media did report on many childhoods, my wish here is to address Qvortrup's (2000) concern that a social constructionist perspective restricts the opportunity to consider what is common to the many childhoods. From a Foucauldian perspective (see Foucault, 1980) this concerns the identification of the dominant constructions of children, for these are the constructions that hold power and thus can be considered to represent the regime of 'truth' about childhood from a news media perspective. What was very apparent within all the *national* news media samples, as well as the local radio news sample, was that the dominant construction was that of 'children as victims' – this applied to both the United Kingdom and the international categories. A construction of 'children as victims' positions children as powerless and conjures up feelings of pity – children are constructed as vulnerable, as 'in danger', and thus in need of protection. Such a construction goes some way towards matching the construction of children as 'weak, poor and needy' in the UNCRC and the Children Act 1989 (page 19 refers). Time *past* (as with the death of children) and time *future* (as epitomized by the need to protect children) played a role in this construction. The emphasis on protection reveals the strong influence of a developmental and socialization framework. If the dominant construction of 'children as victims' represents the reality then we would surely need to conclude that this does represent a crisis in childhood. However, this predominantly one-dimensional view of childhood masks the reality in that it fails to encompass the full range of childhood experience: whilst the children in this study recognized that childhood was both 'good' and 'bad', the dominant construction of 'children as victims' in the national news media samples, as well as the local radio news sample, provides a deficit model of childhood and does not match the predominantly positive construction of childhood in the children's accounts, which emphasized childhood as being 'a privileged time of life' (page 164 refers) in which they played, had fun, and had few responsibilities. Childhood, in the news media samples, was rarely portrayed as something to be celebrated. As such, it might be possible to conclude that within the national news media there was a 'crisis of representation' (see Prout, 2005), for it did not match the lived experience of the children in this study. What needs to be kept in mind, however, is that news values (pages 214-5 refer), by which news media organizations operate, appear to make this somewhat inevitable. A change in representation would thus require a radical rethinking of news values.

Hartley's (1982) argument that news values can disguise the more important ideological determinants of a news item alerted me to the need to remain attentive to possible hidden constructions of childhood. Whilst this chapter has illustrated that children were also constructed as 'positive beings' the, on the surface, *active being* of children – and thus their time *present* – was largely a visual 'active being'. Herein lay a further dominant construction of children – that of 'seen but rarely heard' – for children's own viewpoints were seldom incorporated into news items and, when they were, those of adults usually outweighed them. Closer examination of the *local newspaper* sample revealed that the strong visual presence of children in news items masked the fact that children's views were not incorporated into *any* of the reports. This serves to highlight the potential that pictures offer for manipulation (Moeller, 1999). A construction of 'children as seen but rarely heard' stands in contrast to the participatory rights of children that are emphasized in the UNCRC and the Children Act 1989. Thus the construction of 'children as seen but rarely heard' might be seen to contribute further to a 'crisis of representation', for contemporary children in UK society should be both seen and heard. It may be that the other dominant construction, of 'children as victims', also has a hand to play here for, as Moeller (1999) states, stories are about victims, rather than by them, and so their voices are rarely heard<sup>4</sup>. Thus a dominant construction of 'children as victims' locates children as *objects of concern*, rather than as subjects with voices to be heard. The relative absence of children's voices in the news media samples, alongside the positioning of adults as authoritative sources on children's lives, reveals the power relations that were present.

The disappearance, abduction and murder of Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman provided a thread that ran throughout the news media samples. It dominated the national newspaper sample in August 2002 and continued to reach the news during the national television news sample in August 2003, the national radio news sample in September 2003 and the local radio news sample in May 2004. The inclusion of news media samples from 2002-4 introduced a significant time element into my analysis – the chronosystem within Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory – and this finding with regard to Holly and Jessica reveals continuity over time. In considering further the notion of 'childhood in crisis' it is useful to compare the reporting of the Holly and Jessica case with that of the James Bulger case. During the Bulger case it was the 'evil' of children that formed the agenda setting by the news media and the dominant construction of children

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<sup>4</sup> Although Moeller's point concerns victims of famine it seems possible that it could have wider relevance.

was as *aggressors*, as 'out of place'. The 'demonization' of children fitted with media preoccupations with crime at the time (see King, 1995). 'Other' children were the focus of the moral panic that came to represent the notion of 'childhood in crisis'. With the Holly and Jessica case the agenda setting, particularly by the tabloids, focused on the 'evil' of adults, specifically paedophiles, and the dominant construction was of children as *innocent victims*. The two cases serve to highlight the socially constructed nature of news. Whilst the news media are reactive (Singer and Endreny, 1993) and thus respond to real events that occur, they appear to construct the children they need in order to sell the news product. News values (pages 214-5 refer) play an important part in shaping this construction. With the Holly and Jessica case, paedophiles became the focus of a moral panic (see, for example, Critcher, 2003), thus potentially offering a *new construction* of 'childhood in crisis'. In this way the news media can be seen to have changed its definition (see Singer and Endreny, 1993) as to the source of risk to children, thus providing further insight into the chronosystem in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory. If, as Critcher (2003) argues, paedophilia is now a recurrent, serial moral panic, then this particular construction of 'childhood in crisis' will recur. However, the subsequent arrest of someone known to the girls, for their murder, required a further change in definition and thus a further *new construction* of 'childhood in crisis'. Whilst acknowledging the important role that the news media played in trying to locate Holly and Jessica, the extensiveness and frequency of the reporting, which centred on a threat to children from outside the home, might be seen as contributing further to a 'crisis of representation' about childhood as children are at greater risk of abuse and death within the family home (see Scott *et al.*, 1998). However, this issue does not receive comparable attention by the news media (Kitzinger and Skidmore, 1995).

The extent to which the reporting of the Holly and Jessica case, as well as the nature of the reporting, might have translated into a 'crisis' in the lived experience of the children in this study would have required a return to the field. However, previous news media stories about the abduction and/or murder of children appeared to have already had a material effect in terms of restrictions on children's independent outdoor freedom (pages 136-7, 140 and 176-8 refer). The abduction and murder of Sarah Payne in 2000 seemed to have particularly preyed on the minds of some parents and children in this study. Significantly, Sarah had been a similar age to the children in this study. Since Holly and Jessica were also a similar age to the children in this study it appears likely that their case would also

have had particular relevance for both the parents and children in this study. Utilizing Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, it is useful to consider how children and parents (in the microsystem) might have interacted with the news media (in the exosystem) on this issue. Drawing on Hay's (1995) theory about the process of interpellation it seems likely that the children and parents would have injected their own subjectivities on the reporting of the Holly and Jessica case. The recognition of themselves as potential victims is likely to have produced further anxiety for some children and parents. That the abuse of children by strangers has become one of the most emotive issues of our time (Gallagher *et al.*, 2002) was confirmed by my findings from the parents in this study (page 170 refers). The reporting of the disappearance, abduction and murder of Holly and Jessica appears likely to have ensured that it would have remained so. However, as van Ginneken (1998) states, ultimately it is the reader, listener or viewer who decides what is, or is not, in a news item. Different news media messages are therefore likely to have different meanings for different people as a result of other life experiences.

### SUMMARY

This chapter has explored how childhood was constructed by the news media and why it was constructed in the ways that it was. This task was undertaken in order to consider whether, from a news media perspective, childhood is in crisis. The dominant constructions of children within the news media samples were of 'children as victims' and of 'children as seen but rarely heard'. The extensive reporting of the disappearance, abduction and murder of two ten-year-old girls, Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman, dominated my newspaper analysis in August 2002 and provided a thread that ran throughout the news media samples into 2004. Through a comparison of this case with the Bulger case of 1993, which served as the catalyst for the notion of 'childhood in crisis' in the UK in the 1990s, this chapter concludes that the case of Holly and Jessica provides a *new construction* of 'childhood in crisis'. However, the main conclusion of this chapter is that analysis of the news media samples used for this study reveals what might be referred to as a 'crisis of representation' of childhood. This 'crisis' was evident in three ways: firstly, the construction of 'children as victims' did not match the reality of the positive lived experience of the children involved in this study, whose dominant construction of childhood centred upon it being 'a privileged time of life' in which they played, had fun and had few responsibilities; secondly, a construction of 'children as seen but rarely heard' does not match the participatory rights of children in the UK, as emphasized in the

UNCRC and the Children Act 1989; and, thirdly, the extensiveness and frequency of the reporting of the Holly and Jessica case, along with other linked news items, does not match the reality that children are at greater risk from abuse and death within the family home, yet such issues do not receive comparable attention by the news media. The next, and final, chapter pulls together the findings, giving further consideration to the level of congruence and divergence between the three levels of social activity – micro, exo and macro – examined in this study.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

### CLOSING THE THESIS

#### INTRODUCTION

This Chapter provides some reflections on the study as a whole, the purpose being to provide some endings to the research, as well as to suggest some possible beginnings. The chapter begins by drawing conclusions as to whether the notion of ‘childhood in crisis’ is myth, reality, or cause for concern. Possible recommendations arising from this study are emphasized. This is followed by an evaluation of the research process, in which I highlight what I perceive to be the strengths of this study as well as considering areas for improvement. Some suggestions are then made as to how the study could be developed through further research. The thesis is brought to a close with some final reflections on the research process.

#### **‘CHILDHOOD IN CRISIS’: MYTH, REALITY, OR CAUSE FOR CONCERN?**

The purpose of this study has been to consider whether the notion of ‘childhood in crisis’ is myth, reality, or cause for concern. My exploration of the literature in Chapter Three revealed that the notion of ‘childhood in crisis’ centred on multiple expressions of concern about the condition of contemporary childhood. Such concerns had been based on an adult perspective of what childhood should be like and thus what constitutes a ‘good’ childhood. Additionally, they were often based on adults’ need to maintain the adult-child boundary and thus adult authority.

Children’s views have often been missing in past debates about their lives. The use of a (predominantly) social constructionist perspective was of central importance for this study as it enabled the inclusion of children’s views. The fact that childhood is closely connected with the family in the UK led me to include a parental perspective (pages 22 and 66 refer). Further, since social context is an important feature of a social constructionist perspective, I sought to build context into the research design by utilizing Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory as a framework for the study (see pages 28-30). This theory highlights the need to study contexts beyond the individual’s immediate situation. Within my fieldwork I explored the micro level by accessing the views of 113 children (aged 9-11 years) and 88 parents at two junior schools in contrasting socio-economic areas of southeast England – the schools being separated by a distance of approximately 13 miles;

at the exo level I undertook an analysis of national and local news media samples. I sought to address the key research question – Is childhood in crisis? – by exploring two other questions: 1) How is childhood constructed? 2) Why is childhood constructed in the way that it is? Central to answering these questions within a (predominantly) case study approach were the concerns of children and parents about the condition of contemporary childhood. Additionally, this study sought to explore the construction of childhood at the macro level by means of literature review of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the Children Act 1989 – these provide a blueprint for childhood in the UK.

The complexity and diversity of the children's and parents' concerns about the condition of contemporary childhood make it difficult to draw firm conclusions for this study. However, my findings suggest that for the children and parents in this study the notion of 'childhood in crisis' is a myth as its emphasis on the singular childhood is problematic. The reality I found is that 'crisis' often had different, multiple, interpretations for individuals, thus leading to a conclusion that a more accurate reality is that of 'childhoods in crises'. Similarities and differences existed within and between the two settings with regard to notions of 'crisis' in 'childhood'. Local contextual factors, as well as national and international ones, impinged to influence the many childhoods in the two research communities. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory draws attention to the need to study the different environments in which people behave (micro, meso, exo and macro) and the relationships between the environments. The multiple causes for concern expressed by the children and parents in this study emanated from different environments and the relationships – within and between – that constituted those environments. Bronfenbrenner's theory is valuable for considering recommendations that might arise from this study as it suggests that if we want to change behaviour we have to change environments (Cole, 1979).

The Children's Commissioner for England, appointed in March 2005, has responsibility for ensuring that children's views influence legislation, policy and practice (see page 17). In this way children are constructed as 'rich, competent and powerful'. In January 2006 the Commissioner, Al Aynsley-Green, asked how many adults have really tried to understand what it is like to be a child today (Aynsley-Green, 2006). This, I consider, is what my study sought to do. My view of the children was as dynamic beings, who were key

informants concerning their lives. The 'crisis' points for the children in this study were evidenced by the different, often multiple, ways in which they appeared to construct themselves as feeling vulnerable. Prout (2005) suggests that adults often do not listen to children's vulnerabilities. We need to not only listen more carefully to what children are telling us about the ways in which they feel vulnerable, but also to *hear* what they are telling us. Hearing their concerns is a vital first step in being able to act on their concerns. Particular *causes for concern* that some children *actively sought to bring to my attention* centred on the threat and realities of family break-up (both schools) and difficulties associated with vertically structured teacher-child relationships (Moorcroft School). The children's accounts (both schools) made the power differential between children and adults explicit. Children's lives were controlled by parents in a number of ways and adult agendas cut into childhood space and time in the form of homework, environmental planning and television viewing. Despite my efforts to reduce the power differential between the children and myself, I only belatedly recognized that I had perhaps paid insufficient attention to the concerns of Year 6 children (both schools) regarding their impending transition to secondary school (page 138 refers) and that I had, for example, perhaps failed to help Harry (see page 257). We need to reflect on how often we (adults) foreground our own interests, needs and concerns at the expense of effectively *listening* and *hearing* what children are telling us about the 'crisis' points in their lives, as power relations often prevent us from hearing children. The UNCRC provides a blueprint for all childhoods in the UK and yet different constructions of childhood appeared to be in place at the two schools: the clearly marked adult-child boundary I observed at Moorcroft School emphasized the 'otherness' of children – it did not, I feel, reflect the notion of equality and respect for children and childhood that is inherent in the UNCRC. In contrast, the adult-child relationship I observed at Howland School did, I feel, reflect the notion of equality and respect in the UNCRC, and here the possibility appeared to exist for forging more rewarding adult-child relationships. Are schools in socially disadvantaged areas perhaps more likely to mirror the notion of equality and respect for children and childhood that characterizes the UNCRC? More guidance/training about the UNCRC may help to improve adult-child relationships in some settings.

Particular *causes for concern* for the parents involved in this study centred on the 'outdoor child': whilst parents at both schools had a high level of concern regarding the intensity of traffic, their greatest concern, by far, centred on the issue of paedophiles/'stranger danger'.

However, whilst fears at Moorcroft School seemed more likely to be perceived, at Howland School they appeared to be real for some: Howland children and parents lived in an area in which they saw and heard of 'bad' things happening. It is this issue which revealed a noticeable difference in the parents' (and children's) accounts between the contrasting socio-economic settings and which may help explain (along with financial issues – pages 202-3 refer) Howland parents' higher level of agreement with the notion of 'childhood in crisis' (Table 6.2, page 170 refers). Thus the fears of Howland parents (and children) on this issue appeared to be linked to the socially disadvantaged area in which they lived. However, whether parents' concerns were perceived, or real, the fact remains that they seemed to have had a negative effect on childhood in that they had reduced some children's opportunities for independent outdoor freedom. I return to this point later. Whilst parents in this study valued the role that children's rights – as enshrined in the UNCRC and the Children Act 1989 – have played in helping to protect children from abuse, concern was expressed at the way rights might be used as a weapon by children – the 'you can't touch me notion'. It is possible that this has had a negative impact on adult-child relationships as some parents expressed anxiety about physical contact with other people's children, for fear that it could be misconstrued as sexual (see also page 248 regarding news media reporting of paedophiles/'stranger danger'). Children and adults perhaps need clearer guidance as to what children's rights are for. Alongside this there may be a need for 'touch' policies to provide clear guidance for all adults working with children (see pages 185-7). This, however, needs to be situated within a wider debate about the type of behaviour that could lead to mutually rewarding adult-child relationships in UK society generally. Although this study focused on childhood up to the age of 12 years, it is important to note that the majority of parents expressed more concern about children aged 13-17 years (pages 174-5 refer). Thus the notion of 'childhood in crisis' appeared to have greater salience for children older than those in this study.

Whilst this study has highlighted similarities and differences between the two schools with regard to the different childhoods and crises the children seemed to be experiencing, it also sought to address Qvortrup's (2000) concern that the emphasis on context within a social constructionist approach means that little can be said about childhood in general. Foucault's (1980) work on power and power relations was useful in this study for illuminating the *dominant* construction(s) of childhood in each research context, and thus the regime of 'truth' from each perspective. These emerged from my study:

- at the micro level (children) childhood was constructed as ‘a privileged time of life’;
- at the micro level (parents) childhood was constructed as a time in which children are perceived to be ‘in danger’;
- at the exo level (news media) childhood was constructed by the national news media and the local radio news as a time in which children are ‘victims’ and by both the national and local news media as ‘seen but rarely heard’;
- at the macro level (UNCRC and the Children Act 1989) childhood is constructed as a time in which children are ‘rich, competent and powerful’ and ‘weak, poor and needy’.

Whilst the children at the two schools lived in contrasting socio-economic areas, they held similar views with regard to the regime of ‘truth’ about childhood. Their dominant construction of childhood as ‘a privileged time of life’ – in which they lived, played, had fun and had few responsibilities – went some way towards providing a level of congruence with the vision of the ‘good’ childhood conveyed in the UNCRC (see page 16) but did not concur with the dominant construction in the parents’ accounts or the news media samples. The children’s dominant construction does not support a notion of ‘childhood in crisis’. Whilst the parents at the two schools lived in contrasting socio-economic areas, they also held similar views with regard to the regime of ‘truth’ about childhood. However, whilst their dominant construction of children ‘in danger’ provided a level of congruence with the construction of children as ‘victims’ in the news media and with that of ‘weak, poor and needy’ in the UNCRC and the Children Act 1989, it did not match the children’s dominant construction. The parents’ dominant construction does, however, support a notion of ‘childhood in crisis’. The dominant constructions of childhood in the news media – as ‘victims’ and as ‘seen but rarely heard’ – provided a level of congruence with the parents’ dominant construction and with the construction of ‘weak, poor and needy’ at the macro level, but did not match the children’s dominant construction or that of children’s participatory rights – and thus as ‘rich, competent and powerful’ – at the macro level. The dominant constructions within the news media lend support to a notion of ‘childhood in crisis’. Whilst the UNCRC and the Children Act 1989 do provide a positive construction of children, they also construct children as victims – as ‘weak, poor and needy’ – in that they address crisis in children’s lives. The UNCRC and the Children Act 1989 thus lend some support to a notion of ‘childhood in crisis’. The fact that adults largely view children as ‘victims of their circumstances’ might be considered to represent a crisis that is both a reality and a cause for concern, as this was not how the children primarily constructed



themselves. Although the children were aware of difficulties and anxieties – the ‘crises’ – in their lives, their dominant construction of childhood was that it is ‘a privileged time of life’. The findings thus suggest that the children were active, engaged and had considerable social agency to contest, negate and resist notions of victimhood. We should ask questions as to ‘*Why, as a society, do we in Britain choose mainly to talk about and portray children in such predominantly negative ways?*’ (Moss and Petrie, 2002: 56).

A construction of children as ‘victims of their circumstances’ was very noticeable in the national news media samples as well as the local radio news sample. This construction was also evident in the parents’ accounts and at the macro level (UNCRC and the Children Act 1989). Taken as a whole the news media sample revealed a ‘crisis of representation’ about childhood: it did not match the dominant construction of the children involved in this study; it did not match the participatory rights of children as enshrined in the UNCRC and the Children Act 1989; and the extensive coverage given to the reporting of the abduction and murder of 10-year-old Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman, and other related stories, did not match the reality that children are at greater risk of abuse and death within the family home (see, for example, Kitzinger and Skidmore, 1995). A starting point for this study was the murder of 2-year-old James Bulger by two 10-year-old boys in 1993. This event was considered to be the catalyst in sparking the notion of ‘childhood in crisis’ (Scruton, 1997a). Children were considered to be out of control and the press extended the ‘evil’ character of the two boys to embrace all children and childhood in general (Franklin and Petley, 1996). In contrast, Franklin and Petley (1996) show how Norwegian newspapers reacted very differently to a similar case in Trondheim in 1994, which involved the killing of a 5-year-old girl by young children: compassion was expressed for all the children and families concerned; attempts were made to understand the cause of the tragedy to help prevent such an incident recurring; and the incident was portrayed as an accident rather than a murder. Thus news organizations within Norway appear to operate within a different set of news values to those in the UK (see pages 214-5). Although the local news media in my study (apart from local radio news) provided a *more* positive construction of children than the national news media, it appears that news values in the UK mean that the news media add to the sense of ‘crisis’ in ‘childhood’. Perhaps the national news media have done a good job though in drawing attention to the difficulties some children (and therefore potentially all children) face in their lives, thus revealing that childhood is not always a happy, harmonious time, but has difficulties and anxieties, just like adulthood. However,



the fact that the news media in my study largely constructed children as ‘victims of their circumstances’ is cause for concern and is not conducive to the ‘good’ childhood. If, as Critcher (2002) states, the news media play a central role in constructing the public agenda and in trying to influence policy, then clearly they hold considerable power. That power could be mobilized to take a lead in helping to change perceptions about children and childhood. National news media could consider what lessons might be learnt from some local news media regarding the way in which they seem able to provide constructions of children that are more positive. The construction of children in the news media as ‘victims of their circumstances’ needs to be viewed alongside the other dominant construction of ‘seen but rarely heard’ (national and local news media). What might our vision of childhood look like in the UK if instead of constructing children as ‘victims of their circumstances’ the news media construct children as ‘authors of their lives’?<sup>1</sup>

The notion of ‘childhood in crisis’ speaks to adults’ fears and desires about childhood as well as to an idealized nostalgia for their own childhoods (Buckingham, 2000) – the ‘things were better in our day’ notion. Independent outdoor freedom was a freedom that many parents in this study particularly valued with regard to their own idealized childhoods. Additionally, it was a freedom desired by many of the children, who wished also to be more active. It appears that independent outdoor freedom is part of the government’s vision for childhood: a government-backed plan for the building of new suburban housing estates incorporates obstacles to restrict cars to travelling at 10mph to enable parents to feel confident in allowing their children to play in the street without worrying about traffic (Pearman, 2005). Indeed, an accompanying picture to this article shows two young children playing without adult supervision. However, what this government-backed plan fails to recognize is that, whether real or perceived, parents’ *greatest* fear for children centres on the issue of paedophiles/‘stranger danger’ – this finding in my study supports that of, for example, ‘Kidscape’ (1993, cited in Moran *et al.*, 1997), McNeish and Roberts (1995), Valentine (1996) and Dixey (1999). Findings from my study revealed that news media reporting of paedophiles/‘stranger danger’ (see also page 245 regarding the UNCRC and the Children Act 1989) might have produced negative consequences for interpersonal relationships (between adults and other people’s children and between adults and other adults) and for some children’s independent outdoor freedom. An issue that needs to be considered by the government, therefore, is the extent to

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<sup>1</sup> My use of ‘victims of their circumstances’ and ‘authors of their lives’ has been adapted from Furedi (2002).

which news media coverage (national and local) of paedophiles/‘stranger danger’ – particularly the abduction and murder of children – fails to reflect the reality that children are at greater risk of abuse and death within the family home (see Scott *et al.*, 1998), and instead seems to amplify the fears of children and parents. This is an important issue for it appears to have *contributed* to creating a climate in which parents are afraid to let children play out on their own and, further, some children are themselves afraid. The government could take a lead in exerting some control over news media reporting on paedophiles/‘stranger danger’ issues. The government-backed plan for new housing developments tells us about plans for future communities, but what of present communities? The socially disadvantaged area in which Howland children lived appeared to be ‘dangerous’ and lacking in safe areas in which they could play. The more affluent area in which Moorcroft children lived was undergoing rapid housing development and current house-building initiatives appeared to be having a further negative impact on some children’s opportunities for independent outdoor freedom. Government responses thus need to address the present as well as the future.

‘Childhood in crisis’ is an emotion-invoking notion, and is one that challenged my own experience of childhood. Its weakness is that it inadequately represents the diversity and complexity of crises in children’s lives. Its strength, however, is that it hints at a problem that needs to be solved and it thus has the potential to help change children’s lives for the better. Perhaps the problem cannot be solved, only understood better through the asking of further questions. However, how we as a society respond to the challenge of ‘childhood in crisis’ will depend on the vision of the ‘good’ childhood that we adopt and how we, collectively (adults and children), work together towards achieving our goal.

### **POSSIBLE RECOMMENDATIONS**

Whilst participation in this study was limited to children and parents within two school communities in southeast England, and cannot therefore be generalized, the findings from the news media represent a national picture. Bassey (1999) has argued that providing others with the opportunity to identify with findings from case studies and the accumulation of results from case studies undertaken in different contexts can be a fruitful way for small-scale studies to be ‘generalized’. A number of recommendations, embedded in the previous section, emerge from this study. In seeking to address the issue of

'childhood in crisis', and thus strive to achieve the 'good' childhood in the UK, I offer the following recommendations for consideration:

- Adults need to *listen* and *hear* what children are telling them about 'crisis' points in their lives. Careful listening and hearing are essential if we are to act effectively on children's concerns.
- For some adults working with children a greater understanding (through guidance/training) of the notion of equality and respect for children that is inherent in the UNCRC may help to diffuse adult-child power relations that, in turn, will hopefully lead to more rewarding adult-child relationships.
- A greater awareness and understanding of children's rights – as enshrined in the UNCRC and the Children Act 1989<sup>2</sup> – is required by children and adults so that they are clear about what they are for.
- 'Touch' policies should exist to provide those working with children – in a paid or voluntary capacity – with clear guidance concerning what is deemed to be 'appropriate' physical contact. This issue, however, needs to be situated within a wider debate about the type of interpersonal behaviour that will lead to mutually rewarding adult-child relationships in UK society generally.
- A radical rethinking of news values is required so that news a) reflects how children primarily construct childhood themselves<sup>3</sup> and b) respects children's participatory rights. This would provide a positive image of children that could alter public perceptions of children as well as influencing policy. National news media could see what lessons might be learnt from local news media.
- The government needs to acknowledge and address the fears of parents and children about paedophiles/'stranger danger'. The government could take a lead in exerting some control over news media reporting on this issue as it may be damaging for interpersonal relationships and for some children's independent outdoor freedom. Dangers should be reported, but there needs to be more clarification of statistics relating to risk. Dangers should be reported in a way that reflects the scale of risk.
- Government responses to 'childhood in crisis' need to address the present as well as the future.

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<sup>2</sup> A new Children Act came into effect in 2004.

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted, however, that the dominant construction of childhood by the children in this study – as 'a privileged time of life' – might not be applicable to all children in the UK.

## EVALUATION OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Griffiths (1998: 142) reminds us that '*reflexivity is based on the view that perfection is never possible, although improvement always is*'. In this section I seek to identify what I consider to have been the particular strengths in my process of 'finding out', as well as some areas that, on reflection, would benefit from improvement.

### *The conceptual framework*

#### *Social constructionist approach*

The dominant influence of developmental psychology on the study of childhood for much of the twentieth century has meant that children's perspectives have often been missing in much previous research on childhood. The notion of 'childhood in crisis', along with suggestions of, for example, the 'disappearance of childhood', has tended to be explored solely from an adult perspective. A necessary starting point for this study was to find a theoretical approach that would facilitate the inclusion of children's perspectives – this I considered to be an ethical necessity due to children's rights to participation in issues concerning their lives. My study was thus strongly influenced by the 'emergent paradigm' (James and Prout, 1990) for the study of childhood. A social constructionist approach lies at the heart of the new paradigm. Within this the construction of children as 'beings' provided the appropriate theoretical means for including children in my study. My commitment to accessing, listening to and hearing children's views – enabled by a social constructionist approach – is, I consider, a significant strength of this study. It offers a more complete and accurate account of childhood as it is based on the constructions of those directly experiencing childhood themselves, rather than relying solely on adult knowledge and assumptions. Using a social constructionist approach requires a view of children as experts on their lives. This is not something that can simply be stated, as it is a way of thinking that needs to be believed in and worked at. I am hopeful that my belief in this approach shines through and adds strength to the thesis. In essence, this is to do with respect for children and childhood. It is the inclusion of children's knowledge, about their complete childhood experience, which marks this study's particular uniqueness. I acknowledge, however, that the better we (adults) become at listening to children the more we intrude on their space (Clark *et al.*, 2003).

Prout has continued to develop theory with regard to the study of childhood and in 2005, several years after my fieldwork had been completed, produced a new text (see Prout,

2005). Within this, Prout argues that the new paradigm has perhaps run the course of its possibilities as it is at risk of becoming merely a reverse discourse: *'It turns biological reductionism on its head and replaces it with sociological reductionism'* (Prout, 2005: 63-4). Prout views this as problematic as it has produced a dichotomy between children as 'becomings' and children as 'beings', between 'nature' and 'culture'. This opposition, Prout states, has often been rigidly insisted upon to the point that they deny the possibility of considering children as both 'becomings' and 'beings'. Prout therefore argues for an approach that will keep the boundary between nature and culture open, one that permits the inclusion of the excluded middle ground. Such an approach, Prout argues, requires an interdisciplinary approach, the resources for which might be found in actor-network theory, complexity theory and life-course analysis.

Whilst I support Prout's quest to develop theory for the study of childhood, I consider that my academic background, as an Early Childhood Studies graduate, brought a certain strength to this study. The holistic philosophy of my degree, which requires a multi-disciplinary approach in order to make sense of the diverse factors impacting on children's lives, meant that I came to this study with a relatively open mind. Consequently, whilst acknowledging that social constructionism would provide the main approach for this study, I argued that I would not let it dominate it so that I could discover how participants constructed childhood themselves. My analysis therefore sought to keep boundaries open by illuminating constructions of past, present and future, as well as of 'beings' and 'becomings'. I would be interested to see how other Early Childhood Studies graduates have undertaken postgraduate research. I acknowledge, however, that this study did not include the excluded middle ground that Prout (2005) now seeks to address. This study could therefore be improved by taking on board Prout's new ideas for the study of childhood.

#### Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory

The, predominantly, social constructionist approach used for this study recognizes the influence of social contexts on children's lives. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory was therefore adopted and adapted to provide a framework for building different social contexts (environments) into the research design. This provided a useful structure for exploring the construction of childhood in different levels of social activity, for considering interaction between the various levels, and also the level of congruence and

divergence between different levels. Although Bronfenbrenner's theory was helpful for thinking about environments and relationships, I support Prout's (2005: 81) view that the theory may be weak at managing flows and mobilities as the different levels of social activity seem to be viewed '*as different containers within which children are held*'. Having said this, I consider that the relatively static diagrammatical representations of Bronfenbrenner's theory (see, for example, Boushel *et al.*, 2000) as a series of concentric rings may actually serve to hinder the visualization of the more dynamic process that Bronfenbrenner himself visualizes. Interestingly, Bronfenbrenner has never attempted to present his theory diagrammatically – which is why I have not done so myself. Thinking about the chronosystem within Bronfenbrenner's theory (see, for example, page 163) did, however, shed some light on the way in which childhood is constantly in flux.

### ***Holistic approach***

The strength of the holistic approach was that it enabled me to build a more inclusive account of the construction of childhood from several different perspectives (children, parents and news media). This approach sometimes enabled me to see the way in which many factors interrelated (see, in particular, 'Judy: a vignette', pages 143-4). This revealed the complexity of childhood, an aspect that might not have emerged if a narrower approach had been taken. However, at times I felt that my commitment to a holistic approach meant that I was attempting to deal with very complex issues. The holistic approach adds to the uniqueness of my thesis.

### ***Case study approach***

I consider the case study approach to have been a strength of this study in that it has enabled me to 'dig deep' in a number of areas in order to develop my understanding of 'the case'. Whilst undertaking the case study at one school (such as those by Ball, 1981, and Black-Hawkins, 2002) would have enabled me to explore the construction of childhood in a different way – perhaps with greater emphasis on teachers' constructions rather than on parents' views and aspects of the community which impinged on the children – the inclusion of two schools provided the opportunity for more dynamic possibilities in interpretation.



### *'Friend role'*

In deciding on the membership role that I would employ with the children for the process of 'finding out', I consider the 'friend role' that I adopted (pages 82-5 refer) to have been a strength of this research in that it helped to *reduce* the power differential between the children and myself. However, although this was valuable for helping to build the trust that was important for enabling the children to share their thoughts with me, it did not mean the children necessarily shared everything about their lives (see page 164). My level of access to this role (see Davis, 1998) was affected by gatekeeper control as well as the different cultural script in place at Howland and Moorcroft Schools<sup>4</sup> (pages 124-8 refer) and, consequently, the 'friend role' developed differently at the two schools. Thus, whilst research design enables a researcher to set out the broad structure for their research, it cannot necessarily allow for what happens when the researcher enters the field (Brewer, 2000).

However, at both schools I found that the non-authoritarian and non-disciplinarian stance of my 'friend role' was not always easy to maintain. The fact remains that I am an adult and there were several occasions when I stepped outside the 'friend role' and revealed an authoritarian stance. As researchers we therefore need to continue to reflect on such issues in order to consider: a) how this might affect the research and b) future research roles with children.

It is important to note that even at Howland School my membership role was also openly challenged. Patrick was not one of my research participants (see page 107 for discussion regarding ethics). Although I had been welcomed into the whole school setting by the headteacher, the fact remains that Patrick, and some of his friends, appeared to resent adult intrusion in their space (Punch, 2002). Their comments reveal important lessons for researchers seeking to gain entry to children's worlds. The fact that to Patrick and his friends I often remained an 'outsider' appears to confirm Holmes's (1998: 19) view that *'Adult researchers are never fully accepted into children's cultures because they can never relinquish their adult status'*. I am therefore doubtful about Mandell's (1991: 40) claim that any differences between adults and children can be cast aside to the point that they are

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<sup>4</sup> My first experiences at Howland and Moorcroft (pages 81-2 refer) appear, on reflection, to have been early indicators of a different ethos at the two schools.

*'inconsequential in interaction'*. Despite this, I found the school cultures and cultural script at the two schools impacted on my level of success in adopting the 'friend role'.

The Year 5 Howland children participating in the second research conference presentation (page 102 refers) had been asked to record beforehand whether they had viewed me as: a) an adult; b) as an adult pretending to be a child; c) as a friend; or d) as a helper. I only came to know of the children's thoughts during the presentation itself. All four children chose to describe me as a friend, citing reasons such as: *'because we could tell her anything and she was a lot of fun to have'* (Karen); *'because Jane understood our problems'*<sup>5</sup>. Also, *she told us secrets as we told her'* (Rosanna); *'because she is fun and always happy'* (Damian); and *'because she isn't bossy like an adult'* (Scott). Further, two of the children also used the word *'trust'* to describe our relationship and made further reference to the word *'fun'*. All these statements connect very firmly with the identity I had sought within the 'friend role'. Although it is possible that the children may have responded in a way they thought would please me (see Brooker, 2001), I had strived to build a relationship (with all the children in this study) based on trust and this, Ennew (1994, cited in Punch, 2002) argues, is more likely to produce honest responses (with adults as well). Whilst I consider that I established good research relationships with the children at Moorcroft School, the different level of access permitted to me at Howland School enabled me to develop the 'friend role' in the desired way. It was for this reason that I came to spend more time at Howland School than I did at Moorcroft School. The outcome of this different level of access was, I consider, the development of mutually rewarding adult-child relationships.

The abduction and murder of Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman (see pages 216-20) in the month after my fieldwork came to a close caused me to seriously question the 'friend role' that I had sought with the children at the two schools. Two 'trusted' adults were thought to be involved in the murders and I began to consider what implications this might hold for researchers seeking to gain access to children. I wondered to what extent the *'drip, drip'* effect of news media reporting (see page 177) might have added to parents' fears for children's safety. If I had sought to gain access to children would parents have been so willing to grant access to someone seeking to be their child's 'friend'?

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<sup>5</sup> Here, Rosanna appears to identify a benefit of the research to herself.

### *Research methods with children and parents*

I consider that the variety of methods used with the children was a strength of this study. Using a range of methods opened up the possibilities for interpretation rather than relying on evidence from one method. The variety of methods provided the opportunity for children to use linguistic, drawing and literacy skills. Limiting the study to one method might have restricted some children's ability to participate. For example, whilst some children chose to say little within group discussions, they did express their views in the questionnaire. This highlights the usefulness of the questionnaire as a method despite my initial concern about its test-like nature (page 92 refers). However, on reflection, I can see that the questionnaire contradicts my 'friend role'. Through the 'friend role' I sought to minimize the adult-child power differential, and yet it is adults who test children. The projective focus group (poster design and discussion) was an innovative method. Whilst I was concerned that supplying the children with catalogues to use for their poster design (see page 95) might lead to an over-emphasis on consumer items – particularly technology – they were also used to express feelings about, for example, pets, boyfriends, bedrooms and school uniform, as well as differences between boys and girls. In this way I consider the poster activity to have been extremely useful for teasing out issues I might not have thought of myself. After my fieldwork came to an end, my knowledge and understanding of participatory research continued to develop and I now have reservations concerning the fact that I did not recognize the children's ownership of the questionnaires and return them, or photocopies, to the children. In addition, the posters they produced were taken away; it would have been preferable to see if these could have been displayed in the classrooms, where I could have made notes and taken photographs of them. Additionally, I consider that this study could have been improved by passing over *more* of the agenda to the children.

Whilst two methods were used with the parents (questionnaires and interviews), only those parents who had completed the questionnaire had the opportunity to take part in an interview. Although the questionnaires achieved a good response rate (page 94 refers) it could be that weak literacy skills contributed to the non-response rate. These parents *may* have preferred to take part in an interview. Showing sensitivity to parents in this way would have been more respectful. This study could therefore have been improved by finding ways to make the research *more* inclusive for parents by offering choices about participation.

### *Ethical considerations*

Ethical considerations are of paramount importance in any research project. Many of the issues raised so far in my evaluation should be viewed as ethical issues in that they often relate to issues of respect, behaviour and attitudes. I consider that my *consideration* of ethical issues in Chapter Four is a strength of this study. However, I acknowledge that statements of ethical principles do not necessarily guarantee ethical practice and ongoing reflexivity is therefore required (see Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). My ongoing reflection has revealed some weaknesses. Whilst the ‘friend role’ was an important ethical choice in terms of helping to reduce the power differential between the children and myself, this perhaps led to complacency on my part: an assumption that I had perhaps, after a while, become their ‘friend’, meant that I was not as thorough as I feel I should have been in seeking children’s *ongoing* consent to take part in the research activities. In addition, whilst my discussion of some ethical concerns that arose during the fieldwork (see, for example, page 133) is a strength of this study, I acknowledge that on some occasions I may have failed to fulfil ethical responsibilities. For example, my failure to follow up on Harry’s concern about his teacher’s behaviour towards him (page 125 refers) – taking no action to protect him from harm – raises the question of whether I was colluding with adult power<sup>6</sup>. If this is so, my desired ‘friend role’ needs to be questioned: my failure to help Harry suggests that he was perhaps unlikely to have viewed me as a ‘friend’. However, my openness in raising my weaknesses is a strength of this study as it prompts myself, and others, to continue to reflect on how future research with children might be improved.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

Within this section I make some recommendations for further research that would contribute to the development of the thesis. Three suggestions are made for further research that would help to develop the case study of this thesis. A further two suggestions are made for research beyond the case study, thus enabling the thesis to extend to children in other contexts.

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<sup>6</sup> It should be remembered, however, that Harry did appear to benefit from talking through his ‘troubles’ (pages 118-9 refer).

### ***Extending the case study within Howland and Moorcroft***

#### *a) Include interviews with class teachers and journalists*

Teachers were implicated in my case study but were not directly a part of it. Interviews with the teachers of children involved in the research would enable me to explore their own constructions of childhood, thus adding to my overall understanding of the construction of contemporary childhood. Journalists' individual viewpoints were, in a sense, a missing voice within this study. Interviews with journalists – many of whom may be parents – would enable me to explore more deeply their personal constructions of childhood alongside the reporting requirements of their profession.

#### *b) Extend the case study to include the home environment*

School is but one setting in which children's lives are lived out. Extending the case study to include the child's home environment would add to my understanding of children's constructions of childhood. Issues that are important to children within the school context may be different to issues that are important to children within the home context.

#### *c) Policy research*

Undertaking policy research – of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Children Act 1989 (or 2004) – would enable me to gain a deeper understanding of the construction of childhood at the macro level.

### ***Extending the case study beyond Howland and Moorcroft***

#### *a) Include older children and their parents*

A significant finding in this study was that most parents were more concerned about children in the 13-17 years age group. Extending the case study to children in this age group would enable me to explore further parents' specific concerns, as well as those of children's, at a different point in children's lives. This would extend my understanding of the notion of 'childhood in crisis' and would also permit me to explore the ways in which the concerns of children in this age group are similar, or different, to those of parents.

#### *b) Explore different childhoods*

This study was carried out within two predominantly White British junior schools in southeast England. Additionally, these schools did not have high numbers of children with special educational needs. This research could therefore be extended by undertaking a

comparative study with a school that has a high percentage of ethnic minority pupils or a specialist school catering for children with special needs. This would enable me to consider how ethnicity and disability influence constructions of childhood. Additionally, extending the study to children, parents, news media and legislation in a different country would enable me to examine constructions of childhood in another country and to consider how this compares with constructions of childhood in the UK.

### FINAL REFLECTIONS

*'I imagine it's like painting a picture; the more you add, the more interesting it becomes, but it has to stop at some point and be declared 'finished''* (personal communication – Michelle Reynolds, October 2005).

I received the above comment from an Early Childhood Studies undergraduate student. In it Michelle describes her feelings as she is about to embark on the research project that forms part of the coursework in the final year of her degree. Michelle's comment served as a reminder to myself that I needed to stop adding to my picture, to stop applying finishing touches, in order that I could reach a point at which the thesis could be declared 'finished'. Writing a thesis is a hard task. Perhaps the hardest part is actually letting go, as my emotional engagement with the study, particularly with the people involved in it, make this extremely difficult. Writing this thesis has given some semblance of the order of my research. However, what this order fails to recognize is the disorder – the 'crisis' – that was occurring in my personal life at the time of my fieldwork and beyond. What I feel is important to discuss is the issue of when is research just that – research – and when is it therapy? This blurring of the lines between research and therapy (see, for example, Jones and Tannock, 2000) is often talked about in terms of research participants, but the research may also be therapeutic for the researcher. The personal difficulties that I was experiencing at the time meant that there were a number of occasions when I did not wish to go into Howland or Moorcroft School. However, once there the children always lifted my spirits and I would return home reenergized. I consider that the children at both schools played an important part in helping me to come through a difficult time, for they provided an anchor in my life when other aspects were crumbling. Although my fieldwork at the two schools came to an end in July 2002 I often still think about the time I spent with the children. In drawing this thesis to a close I choose to quote from Fine and Sandstrom (1988: 76-7):



*'What better way in which to spend a second childhood than to spend it with those similar to those with whom one spent the first. While children are constructing their own worlds, they sometimes permit us to stand with them to enjoy the monuments that they have made'.*

A fitting tribute indeed, for I feel very privileged to have co-experienced the worlds of so many children during the course of my fieldwork. For myself it was, quite simply, one of the most enriching experiences of my life.

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## Appendix 1: Letter to schools requesting their participation in the research

26<sup>th</sup> October 2001

Home address

Tel no

Email address

Dear Mr/Mrs/Ms/Miss

Following on from a degree in Early Childhood Studies at Canterbury Christ Church University College, I am now undertaking an MPhil/PhD in which I am exploring contemporary childhood. I am seeking to undertake some fieldwork with a class of Year 5 children and also a class of Year 6 children, and would be very grateful if you would give this your consideration. The research will involve the following aspects:

1. Spending a number of afternoons helping/participating in each class in order to establish a good relationship with the children.
2. Questionnaire to be completed by the children at school – time required, approximately 25-40 minutes.
3. Designing a poster about childhood (in groups of 3-5) – time required, one hour maximum.
4. Poster discussion (in groups) – time required, approximately 35-45 minutes per group.
5. Interviews in small groups (2s, 3s or 4s) – time required, approximately 35-45 minutes per interview.
6. Spending the occasional afternoon in the class while the research is underway in order to maintain a good relationship with the children.
7. Questionnaire for parents of both classes.
8. Interviews with a small number of parents – to take place in school if possible.
9. I would also like to try and involve a few of the children in a presentation of the research.

In order to give you a flavour of what the fieldwork with the children will entail, I have enclosed copies of three documents produced for the pilot of my research during May-July 2001: A) a leaflet that I designed for the children to give them some information about the research B) the questionnaire that the children were asked to complete C) feedback that I gave to all the children.

Research on childhood has, in the past, tended to focus on an adult perspective, but my proposed research offers children the opportunity to add their unique understanding and insight. I do appreciate that involvement in this research would represent an additional burden for the school. Additional work for the class teachers would involve handing out and collecting in information, issuing verbal reminders and help with class organization. Parental permission would need to be sought, either by myself or through the school office, and it is therefore unlikely that the whole class would be involved in the research. At the school where I piloted my research (in which 19 out of a class of 32 took part) I found that flexibility was required both by the class teacher and myself. However, the most rewarding



aspect of the pilot was, by far, the children's enthusiasm for the research. In seeking to give some of my time in return to the school I would be happy to either be involved with an after-school club (preferably of a sporting variety) or to offer some help, where needed, with another class.

I am seeking to commence the fieldwork with the Year 5 class in mid-February 2002 and with the Year 6 class after SATs in May 2002. You have my assurance that confidentiality would be maintained throughout the research process: neither the name of the school or of any individuals would be made public. I would be very grateful if you would complete the reply slip below and return it to me using the stamped addressed envelope provided by Friday 9<sup>th</sup> November. I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

Jane Cox (Mrs) BA

✂-----

**Howland School**

**Please tick appropriate box**

- Please telephone the school office. I would like to talk to you further about this research
- Sorry, we are unable to be involved in your research at this time

**Signed:**

**Print name:**

## Appendix 2: Letter of introduction to schools from research supervisor



Canterbury Christ Church  
University College

25th October 2001

Dear Mr/Mrs/Ms/Miss

**Ref: Research fieldwork in primary schools**

I am writing to introduce my higher degree research student, Mrs Jane Cox, to you, in the hope that you might be willing to support Jane's request to undertake part of her fieldwork at your school.

Mrs Cox has enclosed a variety of documentation about her project, so that you, your staff and governors can take an informed decision concerning the school's potential involvement. She would be happy to come to the school to talk through the processes of the research and, being a parent herself, Jane is especially aware of the ethical aspects of the work, such as the need for parents' and children's agreement to participate.

With very best wishes,

Yours sincerely,

Tricia David BSc, MA, PhD, PGCE, FRSA

Professor Emeritus in Education

Centre for Research in Education  
Faculty of Education  
Canterbury Christ Church University College Canterbury Kent CT1 1QU

### Appendix 3: Letter seeking parental permission

30<sup>th</sup> January 2002

Centre for Educational Research  
Canterbury Christ Church University College  
North Holmes Road  
Canterbury  
Kent  
CT1 1QU

Dear Parent,

I am writing to ask for your help with a research study. Following on from a degree in Early Childhood Studies I am now undertaking a research degree in which I am exploring contemporary childhood. Research on childhood has, in the past, often tended to rely solely on an adult perspective, but this research gives children the opportunity to add their unique insight and understanding to the topic. Mr .... has very kindly agreed to allow me to undertake some research activities at the school and your child's class teacher, Miss ....., is happy to cooperate with the research. I would really like your child to be involved in the research and I am therefore seeking your permission. There are several activities that your child will be asked to participate in:

- 1) Individual completion of a questionnaire.
- 2) Working within a small group to design a poster about childhood.
- 3) Group discussion of poster.
- 4) Group interviews – to follow up on issues and topics raised in the questionnaire and poster activities.

The aim of the research activities is to build up a picture of how children view childhood today. Prior to undertaking the activities I will be spending some time helping/participating with the class in order for the children and myself to familiarize ourselves with each other. Before each research activity commences I will naturally check that the children themselves are happy and agree to participate. The research has been piloted (tried out) with a class of children at another school in ..... and I can honestly say that the children really enjoyed the experience. I would like to assure you that the children's responses will be confidential and that anonymity (both of the children and of the school) will be preserved in the writing-up phase. I do hope that you will allow your child to participate in this research and would be very grateful if you would complete the tear-off slip below and **return it to your child's teacher, in the envelope provided, by Thursday 7<sup>th</sup> February.**

Another dimension to the research will be a questionnaire for parents in order to obtain their perspective on childhood. It is anticipated that this will be sent out in early March. I do hope that you will be happy to complete it. The questionnaire will also offer you the opportunity to apply for some feedback about the research.

Many thanks  
Yours sincerely

Jane Cox  
Research student – Canterbury Christ Church University College.

✂-----

**For the attention of Jane Cox  
RE: CHILDHOOD RESEARCH**

**Child's name:**

- I am willing for my child to take part  
 Sorry, I do not want my child to take part
- Please tick as appropriate

**Signed:**

**Print name:**

**Thank you very much for your help. Please now return the slip to your child's teacher in the envelope provided.**

#### **Appendix 4: Questionnaire instructions for children (verbally reinforced)**

1. This is **not** a test! There are no right or wrong answers. It is just about what **you** think.
2. It is very important that you complete the questionnaire on your own. Do not discuss your answers with anyone else, as I need to know what each of you thinks.
3. If you don't understand something, put up your hand, and I will come and see you.
4. Answer as many of the questions as you can, but if you don't want to answer a particular question move on to the next question.
5. Your answers are confidential. If you do not want other children, or your teacher, to see what you have written, you should take steps to try and avoid this.

## Appendix 5: Children's questionnaire

Name:

### Childhood

Where you see a box put a tick in the appropriate box like this

#### Section 1

1. a) What is your most treasured possession?  
b) Why is this your most treasured possession?
2. a) What do you most enjoy doing?  
b) Why do you enjoy this?
3. a) What do you least enjoy doing?  
b) Why don't you like doing this?
4. If you were given a lot of money, say £500, what would you spend it on?
5. Finish the sentence. 'Childhood is ...
6. What is your favourite childhood memory so far?
7. a) At what age do you think childhood ends?  
b) Give a reason for your answer.

8. Tell me
- a) Some good things about being a child. Try to think of at least two reasons.
- b) Some bad things about being a child. Again, try to think of at least two reasons.

9. a) Do you think that being a child is:      fair                  unfair
- 

b) Give a reason for your answer.

10. a) Are you in a hurry to grow up?      yes                  no
- 

b) Give a reason for your answer.

11. Do you worry about anything?      yes                  no
- (go to question 12)

a) What do you worry about?

b) Why do you think you worry about this?

12. What changes do you think should be made to make the world a better place for children? Try to think of at least two reasons.

13. If you could have three wishes what would they be?

1)

2)

3)

14. a) What do you feel about the future?      looking forward to it                  worried about it
- 

b) Give a reason for your answer.



Section 2

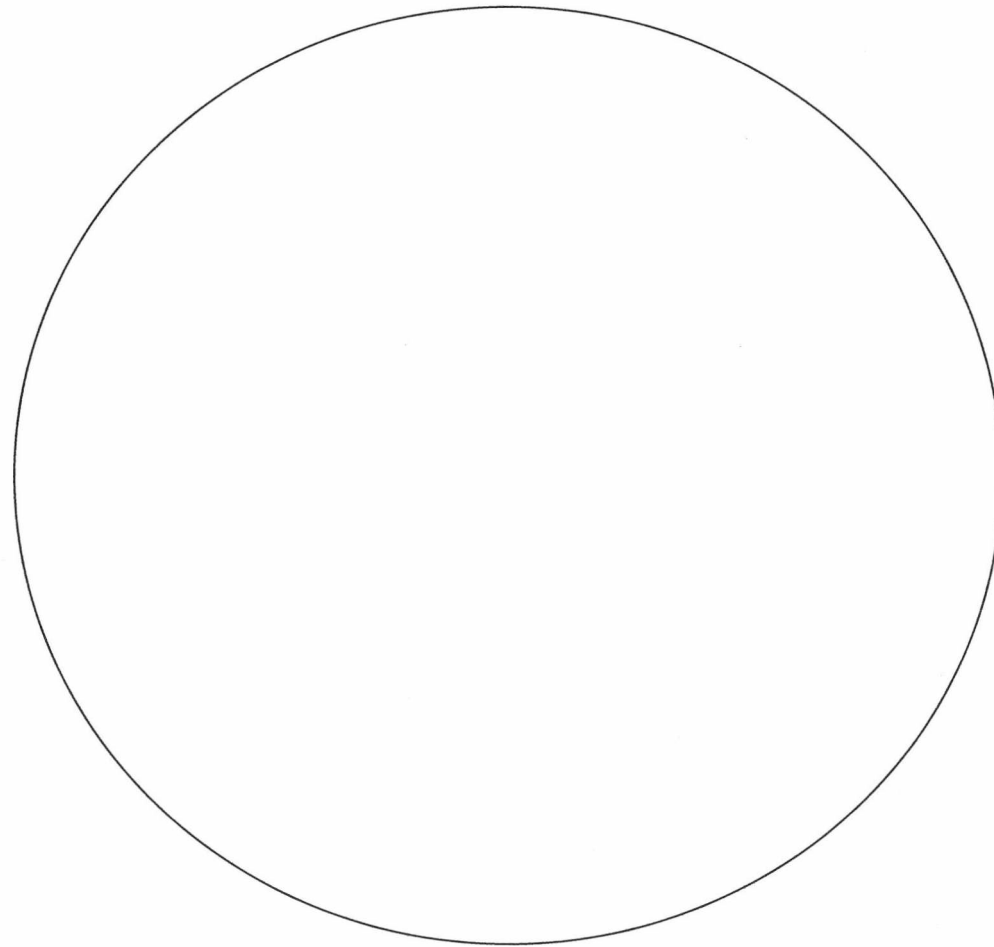


What do you feel are the differences between children and adults? Produce a spider diagram to show your differences.



What do you feel are the similarities between children and adults? Use words or pictures to show your answers.

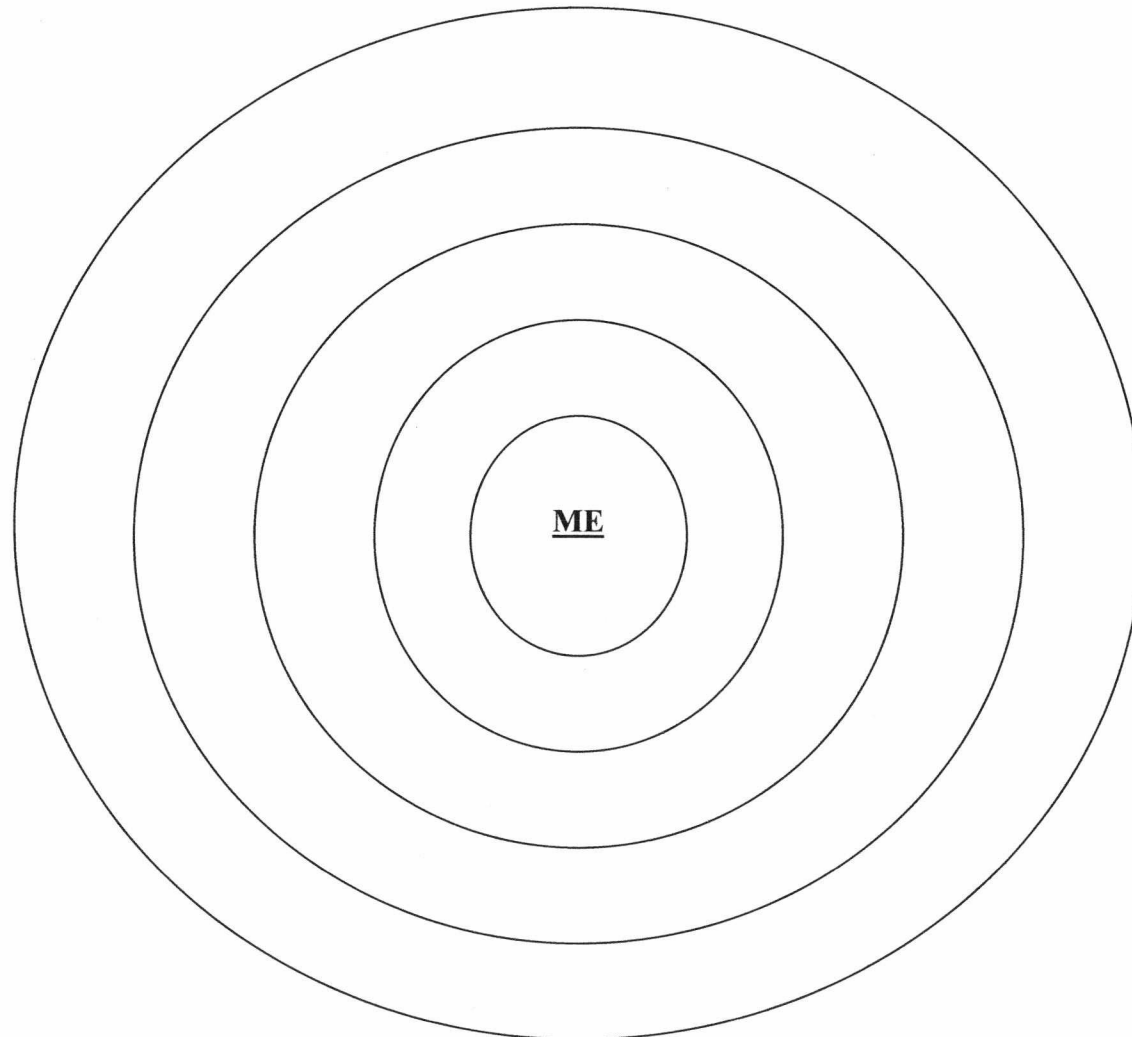
My week



How do you usually spend your time each week? Use the circle to show the amount of time you spend on different activities. **Do not** include eating, sleeping or school.

**Who and what are important to me**

The people and things that are most important should be put in the circle closest to the **ME** circle and then work outwards



## Appendix 6: Parents' questionnaire

# Childhood Questionnaire

Please answer the questions in relation to your views about childhood in the United Kingdom generally. Where you see a box put a tick in the appropriate box like this  If you mark the wrong box, fill in the box and put a tick in the right one, like this   Please use the blank sheet of paper to record any additional comments that you may wish to make.

### Section 1

1. Do you feel that childhood is different today from when you were a child?
- yes  
 no

If you have ticked the 'yes' box, in what way do you feel that it is different?

2. Has there ever been a 'Golden Age' (perfect time) for childhood?
- yes – go to 2a)  
 no – go to 2b)

a) If you have ticked the 'yes' box, where would you place the 'Golden Age'? You may tick more than one box.

pre 1950	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000+
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please give a reason for your answer.

b) If you have ticked the 'no' box please state a reason for your answer.

3. Compared to when you were a child do you feel that childhood today is:
- |                          |                          |                          |                          |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| better                   | worse                    | the same                 | unsure                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Please give a reason for your answer.

4. a) What do you most enjoy about your role as a parent?

b) What do you least enjoy about your role as a parent?

5. With regard to rights for children do you feel that today they have:

too many rights

the right balance of rights

not enough rights

unsure

Please give a reason for your answer.

6. What changes, if any, would you like to see that would make the world a better place for your child to grow up in?

7. Complete the following sentence. 'Childhood is ...

8. At what age do you feel that childhood ends? Please give a reason for your answer.

## Section 2

1. What do you feel are the differences between children and adults?

Children

Adults

2. What do you feel are the similarities between children and adults?



### Section 3

1. To what extent, *if at all*, do the following issues reflect your level of anxiety/concern about children and childhood?

0 = no anxiety/concern

7 = high level of anxiety/concern

Space has been left at the bottom of the table for you to raise any additional issues of concern to you.

	No anxiety/ concern	—————→					High level of anxiety/concern	
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
a) TV/computer/Play Station etc	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b) Consumerism and the commercialization of childhood	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c) Family break-up, new family groupings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d) Working mothers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e) Behaviour of children	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
f) Genetic engineering (e.g. fertility treatment, cloning, designer babies)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
g) Academic pressure at an ever earlier age (e.g. early entry to school, tests)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
h) Paedophiles/'stranger danger'	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
i) Intensity of traffic on the roads	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
j) Poor parenting skills	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
k) Lack of action by the Government	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
l) 'Hot-housing' – filling children's time with numerous activities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
m) Other – please state:	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
n) Other – please state:	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

2. Which two items (if any) from the list on the previous page cause you the greatest anxiety/concern? Tick as many boxes as you wish.

Item \_\_  
Does this anxiety/concern stem from

- experience (self, family member or friend)  
 newspaper reports  
 television news  
 radio news  
 other (please state)

Item \_\_  
Does this anxiety/concern stem from

- experience (self, family member or friend)  
 newspaper reports  
 television news  
 radio news  
 other (please state)

3. Which period of childhood do you feel gives you most cause for concern?

0 – 5 years

6 – 12 years

13 – 17 years

Unsure

Please give a reason for your answer.

4. How many times a week do you usually buy, or read, the following newspapers? **Place a number in the relevant boxes.** Include weekend papers. If you do not usually buy, or read, any newspapers please go to question 9.

Express

Guardian

Independent

Mail

Mirror

News of the World

Observer

Star

Sun

Telegraph

Times

Other (please state which)

5. What factors influence your choice of newspapers?

6. Do you feel that newspapers generally provide an accurate/fair account of children and childhood?

yes

no

unsure

7. Briefly describe at least one story in the newspapers (positive, negative, or both) concerning children or childhood that particularly stands out in your memory.

8. To what extent do you agree, or disagree, that newspapers influence your level of concern/anxiety about children and childhood?

strongly agree                      agree                      unsure                      disagree                      strongly disagree

Please give a reason for your answer.

9. Do you watch the news on television?

yes

no

If you have ticked the 'yes' box which news channel do you **usually** watch?

How many times a week do you **usually** watch this news channel?

10. Do you listen to the news on the radio?

yes

no

If you have ticked the 'yes' box which news station do you **usually** listen to?

How many times a week do you **usually** listen to this station?

11. To what extent do you agree, or disagree, with the following statements?

	strongly agree	agree	unsure	disagree	strongly disagree
Childhood is in crisis. I am concerned for the future of childhood.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Children are exposed to the harsh realities of the adult world at too young an age.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Children are today generally more confident in expressing their views.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The United Kingdom is a child-friendly society.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
There is greater respect for children and childhood today.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Childhood is the most important phase of one's life.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Children have far more opportunities today.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Children are in a hurry to grow up today.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Childhood is an innocent period of life.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Childhood is a carefree time of life.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

12. Briefly:  
a) What are your fears for the future of childhood?

b) What are your hopes for the future of childhood?

### Section 4 – personal details

1. What is your age?

20-25      26-30      31-35      36-40      41-45      46-50      51-55      other  
                                         

2. Are you:

female  
 male

3. Is your household:

one parent  
 two parent

4. Are you in paid employment?

yes  
 no

If yes, then what are your average weekly hours?

What is your job title? \_\_\_\_\_

5. If applicable, is your partner in paid employment?

yes  
 no

If yes, then what are his/her average weekly hours?

What is his/her job title? \_\_\_\_\_

6. How many children do you have?

Thank you for completing this questionnaire – your help is very much appreciated.

If you would be willing to take part in an interview please provide the following information:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Tel no: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Please now return the questionnaire to your child's class teacher in the envelope provided.

Thank you

## Appendix 7: Cover letter for parents' questionnaire

Date

Centre for Educational Research  
Canterbury Christ Church University College  
North Holmes Road  
Canterbury  
Kent  
CT1 1QU

Dear Parent,

Thank you very much for giving your permission for (child's name) to take part in my research on childhood. The main aims of the research are to establish how children, parents and the news media, perceive childhood and, also, to consider the way in which the news media may affect views on childhood. Having spent some time helping and participating with the class in order for the children and myself to familiarize ourselves with each other, the research activities with the children are now underway. As stated in my previous letter, another dimension to the research is a questionnaire for parents, which I am now enclosing. The questionnaire seeks your views about childhood in the UK generally. I do appreciate that completion of the questionnaire is likely to be time-consuming as the questions frequently ask you to state a reason for your response: this will allow for a much deeper insight to the research topic than the mere ticking of boxes would permit. The data gained from the various research activities will provide valuable information for the writing-up of my research thesis. I would like to assure you that your responses on the questionnaire will be confidential and that anonymity will be preserved in the writing-up phase. I do hope that you will be happy to participate in this research. If so, please complete the questionnaire and return it, using the envelope provided, to (child's name) teacher by **(date, in bold)**.

If you would like to receive some feedback about the research, please complete the reply slip below and enclose it with your questionnaire. I am unable to state at this stage as to when the feedback is likely to be available, but if I am unable to issue it via the school, then it will be posted to you at a later date.

Many thanks  
Yours sincerely

Jane Cox  
Research student – Canterbury Christ Church University College

✂-----

**For the attention of Jane Cox  
CHILDHOOD RESEARCH**

Please forward some feedback on the research.

**Mr Mrs Miss Ms** (please circle)

**Initials:**

**Surname:**

**Address:**

**Please enclose this slip with your questionnaire**

## Appendix 8: Poster activity information/request

### Next activity: Alien alert!

Some aliens have landed on our planet! They are all the same size, look exactly the same and all behave in exactly the same way. The aliens have difficulty understanding who the 'little people' (children) are on our planet and why they behave differently to the 'big people' (adults). Working together in groups, your task will be to design a poster for the aliens to explain what childhood is to them – they need to know what it means, and is like, to be a child today.

Please have a look at home for some things that you can bring in to school and use for your poster, such as pictures, newspaper articles, photos etc. Do not bring in anything that will need to be returned, as it will have to be stuck to your poster! You will also be provided with other materials so that you can add your own drawings, writing etc to the poster.





## Appendix 9: Poster design instructions (verbally reinforced)

### Alien alert!

Some aliens have landed on our planet! They are all the same size (6 feet tall), look exactly the same and all behave in exactly the same way. The aliens have difficulty understanding who the 'little people' are on our planet. Your task is to design a poster that will help the aliens to understand what children and childhood are.

In your group:

1. Spend a few minutes discussing what should go on your poster – pictures, poems, piece of writing, drawings etc. Perhaps you could make a list of your ideas before you start sticking things on your poster. You will be discussing your poster with me in your groups, so make sure that everything that goes on your poster has a reason for being there!
2. Think of a suitable title/heading for your poster. Do not spend time colouring in your title/heading until you have completed the rest of the poster.
3. Make sure that everyone in your group is involved and make full use of the different skills in your group.
4. Please put your names on the front of your poster.



**Thank you for taking part in this activity!**

**Jane**

## Appendix 10: Example of interview schedule – children

The following topics/questions were explored:

1. Ice-breaker question: Do you still have a favourite cuddly toy? Why is it special? Does it have a special place in your room?
2. What 'fun' things do you do with your family, friends, on your own? What sort of things might you usually do with your family at weekends?
3. Good things about childhood: play, fun, friends, lack of responsibilities. Agree/disagree
4. Bad things: being told what to do all the time, restrictions, rules, being punished. Very anti-school and homework. Are you listened to, heard, believed? Agree/disagree.
5. Worries/concerns: tests, illness (family members), new school, problems at home (marriage break-up/rowing), bigger people that can hurt you, future (getting a job), bullying. Wars: 'this puts children at risk and other children's minds at worry' death/dying (pets/some afraid/immortality).
6. September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. What happened? Did you see it on the news? How did you feel? Are you exposed to certain knowledge that you would rather not know about because you feel you are too young? What knowledge? Do you listen to the news on the TV/radio or look at the newspapers? Have certain news stories worried you?
7. Is there a lot of pressure/influence from TV ads, and magazines to follow your friends and idols?
8. Is childhood carefree or can it be stressful (e.g. tests, lots of after-school activities, other pressures: home circumstances). Is it a time for opportunities or restraints?
9. Freedom – what freedom do you have, what freedom would you like to have?
10. Other childhoods – is childhood the same for all children in this country? How might it be different?
11. One thing that would make your childhood a better experience for you?
12. Closing question: The best/funniest thing that's happened to you so far?
13. Other issues?

## Appendix 11: Interview letter – parents

29<sup>th</sup> March 2002

Centre for Educational Research  
Canterbury Christ Church University College  
North Holmes Road  
Canterbury  
Kent  
CT1 1QU

Dear

### Re: Childhood Research

Thank you very much for completing my questionnaire about childhood. You indicated on your questionnaire that you might be willing to take part in an interview. I anticipate these interviews taking place during the first half of next term. It would be very helpful if I could tape record the interviews as this will allow me to capture everything that is said rather than having to rely on memory and notes that would otherwise have to be recorded during the interview. I would be very grateful if you would complete the slip below and return it to me, using the pre-paid envelope enclosed, by **Friday 12<sup>th</sup> April**. If you are still happy to proceed with an interview I will then contact you again nearer the time.

With thanks  
Yours sincerely

Jane Cox  
Research Student – Canterbury Christ Church University College



-----

### Parent Interview: name of parent

Please **tick** the relevant box

- I am willing to take part in an interview
- Sorry, I no longer wish to take part in an interview

**If you are willing to take part in an interview please supply the following information**

I would like the interview to take place:

- At home
- At school

My preferred days and times for an interview are as follows:

Signature:

## Appendix 12: Interview schedule – parents

In general, the interview proceeded in the following manner:

- Expanding on some of their responses to questions in sections 1 and 2 of the questionnaire (see Appendix 7). For this purpose, I had read through their questionnaires beforehand and had made notes on responses which I considered would be fruitful to explore further.
- Expanding on their responses to question 1, section 3 on the questionnaire – why they gave each issue the score that they did, why it concerned them.
- Expanding on some of their responses to other questions in section 3 (identified by myself).
- Expanding on their responses to question 11, section 3.

A number of other topics were interspersed with the above:

1. Access to news media. Has the news become more accessible/available over the years? If yes, in what way?
2. Changes in news media reporting. Has news reporting of children and childhood changed over the years? If yes, in what way? Emotive aspect of news – visuals.
3. Loss of sense of community/community shared responsibility for children. Has news reporting led us to mistrust others? If so, then what are the consequences for childhood? Are we more worried about our children's safety now than our parents were about ours? If so, is this justified and what do they see as being at the root of the worry? What are the implications for childhood?
4. Knowledge. Are children today exposed to certain types of knowledge at too young an age? If yes, what knowledge and where does it originate from (media – news or other, peers, parents etc)? What about issues in the media such as 11/9/01 and death generally? Do we, as parents, expose our children to knowledge that we ourselves would not have been exposed to at the same age (can they think of some examples)? Does certain knowledge erode the boundaries between childhood and adulthood – if so, what are the implications for childhood? Should children be protected from certain information – if yes, what information and until what age?
5. Rights. Antagonism – some parents feel that it threatens their authority. Case of whether the issue of rights makes parents feel that they have lost control vs. the case of whether the issue of rights now enables us to see children as our equals and thus granting both children, and the state of childhood, greater respect? Has the advancement of children's rights made children more visible and thus liable to increased scrutiny by the news media?
6. Play. In what ways has play changed? Is this viewed as positive/negative? Has the sense of adventure been lost or is it a question of adults looking back nostalgically at their childhood?

7. Otherness. I have been looking at certain children, and childhood, in a certain area. What other concerns/worries/issues might be raised if I looked at other children, or other children in other areas?
8. Positive images of childhood. Think about the ways in which the news media portrays children and childhood in a positive light. What does the news media do for children and childhood?
9. Boundaries. Are the boundaries between childhood and adulthood blurring?
10. Western ideal. Can we still envision childhood within the idealized Western image – that it is a fun-filled, innocent, carefree time of life?
11. Would you like to be a child today?
12. Other issues?

# Research on childhood!

**Sebastian**

This leaflet has been designed to try and answer some of the questions that you might want to ask. You may show this leaflet to your parent(s) if you wish, but you do not have to do so.

## What is research?

Research is a bit like being a detective. It is about investigating a particular topic and collecting evidence so that you, and others, can know more about the topic. This will help people to understand the topic better.

## What is the research about?

This can best be answered by giving you examples of **some** of the things we will be thinking about: What is childhood? At what age does childhood end? What are the best things about being a child? What are the worst things about being a child? What do you like doing? What don't you like doing? What are the differences between children and adults? In what ways are children and adults similar? Are you in a hurry to grow up?



## Appendix 13: Information leaflet for children

### Why have you been asked to take part?

I am not a child and so I don't really know what it is like to be a child today! The best people to tell me what childhood is like today are those who are experiencing it at the moment – you! On the topic of childhood you are the expert. Your views are therefore **very** important to me.



### What will you be doing?

Three different activities have been planned:

- A questionnaire – this is a series of questions that asks for your thoughts on things to do with childhood. There will also be some diagrams to complete. This will be done on your own, in class. It is **not** a test. There are no right or wrong answers – it is just about what you think.
- Designing a poster about childhood. This will be done in small groups. You will be asked to look for things at home that you might use for your poster. Each group will discuss their poster with me.
- Talking with me about childhood. This will take place in small groups of two, three, or four children. The aim of the talk will be to develop ideas and issues emerging from the questionnaires and posters.

### Who else is involved in the research?

A questionnaire will be sent to your parent(s) to ask for their views about childhood. I am also looking at the newspapers, and the news on the radio and television, to see what they say about children and childhood.

### Do you have to take part?

You will have the choice as to whether you want to take part in each activity but I hope that you will find it interesting and want to take part! It is an opportunity for **me** to learn from **you** and for you to put your views across.

### Will anyone be told about what you say?

I will need to talk about the research with some people and I will also need to write about it, but no-one (including your teacher and your parents) will ever be told who said what. Although it is unlikely, if you do tell me anything that really worries me, then we (you and I) will need to work out what to do about it.



### Thank you for reading this!

**If you have any other questions then write them on the back of this leaflet and show them to me when you next see me.**

**Jane**



## Appendix 14: Feedback issued to Year 6 children at Moorcroft School

# Childhood Research

## Mary

The aim of my research with your class was to build up a picture of how children view childhood today. This gives you a **little** bit of information about **some** of the things that I found out.

Your class has stated that childhood is a time that is generally good, but it can also be bad. Some of the good things about childhood are that it is a time in which you can play, have fun, develop friendships, and are generally free of responsibilities. However, you are at an age when many of you do welcome the opportunity to be given some responsibility – this is a ‘step up’ and means that you are trusted. For some, responsibilities are seen as a burden, as you then have less time for play and other activities. Some of the bad things about being a child are that ‘you get told what to do all the time’, ‘most grown ups don’t listen or believe you’ and ‘you get bullied’. A useful way to find out how children view childhood (and adulthood) is to think of the differences between children and adults. Here are **some** of the suggestions made by your class.

Children	Adults
Fun	Stress
More fun	Less fun
Have to respect parents	Parents boss their children
Do what teachers and parents tell you	Do what you think is best
Want to be late for school	Worried about being late for work
Can do things that adults can’t	Can do things that children can’t
No independence	Independence
If we don’t know an easy question we get away with it	Get embarrassed
Toys	Taxes
Get shouted at	Don’t get shouted at
Rules	Not so many rules as kids
Enjoy playing	Work all the time
More energy	Less energy
Get homework as well as 6 hours at school	Come home and relax after work

The amount of outdoor freedom that you have varies. At one end of the scale your life may be very structured by your parents and your outdoor freedom restricted. At the other end of the scale you may be allowed, within reason, to go where you want, when you want. It was acknowledged that many parents worry about your safety because there are ‘lots of dodgy people about’. A number of references were made to Sarah Payne, Damilola Taylor and ‘Millie’ Dowler. The use of mobile phones has helped, to some extent, to allay parents’ worry. Although you value the protection provided by parents, you also want to be given the space to grow and develop. Some children highlighted changes in their local environment that had impacted on their freedom. For example, one child had lived in a road that was pedestrianized and had been able to play outside safely, but the council had now opened up the road to traffic. Another child commented on the woods that they used



to go and play in, but which are now being cut down to make way for new houses. Such changes might be acceptable if money was then spent on providing alternative areas for children to play in, with one suggestion being a skateboard park!

Friendships appear to be very important to you. For the boys this seemed to centre more on doing various activities together, such as skateboarding, roller hockey, Warhammer, or forming a musical band. For the girls, friendships appear to be very important for the support that they provide: parents, and other adults, may not understand, or may overlook, your feelings and so friends are valued as someone with whom you can share your concerns/problems with. Some children expressed concerns about issues such as their home situation and the health of relatives. Although children now tend to be told many of the facts about these situations – and you do like to know what is going on – they can burden you with worry. There seemed to be a feeling, amongst some of you, that you would appreciate the presence of a neutral person, such as a counsellor, to whom you could turn to for guidance/support. Other issues that caused some of you concern, or worry, were: tests, bullying, the transition to secondary school, wars, death/dying, and the future (getting a job).

It was noticeable in our group discussions that if someone was being critical of another person – child or adult – then someone else within the group would normally step in and stand up for the person being criticised: fairness/justice therefore seems to be important to you. Further, as one child stated, ‘some adults still live by the rule that children should be seen and not heard’. Children are sensitive beings and do have feelings, which can be easily hurt by adults. In their search for justice/fairness children sometimes feel the need to stand up for themselves, but adults tend to view this as ‘answering back’.

There does not appear to be a hurry to grow up because ‘being a child is fun, so I don’t really want to speed up the process’ and ‘it isn’t a big rush’. Although adulthood would bring independence and new experiences, childhood is not something from which you generally wish to escape. In response to the question ‘At what age do you think childhood ends’, one child answered ‘Never! When you have still got memories it lives on’. I hope that in the years to come, when you look back on your childhood, it will be, in the main, filled with happy memories.

There is so much more that I could have written. You have given me a wonderful insight into the world of childhood and I also now know what Grungers, Trendies, Chavs and Goths are! I have learnt a tremendous amount from you all, and this will be an enormous help when I write up my research. It has been great fun getting to know you all – I do hope that you have enjoyed taking part in the research.

I wonder if you agree or disagree with what I have said. It would be lovely to hear what you think. If you have access to the Internet please email me and let me know (but check with your parents first). My email address is: **[jane.cox@tinyworld.co.uk](mailto:jane.cox@tinyworld.co.uk)**

I hope that all your wishes and dreams come true and that you enjoy the summer holidays, and also the rest of your childhood. Good luck at your next school!

**Jane**

**Appendix 15: Demographic information – parents**

	<b>Howland School Total</b>	<b>Moorcroft School Total</b>
Questionnaires completed by females	34	42
Questionnaires completed by males	4	6
One parent households	7	2
One parent households with no earned income	3	0
Two parent households with no earned income	4	0
Mothers in two parent households in full-time employment (35+ hours)	7	7
Mothers in two parent households in part-time employment	13	26
Mothers in two parent households with no paid employment	8	11
Mothers in two parent households whose working hours were not stated	3	3
Males in two parent households in full-time employment (35+ hours)	18	40
Males in two parent households in part-time employment	4	0
Males in two parent households with no paid employment	5	2
Males in two parent households whose working hours were not stated	4	4
Average number of children per family	2.52	2.45

## **Appendix 16: Parent interviewees**

### ***Howland School***

- Mrs Elliott, two parent household, worked part-time;
- Ms Jessup, one parent household, worked part-time;
- Mr and Mrs Gerrard, no paid employment;
- Ms Ellis, one parent household, worked part-time;
- Mrs Fenton, two parent household, no paid employment;
- Mrs Matthews, two parent household, worked full-time;
- Miss Forster, two parent household, no paid employment;
- Mrs Ferguson, two parent household, worked part-time;
- Mr Samson, two parent household, worked part-time;
- Mr and Mrs Randall, mother worked full-time, partner worked full-time;
- Mrs Farrant, one parent household, no paid employment.

Those in employment were: a primary mental health worker, a midday meal supervisor, two learning support assistants, a telesales manager, a technical manager, a hairdresser and a sales assistant.

### ***Moorcroft School***

- Ms Atkins, two parent household, worked part-time;
- Mrs Felton, two parent household, worked part-time;
- Mr Dale, two parent household, worked full-time;
- Mrs Pearce, two parent household, worked part-time;
- Mrs Parker, one parent household, worked full-time;
- Mrs Proctor, two parent household, no paid employment;
- Mrs Griffin, two parent household, no paid employment;
- Mrs Brooks, two parent household, worked part-time.

Those in employment were: a teacher, a clerk to the governors at a special school, a senior pre-school development worker, a dental nurse, a local government auditor and an accident emergency nurse.

**Appendix 17: Parents' questionnaire (Appendix 6) findings – section 3, question 1**

**Distribution of parental anxiety/concern about children and childhood: Howland School**

**NR = no response**

**0 = no concern**

**7 = high level of concern**

**Number in brackets represents number of parents (total = 38)**

**Percentages do not add up to 100% due to rounding up/down**

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	NR
TV/computer/Play Station etc	8% (3)	13% (5)	16% (6)	16% (6)	18% (7)	16% (6)	8% (3)	5% (2)	
Consumerism and the commercialization of childhood	3% (1)	8% (3)	16% (6)	8% (3)	18% (7)	16% (6)	18% (7)	8% (3)	5% (2)
Family break-up, new family groupings	5% (2)	8% (3)	8% (3)	18% (7)	3% (1)	13% (5)	18% (7)	24% (9)	3% (1)
Working mothers	26% (10)	13% (5)	11% (4)	18% (7)	16% (6)	5% (2)	3% (1)	5% (2)	3% (1)
Behaviour of children	0% (0)	3% (1)	8% (3)	8% (3)	21% (8)	13% (5)	24% (9)	24% (9)	
Genetic engineering	13% (5)	11% (4)	5% (2)	8% (3)	5% (2)	8% (3)	13% (5)	37% (14)	
Academic pressure at an ever earlier age	5% (2)	3% (1)	11% (4)	3% (1)	11% (4)	5% (2)	29% (11)	34% (13)	
Paedophiles/'stranger danger'	0% (0)	3% (1)	0% (0)	3% (1)	0% (0)	8% (3)	3% (1)	84% (32)	
Intensity of traffic on the roads	0% (0)	0% (0)	3% (1)	5% (2)	11% (4)	11% (4)	24% (9)	47% (18)	
Poor parenting skills	11% (4)	0% (0)	5% (2)	13% (5)	13% (5)	13% (5)	13% (5)	29% (11)	3% (1)
Lack of action by the Government	3% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)	13% (5)	11% (4)	18% (7)	13% (5)	37% (14)	5% (2)
'Hot-housing' (filling children's time with numerous activities)	13% (5)	8% (3)	13% (5)	29% (11)	5% (2)	11% (4)	3% (1)	11% (4)	8% (3)

**Distribution of parental anxiety/concern about children and childhood: Moorcroft School**

**NR = no response**

**0 = no concern**

**7 = high level of concern**

**Number in brackets represents number of parents (total = 48)**

**Percentages do not add up to 100% due to rounding up/down**

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	NR
TV/computer/Play Station etc	8% (4)	8% (4)	17% (8)	19% (9)	25% (12)	10% (5)	6% (3)	6% (3)	
Consumerism and the commercialization of childhood	2% (1)	2% (1)	8% (4)	21% (10)	19% (9)	10% (5)	15% (7)	19% (9)	4% (2)
Family break-up, new family groupings	2% (1)	8% (4)	10% (5)	6% (3)	17% (8)	21% (10)	17% (8)	19% (9)	
Working mothers	10% (5)	8% (4)	23% (11)	15% (7)	19% (9)	15% (7)	2% (1)	6% (3)	2% (1)
Behaviour of children	0% (0)	2% (1)	4% (2)	15% (7)	23% (11)	15% (7)	17% (8)	25% (12)	
Genetic engineering	4% (2)	6% (3)	2% (1)	15% (7)	6% (3)	17% (8)	17% (8)	33% (16)	
Academic pressure at an ever earlier age	0% (0)	2% (1)	4% (2)	6% (3)	13% (6)	19% (9)	17% (8)	38% (18)	2% (1)
Paedophiles/'stranger danger'	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	4% (2)	10% (5)	2% (1)	83% (40)	
Intensity of traffic on the roads	0% (0)	0% (0)	2% (1)	2% (1)	15% (7)	17% (8)	27% (13)	38% (18)	
Poor parenting skills	4% (2)	0% (0)	4% (2)	19% (9)	8% (4)	13% (6)	27% (13)	25% (12)	
Lack of action by the Government	2% (1)	2% (1)	13% (6)	10% (5)	17% (8)	6% (3)	13% (6)	33% (16)	4% (2)
'Hot-housing' (filling children's time with numerous activities)	4% (2)	6% (3)	10% (5)	33% (16)	17% (8)	10% (5)	10% (5)	8% (4)	

**The table on page 169 was produced by adding up the scores for each issue.**

**Appendix 18: Parents' questionnaire (Appendix 6) findings – section 3, question 11**

**Parents' responses to questionnaire statements: Howland School**

**NR = no response**

**Number in brackets represents number of parents (total = 38)**

**Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding up/down**

	<b>strongly agree</b>	<b>agree</b>	<b>unsure</b>	<b>disagree</b>	<b>strongly disagree</b>	<b>NR</b>
Childhood is in crisis. I am concerned for the future of childhood	26% (10)	26% (10)	39% (15)	5% (2)	0% (0)	3% (1)
Children are exposed to the harsh realities of the adult world at too young an age	53% (20)	37% (14)	3% (1)	8% (3)	0% (0)	
Childhood is the most important phase of one's life	63% (24)	26% (10)	8% (3)	3% (1)	0% (0)	
Children are in a hurry to grow up today	61% (23)	34% (13)	3% (1)	3% (1)	0% (0)	
Childhood is an innocent period of life	42% (16)	32% (12)	11% (4)	13% (5)	0% (0)	3% (1)
Childhood is a carefree time of life	24% (9)	34% (13)	21% (8)	13% (5)	3% (1)	5% (2)



**Parents' responses to questionnaire statements: Moorcroft School**

**NR = no response**

**Number in brackets represents number of parents (total = 48)**

**Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding up/down**

	<b>strongly agree</b>	<b>agree</b>	<b>unsure</b>	<b>disagree</b>	<b>strongly disagree</b>	<b>NR</b>
Childhood is in crisis. I am concerned for the future of childhood	15% (7)	23% (11)	21% (10)	31% (15)	2% (1)	8% (4)
Children are exposed to the harsh realities of the adult world at too young an age	40% (19)	38% (18)	13% (6)	8% (4)	0% (0)	2% (1)
Childhood is the most important phase of one's life	52% (25)	38% (18)	8% (4)	2% (1)	0% (0)	
Children are in a hurry to grow up today	42% (20)	50% (24)	4% (2)	4% (2)	0% (0)	
Childhood is an innocent period of life	17% (8)	48% (23)	13% (6)	21% (10)	0% (0)	2% (1)
Childhood is a carefree time of life	17% (8)	38% (18)	19% (9)	25% (12)	0% (0)	2% (1)

**Appendix 19: Parents' levels of access to the news media**

	<b>Howland School</b>	<b>Moorcroft School</b>
Bought, or read, a newspaper each week	74%	84%
Watched the television news each week	98%	84%
Listened to the radio news each week	50%	74%

## Appendix 20: News categories – United Kingdom and international

### *United Kingdom categories*

- 1) Death of child/ren (in whatever circumstances e.g. accidental, non-accidental, natural causes etc)
- 2) Injury or accident involving child/ren (non-fatal) and/or family member (may, or may not, have been fatal)
- 3) Medical and developmental health issues (encompasses news items relating to individual children who were, for example, ill, undergoing medical treatment, or disabled, as well as general health issues and issues concerning children's development)
- 4) Genetic engineering (this term has been used broadly to encompass issues such as cloning, 'designer babies' and IVF treatment)
- 5) Adult sexual deviance (encompasses *all* areas of adult sexual deviance i.e. it does *not* relate solely to paedophiles)
- 6) Active being (children are included for their intrinsic value e.g. for doing something as part of their *usual* daily routine, for their achievements, or for their individuality)
- 7) Missing or abducted children (includes items relating to missing children, or those thought to have been abducted)
- 8) Visual only (includes items where only a picture is available, or where a written or verbal report is also present but children do not feature in the report)
- 9) Protection issues (includes all items relating to the protection of children)
- 10) Children and well-known people (this includes items in which children are the offspring of someone well-known e.g. actress, politician)
- 11) Family issues (this includes items in which children have been included as family members)
- 12) Moral issues (includes items in which children are depicted unfavourably and/or as receivers of philanthropic acts)
- 13) Other (includes all other items that were insufficient in number to form a further category)

*International categories*

- 1) Children and war (includes all issues relating to children and war e.g. death, injury, economic consequences)
- 2) Death of child/ren (non-war, in whatever other circumstances)
- 3) Abuse of children (all forms)
- 4) Medical and developmental health issues (same as for United Kingdom category)
- 5) Visual only (same as for United Kingdom category)
- 6) Other (same as for United Kingdom category)

**Appendix 21: National newspaper sample – United Kingdom categories**

**Number of news items with representations of children in the national newspaper sample: United Kingdom categories**

	<b>Tabloid newspaper</b>	<b>Broadsheet newspaper</b>
<b>Number of newspapers in sample</b>	31	31
<b>Time span of sample</b>	1 <sup>st</sup> – 31 <sup>st</sup> August 2002	1 <sup>st</sup> – 31 <sup>st</sup> August 2002
Death of child/ren	68 (30%)	62 (37%)
Injury or accident involving child/ren and/or family member	7 (3%)	4 (2%)
Medical and developmental health issues	16 (7%)	14 (8%)
Genetic engineering	9 (4%)	12 (7%)
Adult sexual deviance	29 (13%)	5 (3%)
Active being	7 (3%)	4 (2%)
Missing or abducted children	48 (21%)	35 (21%)
Visual only	0 (0%)	1 (1%)
Protection issues	13 (6%)	16 (10%)
Children and well-known people	21 (9%)	8 (5%)
Family issues	4 (2%)	5 (3%)
Moral issues	4 (2%)	0 (0%)
Other	4 (2%)	1 (1%)
<b>Total number of news items in sample</b>	230	167

**Appendix 22: Local newspaper sample – United Kingdom categories**

**Number of news items with representations of children in the local newspaper sample: United Kingdom categories**

**Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding up/down**

	<b>Howland School</b>	<b>Moorcroft School</b>
<b>Number of newspapers in sample</b>	3	3
<b>Time span of sample</b>	Nov – Dec 2003	Nov- Dec 2003
Death of child/ren	1 (5%)	0 (0%)
Injury or accident involving child/ren and/or family member	1 (5%)	0 (0%)
Medical and developmental health issues	1 (5%)	4 (11%)
Genetic engineering	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Adult sexual deviance	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Active being	10 (50%)	17 (49%)
Missing or abducted children	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Visual only	3 (15%)	5 (14%)
Protection issues	0 (0%)	1 (3%)
Children and well-known people	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Family issues	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Moral issues	4 (20%)	7 (20%)
Other	0 (0%)	1 (3%)
<b>Total number of news items in sample</b>	20	35



**Appendix 23: National newspaper sample – international categories**

**Number of news items with representations of children in the national newspaper sample: international categories**

**Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding up/down**

	<b>Tabloid newspaper</b>	<b>Broadsheet newspaper</b>
<b>Number of newspapers in sample</b>	31	31
<b>Time span of sample</b>	1 <sup>st</sup> – 31 <sup>st</sup> August 2002	1 <sup>st</sup> – 31 <sup>st</sup> August 2002
Children and war	1 (9%)	0 (0%)
Death of child/ren	4 (36%)	4 (20%)
Abuse	2 (18%)	3 (15%)
Medical and developmental health issues	2 (18%)	5 (25%)
Visual only	0 (0%)	4 (20%)
Other	2 (18%)	4 (20%)
<b>Total number of articles in sample</b>	11	20

**N.B. There were no items in the local newspapers for inclusion in the international categories**

## Appendix 24: National and local television news – United Kingdom categories

Number of news reports with representations of children in the national and local television news samples: United Kingdom categories

	<b>National television</b>	<b>Local television</b>
<b>Number of news programmes in sample</b>	30	6
<b>Time span of sample</b>	1 <sup>st</sup> – 31 <sup>st</sup> August 2003	1 <sup>st</sup> – 10 <sup>th</sup> Sept 2003
Death of child/ren	1 (5%)	1 (10%)
Injury or accident involving child/ren and/or family member	2 (10%)	2 (20%)
Medical and developmental health issues	1 (5%)	1 (10%)
Genetic engineering	2 (10%)	0 (0%)
Adult sexual deviance	2 (10%)	0 (0%)
Active being	1 (5%)	3 (30%)
Missing or abducted children	1 (5%)	0 (0%)
Visual only	7 (35%)	1 (10%)
Protection issues	1 (5%)	1 (10%)
Children and well-known people	1 (5%)	0 (0%)
Family issues	0 (0%)	1 (10%)
Moral issues	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Other	1 (5%)	0 (0%)
<b>Total number of news items in sample</b>	20	10

**Appendix 25: National television news – international categories**

**Number of news reports with representations of children in the national television news sample: International categories**

	<b>National television</b>
<b>Number of news programmes in sample</b>	30
<b>Time span of sample</b>	1 <sup>st</sup> – 31 <sup>st</sup> August 2003
Children and war	7 (44%)
Death of child/ren	0 (0%)
Abuse	3 (19%)
Medical and developmental health issues	1 (6%)
Visual only	4 (25%)
Other	1 (6%)
<b>Total number of news items in sample</b>	16

**N.B. There were no reports in the local television sample for inclusion in the international categories**

**Appendix 26: National and local radio news – United Kingdom categories**

**Number of news items with representations of children in the national and local radio news: United Kingdom categories**

**N.B. A news item repeated in a later news programme in the day has only been counted once for the purpose of these findings**

**Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding up/down**

	<b>National radio news</b>	<b>Local radio news</b>
<b>Number of news programmes in sample</b>	37 (on 14 days)	28 (on 18 days)
<b>Time span of sample</b>	8 <sup>th</sup> – 26 <sup>th</sup> Sept 2003	10 <sup>th</sup> – 28 <sup>th</sup> May 2004
Death of child/ren	7 (47%)	2 (40%)
Injury or accident involving child/ren and/or family member	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Medical and developmental health issues	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Genetic engineering	1 (7%)	0 (0%)
Adult sexual deviance	1 (7%)	0 (0%)
Active being	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Missing or abducted children	1 (7%)	0 (0%)
Visual only	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Protection issues	2 (13%)	1 (20%)
Children and well-known people	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Family issues	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Moral issues	1 (7%)	1 (20%)
Other	2 (13%)	1 (20%)
<b>Total number of news items in sample</b>	15	5

**With regard to the international categories there were only 3 news items found. These all related to the category of ‘children and war’. The national radio news accounted for 2 of these items and the local radio news for 1 item.**

