
Children being children: the value of an 'importance filter'

Dr Jonathon Sargeant

Bond University, Australia

Abstract

The perspectives of young children are of considerable interest to the community yet remain largely misunderstood. In this paper I posit that children are optimistic and have a deeper understanding of global, local, and social issues than was previously thought. This study challenges the notion that children are either adversely affected by knowledge or ignorant of global issues outside their control. The effects of external media and the reputed social decay of society, and the pessimistic worldview reportedly held by young children are questioned. In acknowledging children's understanding of key issues, this research shows that children engage in an internal metacognitive processing of information that allows them to maintain their optimism. This paper introduces the concept of an 'importance filter', an internal information processing mechanism that assists children to make sense of their world.

Introduction

Introduction

The child's world of 2007 is often characterised as one that is subjected to a bombardment of information. News of terrorism, societal unrest, parental disquiet and political debate now reach children in quantities and via mediums that far outweigh what was received by previous generations. Such a plethora of information sourced from the adult world now presents children with knowledge that either has little relevance to them, or is confusing and distressing. Despite this, childhood remains notionally carefree and most children appear relatively unaffected by this influx of non-childhood knowledge. Why? The potential for this information to be detrimental to children's wellbeing is huge; but on the whole children seem to maintain a cognitive and emotional distance from the adult world that allows them to remain children. This phenomenon is often explained by the notion of 'childhood as ignorance'. However, considering the sheer volume of information children encounter, I suggest that another mechanism to counter its effect must be at play.

Many researchers allude to children's use of a personal information processing system. Some refer to it simply as 'kid radar' (Biddulph, 2006) others refer to a child's psychological safety mechanism (Bruner and Weinreich-Haste, 1987; Eckersley, 2000), or consider this 'making sense' mechanism as resilience or hardiness (Ruvolo, 2004). However, such models are generally applied when investigating stressful events and their effects on children. Spinrad, Losoya, Eisenberg & Fabes, (1999) suggest that all children learn, primarily from their parents, strategies to regulate their response to external events.

Based on an analysis of four studies of children's self reporting of their perspectives, I propose that most children internally prioritise information to allow them to pursue their childhood relatively unburdened by external stresses. I also propose that there is an additional mechanism in children that activates when a child is not necessarily stressed, but needs to deal with a range of stimuli. I have called this the 'importance filter'.

The child informant

The legitimacy of children's views is often overlooked in research. We tend to gain access to their knowledge, understanding, perceptions, and concerns through adult-generated questionnaires and experiments; we don't allow them their own input. I believe that there is validity in each child's perspective and that up to now this has been largely ignored. Of particular importance is the emerging emphasis on children as competent interpreters of their every-day world when developing programs and services for children (Danby and Farrell, 2004).

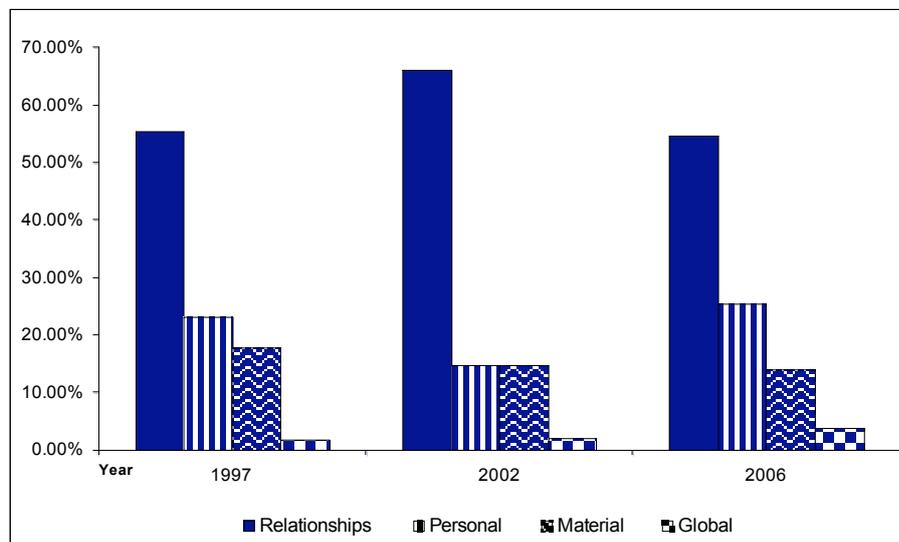
Australian children today live in a constructed and technological age where entertainment, education, and domestic life are strongly influenced by the material resources (such as television, computers, the internet, and transport) available to them. For too long, the child's perspective has been seen as unreliable, biased and too immature to be considered as valid informants for education and public policy development. This is of particular importance in Australia, as children now have unprecedented access to information from sources beyond an adult's direct control.

For the past decade, I have been gathering Australian children's perspectives of the world. During this period over 1000 children have described what makes them worry, what they need to be happy, and what they would like changed in the world. Over this period, it has become increasingly apparent that adults largely underestimate the complexity of a child's world. In contrast to popular opinion, young children have a strong capacity to observe, interpret and react to external influences, issues, and confrontations without losing their optimism. In modern times, children have access to almost limitless knowledge. Whilst they can access as much information as they wish, they are powerless to tackle most of their concerns personally. The only way to deal with such knowledge is to delegate their resolution to the adult world.

Children have a reputation for being materialistic, selfish and generally ignorant of the outside world. In reality, a number of recent studies show that

children are more aware than they let on (Cook and Hess, 2007; Cook-Sather, 2002). Sargeant (1997, and 2005) explored how Australian children aged between 8 and 14 viewed four themes: relationships (friends & family), personal conceptions (of being a child), the material world (technology, media, and money), and global issues (terrorism, war, the environment, the future). These themes reflect contemporary issues that present both opportunities and threats to Australians' sense of community. As Figure 1 shows, in the sample years 1997, 2002 and 2006, responses to the question; *what do you need to be happy?* refer to relationships most often.

Figure 1: What do you need to be happy? Relative importance to children of relationships, their personal conceptions, material possessions and world affairs.



The data for these studies were collected from regional and metropolitan centres across Eastern Australia. In each study it was expected that children would nominate material possessions or an end to some distressing event or condition (Strasburger, 2001) to be of greatest importance. However, as the results show, relationships were by far the most important. Each of these studies was conducted during organised educational activities, and contradicting other research and pre-conceived expectations, the children's answers that directly related to school issues, teachers or external events were few.

Access to information.

Young children are becoming more aware (and potentially concerned) about issues that were previously kept from them by wary adults (Prout, 2005; Simpson, 2004). These can include the financial stability of the family, the emotional strengths or weaknesses of family relationships, global unrest, war, terrorism, child exploitation, environmental degradation, long-term unemployment and poverty.

Contemporary media reports these as being a significant concern (Adler, 1998; Demetriou, 2005; Thekaekara, 2004). Educational programs also engage with these themes; the assumption being that by educating children about today’s issues, these future leaders will be better equipped to make positive change (Parsons, 2003). So long as these issues command a significant amount of attention in the media they will continue to impact on young children. As a result, one might ask, do today’s children know too much for their own good? And to what extent can children maintain a balanced view of their own world in the face of such knowledge?

Children draw on two key sources of knowledge: observation and experience. Experience enables children to choose a course of action with a reasonable expectation that certain outcomes can be achieved (Chandler and Dahlquist, 2002). Observation relies on other information and processing for it to gain relevance (Geldard and Geldard, 2004; Morss, 1990). Modern children are now affected more by observational knowledge and ‘virtual experiences’ than previous generations. In 2007, children act differently from their counterparts of as recently as ten years ago; they follow different social rules in each of their ‘lives’, e.g. their school life, their home life, and their secret chat room life (Robertson, 2004). Children now assume more formalised sub-lives that are determined by their context (Robertson, 2004). These sub-lives now serve more complex functions beyond entertainment.

Wason-Ellam (2004) suggests that as children’s culture is increasingly intertwined with global media, their imagination is lost as packaged entertainment replaces free imaginative play. She suggests the aims of the media are threefold; to inform, entertain and, of most concern, to entice. However, by introducing barriers to accessing the media, adults may be contributing to a situation where children actively seek out these information sources because of the restrictions placed on them (Simpson, 2004). A direct effect of this kind of illicit data gathering by children may be the development of an unrealistic or unbalanced view of the world, as children gain unfiltered information and are unable to draw on other interpretations or clarification from teachers and parents. Figure 2 provides some insights into the range and breadth of information now available to children.

Figure 2 Sources of information readily available to Australian children

<p>internet</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • websites • unrestricted viewing • cyber bullying • chat room • advertising 	<p>home</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • parents • neighbours • peers • siblings • strangers
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<p>television</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • unrestricted viewing • news • global information • advertising • violence • online communities <p>other</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • gaming • sport • grandparents • clergy • mobile phones (SMS) • reading • clubs • extended family • print media 	<p>neighbourhood</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • strangers • neighbours • peers <p>school</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • teachers • strangers • peers <p>experience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • private • social • advertising
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As the information sources listed in Figure 2 (and others) continue to influence children's lives, the relationship between the adult world and the child's world changes as the once most trusted source of knowledge for children, adults, moves to virtual environments and the media. As Prout (2005:124) notes, 'children who are connected with TV and the internet extend the reach of their experience and multiply the range of facts and values they encounter'. Local and global information that is regularly presented to children via education, family, peers and the media can distort children's views of their world. In the modern world of 'news on demand' and education for the future, children are being forced to engage with issues of societal focus that are neither easily understood nor relevant to their place in the community.

Hicks and Holden (1995) suggest that although the overall perceptions of children are generally pessimistic, they are still able to maintain a positive outlook of the future from a personal perspective. Conversely, Sargeant (2005) found that while children expressed an awareness of major global issues, they did not express this as a personal concern. Their focus remained on their family. The big things were left for adults to deal with and to worry about.

Protecting children

The adult community continues to make adjustments and regulations to ensure the safety and freedom of children (Furedi, 2001; Simpson, 2004). An adult's

interpretation of a child's emotional state can influence the adult's preparedness to either expose or shield the child from similar stimuli in future situations. Regulations on television content or restricted access to playgrounds are made in the name of protecting children, although it is unclear what the children themselves think about these restrictions (Robertson, 2000).

A commonly held view of modern children is that they are predominantly self-absorbed and focused on personal gain and satisfaction (Berman, 2003). If children are worried about family breakdown, about pollution, about terrorism, about the future, about school matters, bullying, schoolwork, or teachers, they tend not to show it unless asked. Conversely, if children are made happy by toys, brand name possessions, a nurturing home environment, or success at school, they will say so, since the expression of joy is socially acceptable and encouraged (Furnham and Cheng, 2000; Strasburger, 2001). The expressed priorities of children, across all of the studies that I have conducted, are dominated by an altruistic commitment to, or yearning for, close familial relationships. Such affectations are potentially amplified by the fact that today's children, by virtue of more open communication trends within families, are bearing greater witness to the difficulties their parents face than in previous generations (Macionis & Plummer, 2005; Berman, 2003).

Kulynych (2001:233) notes; 'the capacities of children are frequently underrated, and those of adults overrated'. By devaluing the child's perspective, adults are missing out on significant insights into the social and educational needs of the nation's children. Unfortunately, this widely held view of children's capacities is only slowly changing because of the barriers presented by Danby & Farrell's (2004:37) observation that 'in reality, children do not have the same rights as adults'. The research that forms the basis of this paper does not challenge or ignore the 'new' sociology of children but notes that there is a selective attention to the child's view that pervades much of childhood research.

Each culture has a set of norms, conventions, traditions that influence their children's sense of place. A child's lifeworld, or *lebenswelt*, encapsulates the conditions, resources, relationships, and experiences that create the circumstances under which they live. Cultural knowledge equips adults for providing for children, protecting them and preparing them for the future (Archard, 2004; Prout 2005). By furthering our understanding about how children prioritise their thoughts and gain insights, we can increase our understanding of how a child sees its world.

Today's children do not necessarily experience, or understand, the notion of the 'easy' time in life. Indeed, for most of human existence, the carefree childhood and opportunities for 'child's play' were very short period in their life. The western world, up until the industrial revolution, viewed a child purely as someone who was not yet able to work (Ari es, 1962). Day, Flynn & Coobe (2003) observe that notions of childhood and adolescence are relatively recent in Western societies. Consequently, claiming that 'children don't know how to play anymore' is somewhat of a generational statement made by people who experienced unprecedented wealth and social advancement in the post World War 2 decades.

There is increasing research interest in child wellbeing and social identity although, until very recently, many programs that advocate for children have excluded children themselves from the process. Fortunately, the contemporary view that children are neither capable nor reliable reporters of their own experience and knowledge is waning (Danby and Farrell, 2004). The sociology of childhood continues to provide insights into our understanding of children, how they mature, their cognitive and emotional development, and their place in the world. However, the scarcity of research that explores children's perspectives indicates an underlying tenet that children are unreliable reporters.

The difficulties in effectively conducting research with children, and particularly research into children's perspectives, inevitably results in conflicting conclusions. Some research reports that an epidemic of childhood depression and anxiety disorders looms large (Eckersley, Wierenga and Wyn, 2005), others suggest that there is really nothing to worry about (Furedi, 2001). A reason for these contradictions that was identified by Eckersley (2001) is the methods used in each study. In general, research with young children often uses a single design that that can render the research problematic. There are three main problems.

Many studies adopt a 'deficit' approach where the focus is on one issue of interest to the researcher and do not consider other concerns and interests held by young children. Such studies may exaggerate or underplay the perspectives of children. Consequently, studies of marginalised children or children from disadvantaged backgrounds are extrapolated to the wider population and presented, or at least interpreted, as representing children in general. Crosnoe (2002) and McCabe & Barnett (2000) note that much of the current research into the future of childhood is taken from a deficit model that takes what is wrong with the world and indicates how it can be fixed (Hughes and Leekam, 2004).

Studies that observe children in their natural setting are necessarily designed by adults and so bring with them biases, preconceptions, and expectations that the adult may hold about a child's behaviour, motivation, or conduct (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2005). Eckersley (2003) notes that varying views of childhood are often compounded by (often-unacknowledged) adult preconceptions and/or methodologies used in particular studies (Davies, 2005).

The challenges to childhood research described above reinforce the notion that, as adults, how much we know and understand about children and childhood is largely determined by how much we want to know. As a community, the adult population might need to consider that children are spending more and more time worrying about matters that do not directly impact upon them. The child's voice is one that requires careful interpretive investigation to reveal its underlying meaning.

Australian children enjoy a relatively safe and affluent lifestyle. There are strong social support structures for the unemployed and poor, extreme civil violence and terrorism is almost nonexistent, and natural disasters are rare. Yet these are matters frequently identified by Australians as major concerns. Australian children know that there is poverty in other parts of the world, they share the despair at

natural disasters, they express fear at the prospect of terrorist attacks, and they express a concern for the future of the planet. Of interest is not that Australian children hold the above concerns, but that these concerns are mostly founded on knowledge, not experience.

Hicks (1996) asserts that adults' images of the future are not well developed and are more likely to be pessimistic than optimistic. If children's views of the future are reflective of the adults' views and adults feel they have little control over the future, then children's feelings of disempowerment must be multiplied. As presenters of knowledge to the child who has no experience (Moses, Aldridge, Cellitti and McCorquodale, 2003), adults must consider the possible effects this knowledge may have on a child's lifeworld.

The presentation of new information to children should be balanced; otherwise, a child's lifeworld may be dominated by knowledge of situations that may not directly affect them. If children are given too much information about things that are superfluous to their day-to-day lives, their emotional and cognitive energies may concentrate on these to an excessive extent. As a consequence, their age appropriate socio-emotional development may be hindered (Prout, 2005).

Woolley (1997) notes that many adults are somewhat envious of a child's life that is seemingly free from the constraints of everyday reality. However, such claims are based on the erroneous assumption that children do not differentiate between fantasy and reality, and therefore are not as worried about the real world as are adults (Woolley, 1997). In fact, children can distinguish reality from fantasy and so it is important to consider how what children see as real affects them. It is important to take into account the extent to which adult behaviour, their attitudes to, and their communications with children exacerbates or ameliorates the child's concerns.

As children are becoming aware of the adult world earlier in life (Adler, 1998), their ability to engage in, and the ability of influential adults (e.g. teachers and parents) to encourage and foster the ideal carefree childhood may be further impeded (Langeveld, 2003). For some children, experiences of real world issues are forced on them by, for example, images of natural disasters, extreme poverty, or global and civil unrest. Although these events are rare in Australia, the pervasiveness of the media and other information sources means that events not directly influencing Australian children are still having an effect.

A child's lifeworld may be unduly affected by knowledge of other people's lifeworlds. This associative knowledge may influence their feelings about their natural environment, their social environment, and their future environment. With an increasing awareness of global unrest and personal security and freedom on a local scale, some suggest that today's children are focusing their concerns further and further away from their local environment (Hutchinson, 1999).

By maintaining restrictions on the activities of children, the intent is to strengthen their resiliency and better prepare them for the possibility of danger. As a

result, parents are being exhorted to monitor their children's activities and to either supervise or limit their exposure to the media (Furedi, 2001). However, greater attention is required not on restricting the information children have access to, but to understanding their cognitive, physical, and emotional responses to this information.

Local cultural diversity and regular participation in world events gives Australians a perspective on the global community that belies their geographical isolation. While there are many positive consequences of this, it also brings the problems of the wider global community closer and gives the impression that they are as likely to occur in Australia as anywhere else. Historically, and in many ways logistically, this is unlikely to occur.

The importance filter

The 'importance filter' is an internal mechanism that allows most children to prioritise their concerns according to their physical and emotional needs. Information from external sources such as the adult world is received by children, but how or whether each child acts on these influences is determined by their importance filter. The importance filter allows children to prioritise their thoughts and actions according to their relevance to their lifeworld.

The importance filter enables children to process a range of information and maintain a balanced view of their world. As information is presented to children, their responses and attention are based on how their importance filter is put together. It is apparent that children maintain a local and family oriented focus and view the future with an optimism, based not on ignorance, but on genuine expectation and the hope that the future will be good. By understanding the function of the importance filter adults will be better equipped to work with children to effect positive change in their community while embracing the optimism expressed by the children.

Increasingly, young children are being exposed to the same information as adults, but their importance filter prevents them appropriating the negative worldview as readily as adults. Children are not ignorant of the issues affecting the community—locally or globally—but they can remain emotionally detached from issues they are not ready, willing or able to confront because of their social status as children. Their importance filter places priority on those that affect their own world at that time.

If children are able to effectively employ the strategies suggested by Spinrad, Losoya, Eisenberg, & Fabes (1999), they must first process the information to select the correct strategy to use. Children do this, not through ignorance of external events, not through a lack of understanding of the world outside of their own, or through the intervention of adults, parents, teachers, etc.; they use the importance filter. The importance filter functions as a sophisticated self-regulatory tool for processing information. It is the importance filter that allows most children to continue to participate in their community in a way many believe they no longer can: as children.

Consider the flow of information from a child's key information source: the adult world. In many instances this information is monitored, filtered or regulated by adults and presented in a form deemed by adults as suitable for what they see as a child's level of maturity. At other times, children, without regulation, receive a great amount of information. Such sources may be drawn from the various forms of media, observations of adult behaviour, listening to adults' discussions and involvement with adults less diligent in regulating the information than parents and teachers might be. Such people could include older siblings who are considered adult by the children and who, in many cases, consider themselves as adults.

Regardless of the source, it is recognised that children receive much information about adult circumstances, both global and local, and in varying forms. Depending on the age of the child, this information may be interpreted as reality. The sheer volume of information dictates that, for survival, children must have a mechanism to assess, then adopt, discard, or store the information presented to them.

The importance filter is not presented as an alternative to other theories of child and adolescent development into adulthood, but describes the processes at play during childhood that may affect which socio-emotional path towards adulthood that children follow. Without an effective information processing system like the importance filter, children may assume a pessimistic outlook that becomes more so through adolescence into adulthood.

Children are aware of many issues that affect today's society. However, this knowledge does not appear to be overpowering them. They are explicitly taught about the environment, health, animal welfare, poverty, and cultural diversity and, as a result, are less ignorant and more perceptive of global and local issues than they are often given credit for (Strong, 1998). The importance filter enables children to participate in their community without being burdened by the problems surrounding them. It is the importance filter that allows children to mention, for example, 'family' in a survey (Sargeant, 2005), even when the wider community suggests they have greater social and global concerns.

For young children, the importance filter allows them to maintain a positive view of their future in the face of evidence to the contrary. This does not suggest that children are ignorant or disrespectful of global issues, but it reflects their acceptance that they have little control over their external circumstances. At an age that is supposed to be a time of self-absorption, the children see other influences as peripheral to their core needs. Their importance filter facilitates this perspective.

Personal priority

Pre-adolescent children are not generally credited with having a deep sense of 'other' or qualities of altruism. Freud suggested that at this time children are defined more by their school experience than by their family. They have concerns for themselves and little for others, 'the affection the child formerly felt for the people near him is directed towards objects' (Muller, 1969). Whilst this description of

childhood in the 1960s may be correct, it can no longer be assumed to be the same for the children of the 21st Century.

The information available to today's children often points to a world of despair and hopelessness. O'Neil (1991) suggests that children are pessimistic at a very young age about what the future holds for them. Indeed some literature suggests that children are becoming genuinely fearful that there will be no future at all (Thekaekara, 2004). However, it is adults who make these assumptions and, as Furedi (2001:90) notes, 'it is easy to forget that the way we regard childhood depends on adults' perception of that experience... even the demand for "children's rights" has been formulated by adults'.

It is not essential that a child is happy all the time, or that they should they never experience frightening situations. Attempts to exclude children from the perils of the adolescent and adult world may be detrimental to a child's development. Adults are more able to act on information and experience, they have more choices and their responses to external influences are often more deliberate and framed in terms of their role in the community. By contrast, children do not have this responsibility or power, and must be far more selective about what information they act on. Adults have responsibilities to their community, family, lawmakers, and themselves, and must consider these groups in their actions. However, a key responsibility of adults is to assist their children to make sense of the world. Adults are also responsible for decision making on behalf of children to protect them and restrict access to external threats, real or potential. Ironically, it is in this role, as Simpson (2004) notes, that many adults are influenced by television.

Adults are expected to act, children are not. Children's concerns can be dismissed because they are not considered to have the knowledge or experience to be able to judge things on their merits. Many think that children are blissfully ignorant and are only concerned with things that are immediate, tangible, and selfishly related. If they do express distress or concern for events of a larger nature, they are not given credit because it is thought that they wouldn't understand.

Consequently, children are forced to carry their concerns without resolution and, over time, the weight of unresolved issues could be detrimental. The importance filter is the key mechanism that enables children to maintain their position in the world in the absence of adult guidance. Children are exposed to information and experience, either direct or vicarious, that they must filter themselves. That information has a bearing on their lifeworld. The importance filter allows them to effectively discriminate so that they may function as children without becoming obsessed by the information bombarding them. Children are not resigned to having no control; they use their importance filter to maintain their perspective. Yet the adult community largely ignores this highly sophisticated maintenance of self. The only control a child has is to monitor the extent to which external information influences their view of daily life. They do this exceptionally well.

The effect of the importance filter is so strong that it give adults reason to believe that children do not care about, or have been adequately protected, shielded

or desensitised from, distressing information. In fact, the breadth of information sources available to children is so vast that no adult could completely shield a child from gaining knowledge without consent or external filtering. The importance filter assists children to determine how and what to respond to, how to interpret all of the information flowing to them.

Conclusion

The protectionist ideal described by Simpson (2004), is that the wisdom, experience and knowledge of the adult world should be passed on to children in a way that is beneficial to their development. The future, and ideas of the future, should evolve within the child. This flow of information depends on the level of control the child has at a particular age. However, if one accepts that children are easily and negatively influenced by the adult world then, by deduction, it follows that the young child's world is becoming increasingly negative due to the effects of global and social unrest. Features of the adult world are weighing more generally and heavily on children and have the potential to cause children's lives to become overwhelmed by the worries and difficulties affecting adults. If these conditions were to persist, the negative view of the adult world would leave children with nothing but a pessimistic view of their future.

Modern childhood is increasingly filled with aspects that are not considered to be in a child's best interest. In countering this effect, children maintain a distance from the adult world through the effective use of the importance filter. However, not all children are able to use their importance filter effectively, and thus it should not be seen as a panacea for poor adult-child relationships. For some children, the weight of negative stimulus may be too great. These may be the children who identify family and friends and relationships as important, but don't have such a network to draw on.

It is important to acknowledge that children are discriminating in making sense of the world. It is also apparent that they are more socially intelligent than we, as adults know what to do with. Cullingford (2004) suggests that children are constantly thinking about the real world but learn to ignore what is not necessary to their life. This author suggests that they do not ignore, they filter.

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