

Address by

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***“It’s not the same as when we were young”: Visible differences –
unrecognised effects.***

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We now recognise that change, whether drastic or incremental, in one part of our ecosystem can produce unforeseen effects in another, sometimes long after the change began. This recognition has not always been so.

Until the mid 1980s, the nature of changes in the natural environment on other components was all but ignored as domestic or commercial imperatives such as releasing more land for grazing, providing timber for housing or eliminating a city of its sewage, were met. It was only the more far-sighted environmental scientists and ‘greenies’ who warned of the destruction of native habitats, damage to the ozone layer, or the loss of bio-diversity.

In Australia, it is only since people have started to notice the frogs disappearing and increased areas of salinity that environmental issues have gradually become more mainstream. Despite the coinage of the neologism *ecological sustainability* the tension between protecting the environment and economic and lifestyle considerations still exists.

We have been equally slow in recognising the effects of various environments, whether they be social, political, economic or physical, on humans.

People have been located in substandard accommodation and we wonder why they do not behave as model citizens. Highways have been built through communities and social commentators express surprise when communities fracture. Stratification by age is practised in child care centres and retirement villages and then we are saddened to see each group have little understanding of the other.

The tendency to view people as autonomous beings, independent of their environments, has not been a characteristic just of governments or commercial interests. The scientific world has also frequently failed to consider the environmental context of someone’s existence.

As with the natural environment, it is not easy to identify a single cause or predict the complete range of effects on individuals resulting from a change in their environments. Just as chaos theory suggests that the flapping of the wings of a butterfly can, given time, influence the direction of a hurricane on the other side of the planet, the sheer complexity of environmental inter dependencies means that identifying the range of potential consequences from a change to an individual’s experience of one environment, is an art, or is it a science, that we have yet to master.

At present we are not attuned to detect subtle shifts in outcomes and even less able to predict them or identify their causes. It is often the case that we only become

aware of an influence after 'the frogs have disappeared', particularly in terms of child development.

My concern is that because of the rapid changes to the way we live and the way the world operates there will be an excessive concentration of certain types of experiences and activities and a gradual, but powerful diminution of others, thus limiting or changing the way children experience their world.

In the process, many valuable learning experiences and developmental processes that occurred through the social and physical environments of the past, and consequently tended to be taken for granted, could be irretrievably lost.

Eric Jensen, an experienced US educator, has questioned as well whether children are biologically different from 30 years ago because of their changing environmentsⁱ. He identifies the following influences as having the potential to change the very biological make-up of children.

- Fewer natural foods and more additives
- More exposure to electronically mediated stimulation
- More exposure to drugs and medications
- Commercialisation of childhood — children as consumers
- Less mobility through car travel and seat restraints
- Less early motor stimulation from swings, see-saws, merry-go-rounds because of safety concerns
- More single parent households

Besides having the capacity to impact on children biologically, many changes over the past several decades have the capacity to impact on them socially and emotionally. From an ecological understanding of human functioning these effects are not discrete in the way this categorisation implies, but are interactive and intertwined, or embedded, as in Stroick's model which presents the child nested in multiple environmentsⁱⁱ.

It is not feasible to consider all possible changes here but it is pertinent to address several as an exercise in sensitising thinking about the way change has the potential to impact on children and their development.

One key area of change relates to family stability and reconstituted families. Much has been written about their effects on children. I merely wish to provide the following Australian figures to quantify to some degree the large number of children who have to accommodate to one of the most significant changes in their environments with which a child can be confronted. Each year around 51,000ⁱⁱⁱ couples divorce. In over 53 per cent^{iv} of cases children under 18 years are involved. These figures do not include the breakdown of de facto relationships.

Instability characterises environments for this generation of young people. People lose jobs, parents divorce, children move between families^v. Hugh Mackay says that the rising generation of Australians '*expect change*'^{vi}. He comments 'because they expect tomorrow to be different from today, they are inclined to postpone commitments, to wait and see, to '*hang loose*' as a way of keeping their options open, and because change is not so much an issue but the air they breathe, they incorporate it quite naturally into their outlook'^{vii}.

The average number of children in Australian families now stands at 1.7. Many children born now will be an only child or have only one sibling. Studies demonstrate that family size and birth order have the capacity to impact on a range of variables from education to personality^{viii}, so what are the effects on a cohort of children of not having the companionship of a same or opposite sex sibling, or someone to fight?

Is there an influence on communication, sharing, competitiveness, ambition? Do only children experience greater loneliness, particularly if their parents divorce? Does not having the opportunity to observe the parenting of younger siblings, or practise parenting on them, affect a child's later ability to parent? As well as impacting on the individual child, do these changes result in a subtle shift in the national psyche as certain personality types or learning experiences proliferate as a result of such smaller families.

The low birth rate, combined with the ageing of the post war cohort with its increased life expectancy, means that children will constitute a smaller proportion of the population in the future.

I wonder if or how Australia's attitude to children will change as they constitute an increasingly smaller proportion of the population. Will children become valued and cosseted as has happened in China as a result of the one child policy, to the point that they are overindulged and spoiled? Or will their minority status ensure that they are even less considered as communities cater predominantly for the ageing cohort of post war babies, and as adults strive for greater autonomy and increasingly pursue their own interests?

What is the impact of reduced and unstructured parental time with children? Do family dynamics and attachments suffer? Do teachers and child care workers become surrogate parents? Is there an increase in violence levels, as Belsky and others^{ix} contend, of children who spend long periods of time in day care? Is there an impact on a child's sense of who they are and their worth, or on their communication and negotiation skills? Is there a loss of family tradition and values?

We recognise the importance of the transmission of folklore and beliefs in indigenous cultures, but often not in others. If a family has little time to talk, from where do children derive their philosophical, ethical and spiritual bases? Do peers and the media exert a greater influence over children as parental involvement decreases?

Other aspects of life that have changed greatly over the past few generations are recreation, diet and eating patterns, and changes in modes of transport. Few have considered aspects of these changes for their impact, or potential impact, on children.

The most obvious change in recreational activities relates to computers and Internet usage. At May 2000, 75 per cent of Australian households with children under 18 years, had computers and 46 per cent had Internet access^x. For households without children the numbers were 42 and 25 per cent respectively^{xi}. The different usage rates between households with and without children is not surprising as studies show parents are strongly motivated to buy computers and subscribe to the Internet to enhance their children's educational opportunities^{xii}.

The increased use of home computers has been accompanied by increased speculation about their effects on children's lives. For example: access to computers increases the amount of time children spend in front of either the television or computer screen at the expense of other activities^{xiii}, to the extent that today's youth are sometimes referred to as mediavores; and playing computer games enhances some cognitive functioning and is linked to slightly better academic performance^{xiv}.

Although we do not fully understand the physical, cognitive or social consequences for children individually, or the evolutionary effects on children over time, computers have profoundly changed childhood experiences over the last decade.

Spender has identified a range of behavioural and cultural changes that she argues have resulted from computer use and characterise children of the information age. These include that they: 'worship the connection; use lateral rather than analytical thinking skills to establish connections; are affronted by limits and boundaries; play as they work and work as they play; do not expect to have to self regulate; have low levels of tolerance for systems failure; have no time for manuals; display little interest in understanding the complexities of the systems they navigate; and are expert in manipulating them to their own ends'^{xv}.

She claims that by school age, children operate in two worlds – the dependent and passive world of a print-dominated environment, and the fearless, independent and confident world of the digital environment.

The characteristics of the dependent passive world dominated by the print medium requires children to: 'sit still and concentrate; use disciplined eye movement; consign information to memory; follow a linear argument (usually someone else's); reduce meaning; foster a particular and ordered world view; identify cause and effect, and beginning and end'^{xvi}.

In contrast, the characteristics acquired by and required for operating in the fearless, independent, and confident world dominated by digital media are: 'rapid hand-eye coordination and encompassing eye movement; the mental agility to make rapid connections; the ability to organise information and deal with the absence of ending; access information rather than memorise it; and, to put a 'spin' on information rather than reduce its meaning'^{xvii}.

She even suggests that the current epidemic of Attention Deficit Disorder is a measure of this cultural shift^{xviii}!

Access to the digital media is not something from which children should, or could, be excluded. It provides them with opportunities and entertainment never experienced by any previous generation. It provides them with the capacity to socialise electronically with other children, unlimited by geographical constraints, and organise their lives in ways that were not previously the domain of childhood.

Chatrooms have been described as being the cyber equivalent of going down the creek to look for tadpoles or building a cubby house as it is an area in which children establish their own rules and do their own thing, where they do not have to compete with adults, and where 'parents have no vested interest in their performance'^{xix}.

The issue is not one of viewing digital media as innately harmful, but of being able to detect those aspects of its use, and experiences associated with it, that have the capacity to create seismic shifts in the experiences of childhood.

For example, if Spender's two worlds are valid, what are the issues and long term impacts for children in switching between the two? What are the stresses and consequences when they are required to leave an environment in which they are in control and masterful for one where they are dependent and passive? Does their preference for the digital environment disadvantage them in other aspects of life where it is necessary to tolerate frustration, follow a task through to its conclusion, or learn facts?

What are the effects of the substitution of a local community and friends by a cyber community, or the blending of the local with the global to the point that their environment becomes *glocal*?

There are also many less obvious implications, particularly operating at the biological level, that we are only just starting to consider. For example, in relation to screens, what is the neurological, as distinct from visual, effect of a focal length fixed at 40 centimetres for hours on end? What, if any, is the effect of rapidly changing images, the loss of linear sequencing, the ability to isolate and construct information in blocks rather than basic units, and the almost indiscernible flashing of the screen?

A prime example of unexpected consequences from changed behaviours is the recent finding in the United States that placing babies on their backs, now recommended as a precaution against sudden infant death syndrome, is delaying the time at which they roll over and crawl. Babies identified as prone sleepers continue to roll over and crawl on schedule and also reach several other motor milestones before supine sleepers^{xx}.

There are just two aspects of television that have a powerful impact on children. These aspects are separate but related - the emphasis on a very narrow view of beauty, and the targeting of children as consumers.

Children are involuntary participants in the 'looks' lottery exhibiting varying degrees of attractiveness from birth. Although there is a tendency to deny that looks count, studies show otherwise. Height in males is associated with greater reproductive success^{xxi} and tall men are also more likely to be hired, have higher starting salaries, and to be promoted^{xxii}. For females, slimness and attractiveness are prized. Less attractive women 'are less likely to get a job, earn a competitive salary or marry a man with resources or prospects'^{xxiii}, and female slenderness is associated with competence and occupational success^{xxiv}. Even babies are not spared the prejudice of 'lookism' with some evidence showing that mothers are not as attentive and more reserved in their affections to less attractive babies^{xxv}.

If the adult world is so vulnerable to superficial appearances, how great is the impact of appearance on young people? Valuing good looks is not something that was invented with digital technology, but in the past, young people were not exposed *en masse* and with increasing frequency through a variety of media to narrow versions of artificially 'perfect' images of other young people. Such images become the new reality.

Programs aimed at the pre-adolescent, adolescent and even young adult market regularly reflect problems and issues faced in real life. Young people identify with their characters – except that, unless they are there as the comic relief, such characters do not have acne, are invariably slim, have perfect hair and teeth, and always look cool.

What happens to the child who feels deficient in any or all of these areas, particularly when they have features they cannot change? What of the child from a cultural or ethnic minority whose appearance is quite different from this omnipresent norm?

This persistent exposure of young people to a narrow stereotype of physically perfect images has a great capacity to undermine self-esteem and create an ongoing sense of insecurity about personal worth. It also constrains the range of appearances and looks that are acceptable and has the effect of influencing young people to devalue peers who do not demonstrate the media-defined norms. Much victimisation and teasing in schools is related to appearance and notions of being cool^{xxvi}. Australian cultural minorities report high levels of bullying^{xxvii}, as do those whose body shape does not fit the ideal^{xxviii}.

As young people identify with the images and lifestyles they see on television, so they are also primed to be consumers of the products and services associated with the characters and lifestyles to which they are constantly exposed.

Television advertising consistently targets children, both as consumers in their own right and for their influence over household expenditure. Products are shelved at the eye height of children. Campaigns pair toys with take-a-way food. Brand identification is targeted at this demographic. They are sent unsolicited information across the Internet, targeted by the organisations they belong to, the forms they have completed, or the sites they visit. Messages are reinforced in magazines, frequently owned by the same media organisations who own the television stations, music, video clips and promotional activities.

John Warn, manager of the surf chain Brothers Nielsen, provides one example of the decreased age at which children become influential consumers. He reported that in 1997 in his Sydney store, sales of clothing for boys and girls aged 10 to 16 constituted only a couple of per cent of the store's sales. Two years later, clothing for this age group took up 35% of his floor space^{xxix}. The estimated spending in Australia by or for Generation Y on clothing, durables (typically electronic and digital), and entertainment or recreation, amounts to \$10 billion a year^{xxx}.

Such consumerism is of concern as there is evidence of a positive relationship between children's materialism and their susceptibility to peer influence^{xxxi}, which can make children vulnerable in a range of ways. It also preaches a gospel of materialism, which can be at odds with notions of compassion, kindness, honesty, intellect, and effort. What effects does it have on children and young people from disadvantaged environments who are exposed on a daily basis to lifestyles, that in no way resemble their own, and to which they may aspire but not acquire?

Children are particularly vulnerable to multi-million dollar marketing strategies for take-away and convenience food. These currently account for more than 30 per cent of the total household budget in Australia^{xxxii}. The number of take-away meals bought jumped 57 per cent between 1996 and 1997^{xxxiii}. With growth rates such as

these, it might not be long before Australia reflects the American situation where families spend more on fast food than on cars, records, music, newspapers, magazines and movies combined^{xxxiv}.

As national consumption of take-away and junk food increases, the consumption of fruit and vegetables decreases, particularly for children and young people. A survey of Australian children between 8 and 11 years found that, on the day of the survey, only 56% of boys and 62 % of girls had eaten any fruit, and only one in four had eaten any vegetables^{xxxv}. Another study of the diet of 3,000 two to 18-year olds showed one quarter ate no fruit and one-fifth ate no vegetables^{xxxvi}.

Fast food has been described as children's food as it lacks the spices and strong flavours of adult food, but is colourful and has, in industry terms, "good" mouth feel, because of the high fat and sugar content^{xxxvii}. As children are orally conditioned to fast food through this appeal, socially conditioned through the strong peer presence associated with fast food and the aggressive advertising campaigns of the fast food chains, and as, in my opinion, fast food also satisfies the psychological characteristics of information-age children identified by Spender, it is not surprising that Australia has a growing incidence of childhood obesity.

In the ten years to 1996, the incidence of childhood obesity in Australia doubled^{xxxviii}. It is estimated that currently 25 to 30 per cent of Australian children aged between seven and 15 are either overweight or obese^{xxxix}.

There are gender, race and socio-economic differences^{xl}, but the trend to overweight and obese children and young people in Australia over the past 10 years reflects a general trend in developed countries^{xli}.

There is a range of other matters to be considered. For example: What are the effects of changed patterns of eating, where families eat in front of the television, or different family members eat at different times? What is the impact of this on family relationships, speech development in young children, the learning of table manners and other social mores, or the sharing of information? Many children do not know how to prepare a meal from scratch. They do not know the names of many fruit and vegetables. Have you ever had a young person at a check-out ask you to identify a fruit or vegetable you are buying so that they can price it? What does this do for future household nutrition and budgeting?

As well as gaining weight through the excessive consumption of energy-dense food, children are also experiencing less of both voluntary and involuntary physical activity than in the past. The recreational choices of the Nintendo generation certainly contribute, but so do our town planning, modes of transport, safety concerns, and family time constraints, to name a few.

American studies show that in 1960 the average two-year-old had spent an estimated 200 hours in a car. In comparison, today's 2 year old has spent an estimated 500 hours in a car seat^{xlii}. What does constraining a young child for such a large number of hours do to their physical development? Just as placing children on their backs to prevent cot death has been found to have an unexpected consequence for their physical development, is there also a consequence of spending a large number of hours of prime development time in a car restraint?

In recognition that many children are transported to school each day and consequently miss out on the exercise and the chance to learn road safety skills the NSW health department in collaboration with a number of other agencies this year sponsored a Walk Safely to School Day. Who would have thought when we were children that several decades on, schools would have to take responsibility for teaching children how to walk to school or to play?

This reliance on transport could have other impacts on children that need to be considered. For example, what replaces the sense of independence that a child used to derive from walking to school? What replaces the sense of community that came with being able to know and name every household in the street?

As well as contributing to weight gain, reduced physical activity can have serious consequences for children's physical development, including their gross motor skills and laterality, which are pre-requisites for other aspects of physical development. These in turn impact on children's capacity to learn to read and write, and their general physical well-being.

This sample of issues and examples is provided with the hope that they help generate an increased sensitivity to the effects that environmental change of any sort can have on children, and to help us create environments that are more child friendly and more child aware.

The NSW Child Protection Council defines a child friendly community as:

...one which values and respects children and caters for the diversity of their cultural backgrounds and circumstances. It recognises the impact of political, social and economic decisions on children and their caregivers. It acknowledges the rights, needs and interests of children and builds these into its decision making processes^{xliii}.

Although in some ways children are accorded more attention than in the past, there are also some examples where they are not. The ambiguous attitude to children sees them embraced and invited to participate in some quarters, particularly where they are identified as profitable consumers, but also not considered, or specifically excluded in others. Enterprises that do not see a commercial advantage in courting children or accommodating their presence can be decidedly child *unfriendly*. Counters are too high, no toys or facilities are provided and children are generally made to feel unwelcome, or in some cases, are banned.

It is easy to see childhood through our own experiences without seriously considering what has changed in the meantime, that now defines childhood and child development differently. What could you do as a child that the current generation of children can no longer do? Can you determine what needs, cognitive, physical, emotional or social, those activities fulfilled. Are there substitute activities that a child can undertake today that would serve the same purposes?

This is not to suggest that in most cases there are no substitutes. Many are probably much more interesting than in the past. I am also not attempting to hark back to a golden age that never really existed, but simply to alert you to the fact that

children have needs and experiences that may not be adequately met because of changes to the way we live.

These are some observations from Brisbane born author David Malouf that capture the intimacy of the relationship small children have with the environment that is their first home and the lifelong effects of that relationship.

First houses are the grounds of our first experience. Crawling about at floor level, room by room, we discover laws that we will apply later to the world at large; and who is to say if our notions of space and dimension are not determined for all time by what we encounter there, in the particular relationship of living-rooms to attic and cellar (or in my case under-the-house), of inner rooms to the verandahs that are open boundaries?

Each house has its own topography, its own lore: negotiable borders, spaces open or closed, the salient features – not Capes and Bays in this case but the Side Door, the Brass Jardiniere – whose names make up a daily litany. A complex history comes down to us, through household jokes and anecdotes, odd habits, irrational superstitions. Its spirit reside in ordinary objects that become, beyond the fact of presence and usefulness, the characters in a private language – characters too in the story we are living. We hear our first folk tales with a start of recognition, since what is enacted in them is general to every society, even the smallest, and our own has already revealed to us the magic that glows along a threshold or round a forbidden biscuit tin. The house is a field of dense affinities, laid down, each one, with an almost physical power, in the life we share with all that in being ‘familiar’ has become essential to us, inseparable from what we are. We are drawn back magically, magnetically to our own sticky fingerprints...

I can keep our first house undivided, as it was in my earliest experience of it, when I was not yet eight years old; and it is this whole house I want to go back to and explore, rediscovering, room by room, what it was that I first learned there about how high, how wide the world is, how one space opens into another, and from the objects those rooms contained, and the habits and uses they were caught up in (including the forbidden ones), what kind of reality I had been born into, that body of myths, beliefs, loyalties, anxieties, affections that shape a life whose outline we enter and outgrow^{xliv}.

Malouf's observations poignantly demonstrate the profound significance of a child's early environment. The style of houses and fences we build, the materials and finishes we use, the size of our sub-divisions, the type of tree we plant and garden design we favour, impact on the way children can experience their environment, and eventually as Malouf suggests, who they become.

The type of play equipment we provide, the hours we work, the way we communicate, our modes of transport, the structured activities we favour for our children, our security concerns, family composition, patterns of spending, and our sense of style and fashion can also be added to this list.

If children do not develop a sense of geographical community, are the communities that they develop through interests and activities appropriate and sufficient substitutes? If these communities include only individuals of a similar age, it means that some children are never exposed to people older than their parents. What is the effect of that on both those children and that community?

What is the impact on the amount of eye contact an infant receives when placed in long term child care? Is there any effect on children when a dishwasher replaces washing up around the kitchen sink?

The list of small but significant differences is seemingly endless and I challenge you to find some for yourself and consider what the impact might be on children, or family, or community dynamics.

Some of these issues might seem inconsequential, and some of them well may be, but without exploring the possible effect of change on children such as the increase in sedentary play, they make take their toll. It is important that we do not fail children simply because we are insensitive to their developmental and other needs, uncertain of the influences upon them, and unaware of their multiple impacts.

Children are confronted by an increasingly complex and problematic world: crowded by relentless scientific and technological development, and environmental and ethical concerns affecting the way they socialise, learn, play - what they hear, taste and see, and the air they breathe. And even, given recent developments in genetics, what stock they might inherit when conceived.

More than ever, today's ... child is also an international child, influenced by world events, trends and technologies. The iconography from earlier decades – kids in billycarts, or of alleyway cricket games – is superseded by such sometimes surreal images as recent television footage of a seven-year-old Tibetan lama sitting crosslegged in his golden and burgundy robes playing Pokemon; or a documentary on a child with a life-threatening condition being operated on in utero^{xlv}.

Little wonder then that the four articles in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 19 on safe environments, article 24 on health environments, article 29 on stimulating educational environments and article 31 on culturally supportive environments) are receiving more widespread and increasing attention.

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^v Bagnall, D. 1999, The Y factor, *The Bulletin*, March 16, 1999, 15-19.

^{vi} MacKay, H. 1999, *Turning point: Australian's choosing their future*, Sydney: MacMillan, p. 117.

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