

# Modern Childhood

The Image of the Child in our Society

THE SEVENTH KILBRANDON LECTURE

By Trond Waage  
Special Adviser, UNICEF Research Centre, Florence  
former Norwegian Children's Ombudsman  
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The following is an edited transcript of the lecture delivered in Glasgow on 1 November 2005 by Trond Waage. The transcription has not been authorised by the speaker.



It was a Tuesday afternoon in my office, when I was Ombudsman for Children in Norway, and the phone rang at about half past six in the evening. I picked up the phone and a voice said, “Hi Trond, this is Tom.” Tom had been a student of mine at University - he was now Rector at a Secondary School outside Oslo.

Tom said, “Trond, I need your help.”

“What’s the problem?” I asked.

“I’m at the Secondary School,” he said, “and the final year class are creating havoc all over the school. It’s impossible to do any teaching. They are disrupting the place, the staff are in crisis and we have tried everything. So we wanted to see if the Ombudsman could try to talk to them”.

“Okay, Tom,” I replied, “I will come up on Friday. Is that okay?”

On Friday at two o’clock, I arrived on the 05:30 from Oslo. I walked into the class. Could I call it a class? It was a mess. They were sitting everywhere, they were up on the table, on the chairs, and whatever I tried to say, they twisted it around. I just felt angry and thought, “This is impossible!”. I felt we could do with a ‘Big Brother’ system

because they were so *nasty*. They were using very bad language, and the worst guy – Eric – was sitting there in the second row, with his feet on the table, twisting everything I said. After twenty minutes I said, “Okay, if this is what you want, it’s your life – do it”.

I went out in anger, confused. I felt like a loser. Outside, Tom was standing, waiting for me and he could see the disappointment on my face. I couldn’t get through to these kids, and especially not to Eric. Further down in the hall, the parents were waiting, expecting a summing-up meeting which we had intended to be very positive, with me telling them what to do. And we ended up with this classic philosophical moment, just sitting together, sighing and saying, “Well, that’s it.”

After the coffee and cake, I went out to my car. I had almost run out of gas, so had to stop at the local gas station to fill it up. I was so depressed, and it was getting dark. I went into the gas station. It was one of these modern gas stations, you never know if they even have gas because it looks like a restaurant or a coffee bar. So I fill up my car, go in, and there he was – standing there –

Eric! – in uniform, looking at me and saying “Yes, sir, anything else?”

I had this enormous sense of confusion at what was happening here. Eric pushed a few buttons and produced a café latte for me, I drank it, and finally I said “Eric, what is this?” Here he was, responsible for a gas station, fifteen and a half years old - he probably shouldn't even be doing a four and a half hour shift at his age. Then politely and nicely he said, “Trond, it's so easy. Over, there, at the school, I've never been met with respect. I never respond in a responsible way when people show lack of respect to me, that's why. It's so simple.” I used Eric for many years as a main adviser for my job as an Ombudsman for Children.

Minister, ladies and gentlemen, my name is Trond. Thank you very much for that kind introduction. I am very delighted to be giving this lecture in the memory of Lord Kilbrandon. Through his support in the 1960s, which led to the Children's Hearings system, he set in motion a very positive development, and I will mention throughout my lecture not only Scotland, but also Europe, which was, and still is, a very good place for children.



I'm going to say something about modern childhood, the image of the child in society, based on some of my research. Some of my work has been carried out at the UNICEF Research Centre in Florence, but I mainly base my thoughts on the eight years of meeting with children in my capacity as an Ombudsman.

Before I do that, I want to go back some years, to the end of the Middle Ages, when the main task for children was to survive to the age of six or seven, after which they disappeared into the world of adults. There was no social awareness of childhood – that is, of children as a separate social group. Childhood was not reflected in the home, children simply did not exist, or were regarded as their father's private property. Thankfully, that is not the case today, is it?

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, we had a refined version of childhood. We needed to get their small fingers away from industry, because we recognised their intelligence. So we placed them in education, and childhood developed as a kind of independent category. In the eighteenth century, we recognised the child's soul, this fantastic noble thing inside every child which could be

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developed in a positive way, and children were seen as a part of the development of society, the hope for the future, the future-makers.

And now we have developed laws for protection of children, for social control, for compulsory education, and the consequences of this new attitude towards childhood is that children are more and more excluded from the world of work and are placed into a 'waiting room' known as schools. And children have shifted from being the property solely of the parents to also being the property of the state, because the state is now involved more and more in the name of protecting children, and this intervention of the state produces a conflict for many cultures. If you ask children themselves, they would say "We are not yet human beings. We are not yet adults. We don't yet have our full value, we are not yet participating." They are the 'Not Yet' generation, they would say. This is not a good feeling, to be fifteen years old, after ten years in the education system, and not feel the value of being a human being because of the system. And we have people encouraging that feeling and that experience.

So this generation's children are in a conflict. They have been through a gender revolution, which means that when they enter the education system or school, they know that whether they are a boy or girl they will have the same opportunities. They don't necessarily depend on their parents' wallet if they are going to take up education – that was the main ideal and agenda at least. So we have the education revolution. Nearly everyone these days has the opportunity to enter education.

And what about globalisation? If you ask children today, and take the time to discuss it with them, you will very quickly find out that they have quite an overview of what the world is. I had to handle one war – the Vietnam War – but these days they have to handle fifteen to twenty wars and they know where they are happening.

The fashion industry is another trend which is influencing the youngsters these days.

The IT revolution is here. When I went into my oldest daughter's room recently there were so many things on – there was a TV, there was a computer, there was an SMSB playing - that I felt I was entering the control room of NASA! So I didn't go in, I just backed out because I could not handle all these things at the same time.

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So what I'm trying to say is that through all these revolutions and changes in modern society, which continues to change rapidly, children are more and more pilots for the future and they cannot survive by following the routes of the past. They have to try to define their own future much more so than previously – whereas we had both the support of our parents and the maps for the future. And this will, of course, create a new road for those of us who are involved in the development of the education system and universities, as well as policy making. Because the nursery is invaded by the fashion industry, the multi-media industry, the remote controls, the cellular phones. Have you seen the tongues when they start to SMS [mimics someone concentrating on texting with tongue protruding]? On the bus back home from the airport yesterday in Oslo there were two teenagers sitting opposite each other with these tongues sticking out, you know? No phone and they still understood each other. It's a new language. It's amazing how they used these and it's a fantastic communication tool for them, because they do not only have contact with their friends, but also have world-wide communication. But it is the SMS phantom, then the CD, then the DVD which have invaded the room. And then there is Broadband. I don't know if you have Broadband –

my house is too small. I haven't dared to put it in yet, because no one has told me how broad it is! But you must have it if you are going to be a part of Europe. They say in Norway that if everyone had Broadband we would be a member of the EU – at least that's what they said at this latest election we had. So the nursery is invaded and the child is turned into a Dolby child.

I undertook a project in the early nineties, when I was working for Child Watch International. We were a group of researchers who wanted to hold a Nordic Conference and we decided to apply for some funds for research on modern childhood from the Nordic Council. I was to take care of putting the application together and sending it to the Council. When the deadline came round I had received a response from all the other Nordic countries except Sweden. We were waiting for Göran from the University of Stockholm, so I called him and said, "Göran, we need a page from you now, because we won't get the money if we don't put the application in on time. So it would be good if you could do it today. Can you mail it to me?" And he said, "I can't find the mail but I'll fax it to you." After an hour the page came through on the fax. The content of the page was very good and I agreed with the

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guy in my office that he should scan it in and put it into the application. While we were standing there reading and nodding and saying “this is good”, a new fax arrived and I said, “Oh, just a minute, we have two.” We compared these two pages but we couldn’t see the difference and while we were waiting, another ten faxes came and we realised, finally, that they were faxes of the same page. So I called Göran - he is Professor in Youth Psychology, by the way – and I said, “Göran, what’s going on? You have sent the same page ten times.” And he said “I don’t understand it. I keep putting the paper in and it keeps coming back out again.”

What I’m trying to say is that this technology, which has simplified our lives so much, also means we can no longer live the simple life. It is not easy to be a professor at that level and still understand how quickly things are changing. Or why young people are using their thumbs all the time [mimics playing video games] and have to go to therapy to get their thumbs fixed.

In modern childhood today we also have the negotiation generation. They negotiate much more than ever before. I have four children and the oldest is the one with whom I

had set the standard for the other ones. When she was thirteen, we had a family bell. They could ring it when they needed to talk about something - we tried to take a democratic approach. So when she rang this bell, I knew what was going on, because she has been quiet for two days. When we sat around the table, she said, "Daddy, it's about mobile phones."

Now, I had at that time been published in a newspaper as saying that I was against thirteen and fourteen year olds having mobile phones, for three reasons. One was the radiation. We have not had enough research on that and it's now coming up more and more. Some researchers say this radiation from phones can be quite dangerous, so at certain stages of biological development we should not have this enormous exposure to radiation from the phone. Secondly, I had said, it's part of the fashion industry. You have to change to the latest model every year or even every six months to keep up with the latest of the latest, it's part of who you are. The third reason was that parents say it's taking away some of the social control. When the phone was in the living room and someone called and it was a friend of my oldest daughter, I could talk to her and say, "Hi, Linda, how are you today?" and that small talk I had with her was a part of the whole social network.

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So, my daughter said, “I know you are against mobile phones because of the radiation, and I do encourage you to go on with this because we need more research, and I do also understand your argument about the friends”. She was supporting my arguments all the way and then she said, “But I have one problem and that is that everyone in my class has a phone, and I don’t know which Pizza Hut they are going to on Thursday or which movie they are going to.” So I tried to come up with an argument, but when she had finished, she came up with the trump card, saying, “Daddy, do you really want me to be socially excluded?”

And, of course, no dad wants their child to be socially excluded. So, it ended up after a long debate with her getting a phone, but she wasn’t to bring it to school, only use it in her room and outside school. Three months later a new meeting took place and after that she had the phone in school, but it was supposed to be off during class and only on during the free time. And then after eight months, it was all there.

She had negotiated, and who had taught this girl to negotiate in this way? Dad? No, I would not say it was



Mum or Dad who had been doing the training. The education system? No. So there must be someone who has been training them, and they believe in children and they understand children in a completely different way than dad, mum and the educational system. And they invest a lot of money on research into this. You know who they are, right? Matel, Coca-cola and McDonalds, of course. They are doing a good job of teaching our kids to negotiate, which I think is positive if we can use it in a positive way and not only to buy into new trends.

So from authority to the negotiation family. Children expect participation and equality not only at home, not only among their peers, but also in the educational system and in the sports arena. They have a say. They have experience. They have the competence and they want to use that competence, and the first thing you have to do is to listen to them. We may struggle with the commercials, of course, but negotiation is something positive and involves participation.

Secondly, in the institution generation, children are more and more involved in organised activities. There are more and more professionals involved in childhood, which means that they meet different kind of people who are

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educated in how they should treat children and talk to children. The expectation of adults is that children then learn how to operate in this adult institution, learn what kind of expectations they should have. And they also bring this back home and behave positively or negatively towards the parents.

They are also the generation of individuals. If Scotland loses a football match against Norway you have to find one person who is responsible for losing, whether that is the coach or one of the players. You have to find one person, one individual, and that will give you the answer to why things went wrong. And this is not only in football. It's in music too. It's in all the TV films they are exposed to from age one. So the social codes are on their way to being replaced more and more by individual codes. This is also a new experience for us, because individualism is not necessarily negative, but if it totally replaces the social codes, which are the glue of the society and democracy, then we have to see the red alert and start to find ways of replacing social codes too.

In terms of the commercial generation, children and youngsters are, as I said earlier, the most important consumers. Quite a lot of research goes into this, and as

parents we are spending quite a lot of money on our kids. “To be or not to be” has been replaced today with “to have or not to have”. If you don’t have the right thing, you can very easily be excluded from the gang, from the group. In Norway, if you go into a Secondary School you will find five or six of the students there whose clothes are provided by commercial industry – free – they don’t pay for it. They are just going around being models for the others and creating the trend. And this is not only in Norway, it is also happening in England too, I heard. So, it’s as if what you have is much more important than what you are. A dangerous development, of course, but we are all a part of this development. For example, we all stop celebrating our birthdays after we have passed twenty-five. I’m just twenty-seven, so I have denied it for two years. We try to be as young as possible until we die because the philosophy of the market is that the one with the most things before he dies is the winner, isn’t it? So we collect all the time and we pass on to our children the idea that this is the way you should live – to consume – and it will bring us happiness.

In Sweden, a research group visited 152 nurseries for children between the ages of three and five years.

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On average they found 534 toys per room and twenty per cent were unpacked. Part of the conclusion was that children do not play much with these toys. (I had a son who mainly played with the hoover most of his childhood. I don't know why, because he's not selling hoovers now.) Nurseries reflect the adult consumer society, and consumer goods have high value. The sexless differences in toys are as high now as was the case a generation ago. Toys are given a symbolic meaning – they become an expression of love, but without consciousness, without foundation. Look at the airports around Europe. There are now two or three toy stalls in every airport duty free shop, because you have to buy something to take home which can show that you miss your child and that you love your child. And you buy plastic - you fill up the nursery with green, blue and pink plastic. That is love.

Then there's the media generation – the “screenagers”. I'm not going to discuss at length the violence in the media but there is a big study being commissioned by the General Assembly and Kofi Annan, who is General Secretary of the UN, called *The UN Study on Violence in Children*, which is now in its second year and will be presented to the Assembly next year. It has been a fantastic process, which has included looking at violence on the screen, violence in

school and bullying. There have been regular meetings and there has been an enormous momentum for change. So, regardless of the outcome I think the process which is now on-going has been fantastic.

The “screenagers” are trained not only to watch, but also to learn from the media and their computer programs. What they learn gives them this world view on everything. They can also make film clips and other effects, which is quite positive, and they have learned this from the media.

But what I want to underline here is how children learn the information codes from the media and learn to decode the information as they are learning. I am a trained TV producer, because I also headed the TV Department in the university for ten years, and I started working on how children decode visual information. TV programmes are made such that you have your emotions manipulated, for example in the news. The trigger is the headline, and if the headlines are well edited you will stick to the channel. And then you have the presenter, you have a conflict escalation, then you have a conflict resolution and then you have the weather phasing out the time. This is also how one and a half hour long films are made. It’s an emotional ride. I had the opportunity to go into the schools

and film the classroom for one month. I was actually searching for non-verbal behaviour – what they did with their bodies – when the pupils were sitting, but what we found was something quite different. We could read from the faces of every child who came into that classroom that they knew exactly what was going to happen in the next 45 minutes in this room. You could see that on their faces. After 25 minutes they were waiting for a ‘peak’. I’m not saying that the education system should try to adopt the same methods as TV or the media presentation model or the narrative role model, but what I’m trying to say is that if this is the true model, if this is how children experience the classroom, we have to do something because when you are a child whose potential is being neglected you cannot mobilise the research opportunities you have inside you.

Modern childhood has also created the “rights” generation. Children today know about their rights. One hundred and ninety two nations ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, a document which presents a kind of holistic view on childhood and is very pro-active in its form. It is not only a legislative approach, it is, as many researchers say today, a “redefining of childhood”, which is very important.

What we have experienced in some countries now is a kind of political correctness, an international expectation that we are focusing too much on the legislative approach to protection. That is done through the democratic society, through our parliaments and governments, through TV channels and the civil society with the family, schools, church groups, sport etc. They have a common understanding of the child in this culture, which is different from what is happening inside the political system. So people in our society become child-like, which is different from how children actually are. Through my work as an Ombudsman, I learned quite a lot about that across Europe. Legislation passed by parliament isn't necessarily meaningful for civil society. We can see this when it comes to smoking. In many countries now you are not allowed to smoke in public places because as an adult you need protection, but you are allowed to expose your child to heavy smoke in your car and in your kitchen. So we are very positive towards children when it comes to legislation, but when it comes to enlightening society something is missing. The implementation mechanism to reduce this gap is very important. We have political systems which can enforce this mechanism, not only through awareness raising campaigns. But we should also

have strong mechanisms to monitor this process – like Ombudsmen for children, which we now have a number of in Europe.

The children’s rights generation is based on the three “Ps” from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by all nations in Geneva, which many of you are probably very familiar with – protection, provision and participation. If you go into that report you will find that there is quite a lot on protection. Addressing this is the easiest thing to do – you just need to draw up the legislation. Next you look at provision, provision of education and health services for example, and then, if you have money and willingness left, maybe you do something about participation, because that’s mentioned in the Convention too. This approach is quite wrong and is not in the spirit of the Convention, because the Convention actually states that it should be a dynamic process. Provision is best when you have children taking part in shaping the final outcome – for example, what kind of reform to the educational system is required. Protection is most effective when children are involved in the process, much more so than they presently are. In many countries they are not involved at all in the protection processes in the country, and that’s why some of these protection mechanisms don’t work for children.



Article 12, which is the Participation article in the Convention, states that parties shall ensure that a child who is capable of forming his or her own views has the right to express those views freely in all matters. It is a tricky formulation because what does “capable of forming his or her own views” mean? I will come back to that, because that is something beyond the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In many countries in Europe today, such as Norway and Sweden, we do have participation, but my experience is that when I look into these projects and these activities, they turn out to be tokenistic, a pretence that we are taking children seriously. I have been to two hundred and fifty seven conferences in Europe, many with a title such as “Give Children a Voice”. If there is something I know, based on experience both from my own kids and also as an Ombudsman, it is that children do have voices. The problem is that we don’t have ears enough to listen to them.

The emancipation of the child is the “in thing” now, with discussion going beyond the participation mentioned in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. How far are we willing to go to empower a child? And what does it mean

to “empower”? Does it mean that I as an adult have to reduce my power? Well, yes it does, and this is of course threatening to all of us, because we want to have the authority and we want to prevent children having too strong an opinion about our decisions or the way the system is functioning.

Should children take part in a general election? In Norway I said two years ago that at the age of seventeen years and three months, when children get their ID number, they should also have the vote. I said this at a meeting we had in the Norwegian Parliament and there was some laughter when I said it, especially from women, who said “Trond, as a professional you know that children are not mature enough to do this, you know. And the world is too complex for a child to take part in a general election”. But I had done my homework because I had read all the debates in the Parliament in 1899 where they were discussing whether women should have the vote. What was the argument against? – that they are not mature enough and the world was too complex for women to understand. So I referred to that. And it will probably happen and, if it does happen, would then parents represent children in the beginning, when they are three, four, five six years old?

Maybe? And maybe it should be up to parents to decide when their children should use their vote. But if children had a vote, I'm sure that kindergartens as well as the education system would train kids in democratic processes more than they do these days. And I'm sure that when you had an election, the focus would be the family and children more than the price of the gas.

So, the evolving capacity of the child, I think, is attractive for some of us but we don't dare to push this line too far. I can see children's potential development and it's more a threat towards our power, because we have this common assumption about childhood that child development is a universal experience. Adulthood has normative status. Goals of childhood are universal and the deviation from the norm indicates risks. In that way children are very passive players. This is not only a common assumption, it is also a part of what we have stated through research. We have this understanding that the approaches have been influenced by stage theories, so maybe one of the strongest enemies when it comes to children's participation is Piaget. He developed stage theory, which is now reflected everywhere in policy making at university level and at teacher training colleges, and it states that children

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go through stages and it also describes what we can expect of children's development in different age settings. But this has been derived from the northern cultures, and other theories say the opposite. So, we should encourage more research which could challenge the traditional way of thinking about child development.

Should everyone who comes into the education system be concerned about this? Schools de-skill children by failing to value what is different about them and the capacity of their communities. They fail to promote participation as a learning opportunity. And how do we meet the modern challenges with regard to teaching us what is happening out there. Is something happening out there? What is happening in here? Is it more important that we do it our way? - "Sit still, I see your hand up but be quiet and sit". And we are more concerned about school subjects than the child inside, who represents energy and potential.

Schools are becoming society's largest waiting rooms, and they are becoming a major risk factor for children - not drugs, not violence in the street, not alcohol, but the education system, because we produce too many losers.

These losers won't necessarily end up in jail, but quite a lot of them will end up on our social budgets for the rest of their lives, and using our tax money. If you fail early in the education system, the cost to society is high, not only economically but also by causing a human disaster in the long term. So the learning process of creating the losers should be turned into one which creates winners: and that is quite a challenge. You cannot do it through a new educational reform, simply trying to just move something around or changing round some subjects and reviewing one thing or increasing something else, like for example IT. The idea is to bring children more into the driving seat in the educational system. Places which have tried that do not experience children as a threat. Children display enormous potential when they can utilise their competences in the educational system.

So then we have the "com-tech" generation - realising the potential and minimising the risk, yesterday and tomorrow. Yesterday the family room was the media room - everyone could sit in the room, and we had one TV and we could watch the same thing and we could talk about it. We had social control, we were in a position to monitor what kind of programmes our children watched and guide them if

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they saw something which was not good, or turn over the channel and say, “Now it’s time for the news”. But these days every room is the media room. If you go into a home these days you would find different media rooms there, catering to the different ages of the family members. You have the media room in your hand, the 3G or the PDA, and you can scan the Internet at high speed and do whatever you want.

This is becoming a big problem now in Tokyo because young girls are prostituting themselves through the 3G in high speed, high quality pictures, but the person they are selling them to can find them and can start to commit criminal acts with the young people. These new phones present a challenge in terms of controlling contact. For example in Norway we had in one school in a city in the south a pupil who used a phone with a camera to take a picture of a boy in the shower. The boy was not fat but he was well endowed, and what they did was morph the picture so that most of him became bigger except for one thing, which became smaller, and then they put it on the net. And when it is on the net, you will never get it off the net. It’s there forever. Everyone in the school saw his picture, and this boy was completely crushed. Finally it

came to the attention of the media and my office and we had a long debate with this boy and with the headmaster of the school. The headmaster then immediately said, “No phones in my school”. Three hundred and eighty nine kids – no phones in the school. I said, “I don’t think this is the way of doing it. I think you have to just get the whole gang in a meeting and discuss what the consequences for this boy will be when this photo will be on the net for ever, what kind of crime they have committed towards this boy.” And this is what we did. I had a four hour meeting, which ended up with rules being drawn up on how to use the phone, and there has never been any further incident since then, because now they really monitor each other. But it illustrates how dangerous it is today with this new technology, if you don’t train young people to use it responsibly and understand the consequences of using it.

What training is given should not be an accident; it should be a part of the training of every child to be a member of modern society. Responsibility also means empowering the child. Have you seen the party websites? This is when you are in secondary school, you end up at parties and people are drunk. There is always someone taking pictures and suddenly they are on three or four websites world-wide.

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The porn industry searches these sites and people collect the photos. They steal pictures from school sites and party sites which were originally intended to be innocent fun. “We had a party and I just put it on the web for everybody to see”. But Lesley is drunk and she is half-naked and it’s not a good thing for her to be on the net, because when she applies for a job in the future, one of the first things the employer will do is to look her up on Google. And if they Google her and find her name and the party site, she can be sitting there in an interview and they’ll say, “Lesley, I saw that you were drunk in 1998”. It’s part of your net identity which you cannot change. So we have to train our kids to take that responsibility for themselves, not only to stay away from these parties, but if they do go, to understand what the consequences may be.

Another danger is web-camera ‘friends’. You have a web-camera there in front of you, you are alone in the evening and you started to chat with this person. There is a five minute film which you can get free of charge from Childnet International, which can be used in schools – The Jenny Story. It shows a girl telling her story:



“I like using chat rooms and that kind of thing. I’d chat to all my mates from school and I like to talk to people who like the same music as me. My dad was happy because basically it kept me quiet. Me and Claire had been talking to each other, she said something about this girl who was being really weird with her and passed her on to me on IM. Her name was Jodie, and I just said “Hi” and like she started chatting to me, and she seemed nice, so I was talking to her. She asked me general questions, like whereabouts I lived, what school I went to, what music I liked, you know. She said she was twenty something and that she was a model. She said that she’s been doing it since my age. We spoke for a couple of hours. It was night-time when she asked me to send her a picture. So I sent her one, just of my face. She said that I was really pretty and good looking. She was saying, “You could make a really good model. You’re gorgeous. Would you like to?” And I said I would obviously like to be a model, and I would obviously like to look like a model.”

As you understand, it was not a she it was a he, and he was forty five. And he easily found where she lived and he came and raped her. It's a true story.

So, how to respond to this challenge, protecting children from harmful information? There has been quite a debate about this, because some argue we are threatening their freedom of speech, which I think is nonsense. My freedom of speech as an adult should not be a threat to children. I think protection of children should be the first priority. But we also need a national internet study sheet for the educational system, which has been difficult in many countries in Europe to come up with. What should we teach our children? Not only to protect them, but how should we train, educate and empower them to use the net? And then there's those 3G phones from Japan and Tokyo. As long as they can be sold and not be registered to an owner they can be misused enormously and it has an awful potential to exploit children.

Service providers should act responsibly, not just say, "Children are not my responsibility – that is for the parents". To raise a child today is not only parents' responsibility, it must be a three-fold responsibility: private companies including service providers, the education

system and parents themselves. There should be an outspoken code of ethics regarding children as consumers. Governments should engage in discussion with companies who target children, and encourage them to develop one.

I had some meetings with private companies and asked that they develop ethical codes when it comes to children. And they had good codes and I said, well write them down, state them, publicise them. We need help in this mechanism for protecting children which is up-dated and organised by providers. Not by parents, because parents want quality time. You see parents walking around with all the remotes and the connections to Broadband, being the local media police in their home, but that is not quality time. You have to trust someone and you have to buy some extras from providers or from TV companies so that children are not exposed to negative and harmful information.

# Modern Childhood

The Image of the Child in our Society

I want to also say something about modern parents. Parenting is changing. You can see today that in many countries more and more children are *planned*. The average age for parents to have their first baby in Norway is now thirty years old. It is the same in southern Europe, where fewer children are being born because it's too difficult for people to plan parenthood together with a career. So when they do have a child the most important thing is that this child must be a success. If you go out on Sundays to parks you can see parents showing off their children, saying, "Look at her, isn't she nice. She does ballet, she is quite good at it, and she speaks French too, you know".

The child must be a success, and it is also becoming more and more of an industry to design children's development, to 'hyper-parent'. It is said that your child will be more intelligent if you play Mozart when the baby is in the womb. You get speakers that you can place over the womb and if you specially edit Mozart you will give birth to a socially intelligent human being who, after the first two hours, can say "Hello". And she or he will be able to read at two years old. And baby-swimming is very important because if you don't have baby-swimming the child will

have problems with mathematics in later life. He will be a loser. You must create a success and so you buy baby swimming courses. And what about baby-singing? You enrol the child at three months old and together with other kids they all sing. Or, perhaps baby-ballet, which is the new trend.

But the problem is that if you fill up the 'baby school', there will be no window to kick a ball around, you lose sight of childhood. There is more evidence saying that if you do this, you get 'baby burn-out' - the latest thing coming out of research. What is missing is empathy, which is the key for social interaction. You are missing critical thinking and you are becoming dependent on Microsoft Outlook for the rest of your life. So this is the hyper-parent.

So modern parents control, and come up with the "don'ts" and the "nos". But new evidence shows you have to involve yourself with your children in a much better way. Involvement means time and it means education - parent education. Parents need to learn how to sit down and actually look the child in the eyes and spend that time with them, prioritising it in this period of this young person's life so they can understand they are valuable. That you

understand what you are doing is the most important training. To listen, to talk and guide, to be involved. To counsel, to relate and to engage in a trusting dialogue. To be clear and not abdicate responsibility.

I was at a school parents' night a month ago, and we had to meet with our kids. In came this ten year old boy with those trousers that they wear when they are skateboarding, you know, the saggy ones. And he has the skateboard, and the cap is back to front and he has the chewing gum. He walks in and behind him came an *identical* type. He was taller, but he had the saggy trousers, the skate board, the cap, the chewing gum – this was the dad! He had abdicated responsibility completely and become a friend.

I met one of my student mates from university at the cinema last year. She was standing there and I didn't remember her looking so young. Beside her was another identical young woman, dressed the same, and I said, "I didn't know you were a twin, Jane". And she said, "I'm not a twin, this is my daughter. She is fifteen". So there they were exchanging clothes, going to the same cinema together, 'digging' the same music. The

mother had abdicated responsibility at a time when the child needed parents who could be involved in a different way – as a coach.

You have to prioritise a participative and involving approach – it starts at home. If you only deal with eating, sleeping and playing and, whatever the child does, you decide all the regulations, you will probably end up with a child who is not willing to participate in the family in the long-term because that child has not been trained to do that.

So modern childhood is about a competent child with some excitement in their lives, flexible, self-fulfilled, respected and equal, participative, with a critical attitude, who has been prepared for the future. That is the young competent child in a nutshell today. Children are an investment: it should not all be about how much they cost. In the sixties, when they found oil in Norway and Scotland, there were many parliamentary documents on oil policy for Norway. I did an experimental word search and changed the word “oil” for the word “children” throughout the document. It was a fantastic manifesto for children!

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When a child is born, it is a *tabula rasa* – an empty head, a being with needs. But there are a lot of theories and pieces of research showing that this passive object is thinking and participating and communicating with mum from the first minutes after birth. You need to prepare them for the future, they need life's management skills, social relationship skills, normality maps and an instrument to navigate in a future they don't know anything about. Because the only thing that is certain is that everything is uncertain. They also need to distinguish quality from trash – who should guide them and coach them to do that? Guiding them means understanding, not only “don't”. In my meetings in parliaments around the world I have come across political visions and constitutional documents that say it is with the law that you build a country, or it is with religion that you build a country, or it is with the education, education, education, that you build a country. Or – the latest, of course – it is with Broadband that you build a country. I know that you are well aware that this is not correct. *It is with children that we build a country.* If you really want to think that one through, turn off the TV one night and experience the potential in your children – it is enormous. But we have to



change our own attitude and accept that children should be seen, heard and valued, that they are competent. We have to see the possibilities in that and not perceive it as a threat.

Childhood is not a disease that will pass. Childhood lasts for a life-time and for generations. One wrong investment will be wrong not only for this one human being, but for a whole generation, because of the social heritage. So thank you all for believing in children.

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