



**Kitchener-Waterloo
Sexual Assault Support Centre**

151 Frederick St, Suite 201,
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**24 Hour Crisis &
Support Line** (519) 741-8633

Business Line (519) 571-0121
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The Systematic Subordinating of Children

What is the place of children in North American society? How do we—that is, adult citizens—feel about them? There are paradoxes in our attitudes and behavior toward children: we tell our selves that western children are spoiled, that they have everything they could possibly want. But in fact a closer look at our treatment of children suggests that they suffer many of the worst disadvantages of oppressed minority groups.

First, as a society we are not committed to meeting the special needs of children and this is evident in how we structure the social environment. One obvious example is public washrooms: The sinks and toilets are too high for little people to comfortably use, the paper towels are out of reach, the water in the tap is burning hot and there is seldom any facility to enable parents to change the diapers of their young babies.

While the significance of access to public buildings is becoming more widely recognized as an important issue for disabled persons, it is never considered in connection with children, who have trouble negotiating steep stairs, cannot reach elevator buttons and fall easily on slippery, hard-waxed floors. Public intuitions such as banks, post offices and government buildings are forbidding places to little children. And public events that are not suitable for children, such as conferences, workshops, films, lectures and exhibits seldom, if ever, offer adequate child care.

The social environment is not accommodated to children, and on that basis alone North American society must be charged with indifference to our offspring. But this lack of concern for children's needs is also a symptom of a wider social pattern of segregation of children segregation that, if applied to any other group of human beings, would be considered both immoral and illegal. Right now there are apartment buildings, hotels and restaurants that not only do not welcome children but sometimes actually forbid their presence.

We banish children from our workplaces and confine them to age-stratified institutions called "schools". Day care is inadequate and often non-existence. And instead of welcoming children into everyday adult, activities, we encourage them to take part in substitute behaviors: Games and playing with toys that are imitations of real human work, entertainment that distorts and confines their understanding of the world and lessons that make them hate what they are learning.

And children have virtually no voice in the society in which they live. Denied many of the most basic ways of expressing their views, for example, by voting or by changing their place of residence, children are very seldom, listened to and are unable to affect social policy. Even on the level of personal interactions it is a common observation in grocery stores or on buses that children will ask questions and make comments to adults



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and be utterly ignored, or, at best, laughed at. Many children routinely find that they must make requests three, four, or five times before finally the urgency in their voices gets noticed. Children are thought to be nuisances. How many adults are even willing to assume that children have ideas and opinions worth hearing?

So North American children are not welcome in adult society, are segregated from it and are ignored. But our treatment of children is actually even worse than this. Children are deliberately used: indeed, the exploitation of children is so widespread and common as to be taken for granted. Children's tastes and interests are powerfully manipulated in order to sell consumer goods, often goods that fail to benefit them and that even harm them. A huge toy industry, a burgeoning market for snack and fast foods and an entertainment industry that cultivates passivity and non-thinking all testify to the money to be made from selling to children.

Perhaps not surprisingly in a society where children can be as effectively exploited as consumers they are not urged to buy commodities: they actually become commodities. Children are regarded as a type of consumer good, to be acquired only if we can afford them and they fit our "lifestyles". And parents are encouraged to want only the highest quality children: Prenatal diagnosis and other reproductive technologies help to ensure that less than-perfect offspring are eliminated, and later on, music, arts, sports and other forms of training and child-betterment schemes help to ensure that our children will be top-notch products.

What all these aspects of our behavior toward children suggest is that we collectively see our children as possessions, as things which we can buy, improve upon and even (with the advent of surrogate motherhood) sell. And if they are our possessions, then it follows—does it not?—that we can do what we like with them. That attitude is all too obvious in the behavior of the horrifying numbers of adults who subject children, both their "own" and those that "belong" to other people, to cruel physical, sexual and psychological abuse, sometimes in the name of "discipline". Hundreds of thousands of children are routinely exposed to severe and almost unremitting torment as part of the experience of "growing up".

In North America, then, children are not persons; indeed, they are not even second-class citizens. In North America, children are things. In North America, oppression starts in childhood.

Christine Overall

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