

Games children play

TWO 10-YEAR-OLD GIRLS in Kent are playing with their Ken and Barbie dolls. They are pretending that the dolls are having oral sex.

At a day-care center in Columbus, a preschool boy announces to his class that he had seen the movie *Top Gun* and knows how to French kiss—and then proceeds to demonstrate.

A group of young children in Pennsylvania pretends to be drug dealers and operates a make-believe drug ring—complete with mock drug sales and a ledger detailing each transaction.

Childhood is dead.

Experts say that too many children today are not experiencing that golden period of freedom before the tensions of the adult world seize them.

This is borne out by the pretend games that children play these days—games that reflect all of society's ills and concerns.

For instance:

When children play house today, there are characters and scenarios that did not exist before—stepparents, stepsiblings, roommates, fathers visiting their children on weekends.

Or that when children act out scenes from fairy tales, they do not play at being awakened from their sleep by a chaste kiss. Instead they pretend that the prince goes to bed with them.

Or, at Betsy Cahill's day-care center in Columbus, a five-year-old girl opens her shirt for a classmate to admire her non-existent breasts.

But if childhood is dead for some, it was killed by any number of assailants—by a society that did not protect and cherish its youngest members; by a media that hastened the end of the age of innocence; by a culture that no longer celebrated the joyous rituals of childhood.

But although childhood died, the children survived. And as some of them wandered across a landscape of broken homes and drug-infested streets, of violent neighborhoods and a sex-obsessed culture, they took on the characteristics of modern-day survivors.

"By the time they are 7 or 8 they have been through more than a generation ago did in their lifetime," says Betsy Korhnak, former child-care director of the Akron YWCA.

Child-care experts interviewed recently agreed. They say children today are growing up with a degree of stress that was unheard of two decades ago—that their childhoods are at risk. The extent of the risk varies by family backgrounds.

And all of this stress is reflected in the games they play, says Dr. John Guidubaldi, professor of school psychology at Kent State University. Experts say that pretend games allow children to deal with situations they are exposed to but don't quite understand.

With more children growing up in single-parent homes or in families where both parents work, they are turning increasingly to peers to help them process the onslaught of information to which they are exposed.

A Kent woman, who did not want to be identified, says that her 10-year-old daughter and her friend frequently use their Ken and Barbie dolls to act out what is going on in their lives. Since she is recently divorced, the woman said her daughter often pretends that the dolls are going through a divorce.

With the rise in the rate of divorce and single parents, children are being exposed to another new phenomenon—that of seeing their parents as sexual beings who date and have different romantic partners.

The result is a growing sexual precociousness among young children.

"There are far fewer tomboys than there used to be," says Korhnak. "Their childhood is getting shorter. It's like they're on stage all the time."

Children's play has also changed because there are fewer physical outlets for kids today, experts say. As children grow more sedentary, fantasy play may be their only creative outlet.

"Where are the children who play hide-and-seek and kick-the-can?" asks Dr. Violet Leathers, assistant professor of education at the University of Akron.

"Twenty years ago kids had less things provided. They could take a ball and make something of it."

"It used to be that if children were angry they could run, climb, be loud—get the anger out physically," says Korhnaak. "Now a lot of loudness is not permitted. Very few children are allowed to climb trees or play in creeks. They can't stretch their wings and fly."

Experts say that as the media becomes increasingly sophisticated and complex, children turn to role-playing to simplify concepts.

Cahill, who is currently a graduate student at Kent State University, cites the film *Batman* as an example of sophistication in the media.

"There is not clear-cut good or evil," she says. "There is an undertone of psychological evil to the film that kids will not understand."

Guidubaldi also decries the loss of heroes in American life today.

"In our country today we see a dearth of heroes," he says. "Even in the sports figures there has been a tainting of their wholesomeness."

Historically, children have incorporated their heroes into their play. But even their fictional heroes have changed in recent years.

Dona Greene-Bolton, who is the head teacher of the nursery program at the Kent State Child Develop-

ment Center, says that characters such as Superman depicted altruism and allowed children to aspire to noble goals, like saving the planet.

But the new heroes are mechanical, plastic toys like He-man and do not call upon children to use their imaginations, Ms. Bolton says.

Guidubaldi says society will pay the price for not devoting more time and resources to its young.

"Americans lead the pack on egocentrism in parents," he says. "This is the era of inflated entitlements."

The demise of childhood can best be seen in the worldliness of the games that children play, experts say.

And unless society goes back to a simpler time, they do not anticipate children's games becoming any more innocent.

"I'd like to see children running barefoot and picking dandelions," says Korhnaak wistfully. "But that world's gone."

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This article originally appeared in the *Akron Beacon Journal* and in the *Indianapolis Star*.

Bob and Angie Stead of Dearborn, Michigan, share this letter with our readers. It was one of a series of letters to the Toothfairy written by their daughter Kayrol Anna Stead.

Dear Toothfairy,

Today at 9:00am I got 2 more teeth pulled. Yesterday a tooth fell out on its own. So now you have 3 teeth from me to take back to Toothland. Use them wisely!

I am very, very sorry to say that these 3 teeth will be my last baby teeth. The ones you get tonight are my 18th, 19th, and 20th teeth. Thank you for 4 years of faithful service.

There is a way, though, for you to come back to my pillow. Only I would have to let my tooth decay — and no one want a rotten tooth!

I better warn you about my 7-year-old brother, Philip. He has only lost about 5 or 6 teeth. Beware!

Your loyal mouth,

Kayrol Stead

Age 10

P.S. I still would be your customer if I didn't have braces!