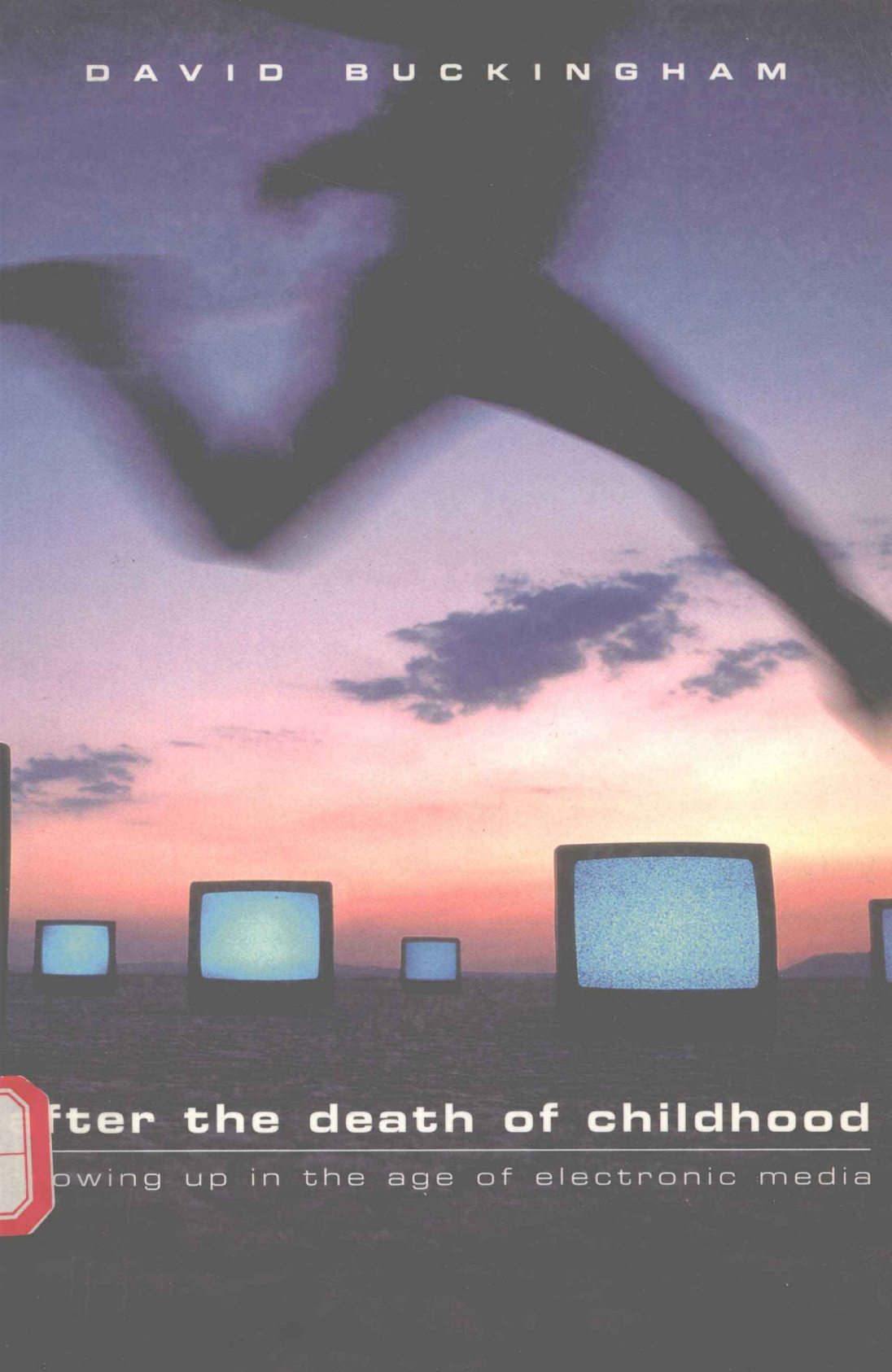


DAVID BUCKINGHAM



After the death of childhood

growing up in the age of electronic media

After the Death of Childhood

Growing Up in the Age of
Electronic Media

David Buckingham

Polity Press

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1

In Search of the Child

The claim that childhood has been lost has been one of the most popular laments of the closing years of the twentieth century. It is a lament that has echoed across a whole range of social domains – in the family, in the school, in politics, and perhaps above all in the media. Of course, the figure of the child has always been the focus of adult fears, desires and fantasies. Yet in recent years, debates about childhood have become invested with a growing sense of anxiety and panic. Traditional certainties about the meaning and status of childhood have been steadily eroded and undermined. We no longer seem to know where childhood can be found.

The place of the child in these debates is profoundly ambiguous, however. On the one hand, children are increasingly seen as threatened and endangered. Thus, we have seen a succession of high-profile investigations into child abuse, both in families and in schools and children's homes. There are frequent press reports about child murders and the scandal of neglected 'home alone kids'; and public hysteria about the risk of random abduction by paedophiles has steadily intensified. Meanwhile, our newspapers and television screens show scenes of the very different childhoods of children in developing countries: the street children of Latin America, the child soldiers in Africa and the victims of sex tourism in Asia.

On the other hand, children are also increasingly perceived as a threat to the rest of us – as violent, anti-social and sexually precocious. There has been growing concern about the apparent collapse of discipline in schools, and the rise in child crime, drug-taking and teenage pregnancy. As in the 1970s, the threat of an uncontrollable underclass of young people, caught in the liminal space between

school and work, has begun to loom large – although this time around, the delinquents are even younger. The sacred garden of childhood has increasingly been violated; and yet children themselves seem ever more reluctant to remain confined within it.

The media are implicated here in contradictory ways. On the one hand, they serve as the primary vehicle for these ongoing debates about the changing nature of childhood – and in the process, they undoubtedly contribute to the growing sense of fear and panic. Yet on the other hand, the media are frequently blamed for *causing* those problems in the first place – for provoking indiscipline and aggressive behaviour, for inflaming precocious sexuality, and for destroying the healthy social bonds which might prevent them from arising in the first place. Journalists, media pundits, self-appointed guardians of public morality – and increasingly academics and politicians – are incessantly called on to pronounce on the dangers of the media for children: the influence of violent ‘video nasties’, the ‘dumbing down’ of children’s television, the explicit sexuality of teenage magazines and the easy availability of pornography via the internet. And the media are now routinely condemned for ‘commercializing’ childhood – for transforming children into rapacious consumers, seduced by the deceptive wiles of advertisers into wanting what they do not need.

Meanwhile, the media themselves display an ambivalent fascination with the very *idea* of childhood. Hollywood movies have become preoccupied with the figure of the child-like adult (*Forest Gump*, *Toys*, *Dumb and Dumber*) and the adult-like child (*Jack*, *Little Man Tate*, *Big*). Advertising images display a similar ambivalence, from the notorious black devil/white angel of the campaign for Benetton clothing to the waif-like supermodels of the Calvin Kline ads. Meanwhile, the resurgence of the Disney Corporation points to the global marketability of conventional ‘children’s culture’ to both adults and children – although, ironically, *Kids*, Larry Clark’s controversial documentary-style film of casual sex and drugs among younger teenagers in New York, is also owned by a Disney subsidiary.

And then there is the figure of Michael Jackson – in the words of his biographer, ‘the man who was never a child and the child who never grew up’.¹ From the children’s crusade represented in his ‘Heal the World’ video, through his obsession with the imagery of Disney and Peter Pan, to the scandals surrounding allegations about his sexual abuse of children, Jackson epitomizes the intense uncertainty and discomfort that has come to surround the notion of childhood in the late modern era.

The responses of politicians and policy-makers to this sense of cri-

sis have been largely authoritarian and punitive. To be sure, there has been a renewed emphasis on children's rights in recent years, in the wake of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child; although in practice, this has often been interpreted as simply a matter of children's right to protection by adults. In most other respects, there has been increasing enthusiasm for more disciplinary social policies. Thus, we have seen the introduction of curfews and the building of new children's prisons. In Britain, state benefit for young people has been withdrawn; and there have been 'hit squads' to reassert discipline in schools. Such policies appear to be designed not so much to protect children from adults as to protect adults from children.

In relation to the media, the official response has also been predominantly a disciplinary one. In the wake of growing moral panics about the influence of sex and violence in the media, governments in many countries have introduced tighter censorship legislation; and in North America we have seen the introduction of the V-chip, a technical device fitted to all new television sets that will apparently filter out 'violent' material. Meanwhile, there is growing interest in the potential of blocking software, programs with symptomatically anthropomorphic titles like 'Net Nanny' and 'Cyber Sitter' that promise to restrict children's access to proscribed sites on the internet. Yet despite this search for a 'technological fix', national governments appear ever more incapable of regulating the commercial corporations that now control the global circulation of media commodities – not least those aimed at the children's market.

Nevertheless, interpretations of these changes in childhood – and of the role of the media in reflecting or producing them – have been sharply polarized. On the one hand, there are those who argue that childhood as we know it is disappearing or dying, and that the media – particularly television – are primarily to blame. From this perspective, the media are seen to have erased the boundaries between childhood and adulthood, and hence to have undermined the authority of adults. On the other hand, there are those who argue that there is a growing generation gap in media use – that young people's experience of new media technologies (and particularly of computers) is driving a wedge between their culture and that of their parents' generation. Far from erasing the boundaries, the media are seen here to have reinforced them – although now it is adults who are believed to have most to lose, as children's expertise with technology gives them access to new forms of culture and communication that largely escape parental control.

To some extent, these arguments can be seen as part of a more

general anxiety about social change which has accompanied the advent of a new millennium. The metaphor of 'death' is everywhere around us – not least on bookshelves, where books about the death of childhood sit alongside those about the death of the self, of society, of ideology, and of history. Such debates often seem to permit only a narrow choice between grandiose despair and breathless optimism.

In the first part of this book, I review these contrasting arguments in more detail, and seek to challenge the totalizing rhetoric that characterizes them. As I shall indicate, both positions are based on essentialist views of childhood and of communications media – and indeed of the relationships between them. Yet for all their limitations, these arguments point to two significant assumptions which form the basis of my analysis here. Both implicitly and explicitly, they suggest that the notion of childhood is itself a social, historical construction; and that culture and representation – not least in the form of electronic media – are one of the main arenas in which that construction is developed and sustained.

Constructing childhood

The idea that childhood is a social construction is now commonplace in discussions of the history and sociology of childhood; and it is even being increasingly accepted by some psychologists.² The central premise here is that 'the child' is not a natural or universal category, which is simply determined by biology. Nor is it something which has a fixed meaning, in whose name appeals can unproblematically be made. On the contrary, childhood is historically, culturally and socially variable. Children have been regarded – and have regarded themselves – in very different ways in different historical periods, in different cultures and in different social groups. Furthermore, even these definitions are not fixed. The meaning of 'childhood' is subject to a constant process of struggle and negotiation, both in public discourse (for example, in the media, in the academy or in social policy) and in interpersonal relationships, among peers and in the family.

This is not to imply that the biological individuals whom we might collectively agree to call 'children' somehow do not exist, or that we cannot describe them. Rather, it is to say that these collective definitions are the outcome of social and discursive processes. There is a kind of circularity here. Children are defined as a particular category, with particular characteristics and limitations, both by themselves

and by others – by parents, teachers, researchers, politicians, policy-makers, welfare agencies, and (of course) by the media. These definitions are codified in laws and policies; and they are embodied within particular forms of institutional and social practice, which in turn help to *produce* the forms of behaviour which are seen as typically ‘child-like’ – and simultaneously to generate forms of resistance to them.³

Schooling, for example, is a social institution that effectively constructs and defines what it means to be a child – and indeed a child of a particular age. The separation of children by biological age rather than ‘ability’, the highly regulated nature of teacher/student relationships, the organization of the curriculum and the daily timetable, the practice of grading – all in various ways serve to reinforce and to naturalize particular assumptions about what children are and should be. And yet these definitions are, for the most part, only made explicit in specialized forms of institutional and professional discourse from which children themselves are largely excluded.

Of course, these various definitions and discourses are not necessarily consistent or coherent. On the contrary, we should expect them to be characterized by resistance and contradiction. The school and the family, for instance, appear to lay out clear definitions of the rights and responsibilities of both adults and children. Yet as teachers and parents know only too well, children routinely challenge and renegotiate these definitions, not always directly but often through what amounts to a form of guerrilla warfare. Furthermore, the expectations of these institutions are often themselves contradictory. On the one hand, for example, parents and teachers will routinely exhort children to ‘grow up’, and to behave in what they perceive as a mature and responsible way; while on the other, they will deny children privileges on the grounds that they are not yet old enough to deserve or appreciate them. And at the same time, becoming – and being perceived to be – an adult necessarily involves suppressing elements of one’s behaviour which others might deem to be inappropriately ‘childish’.

‘Childhood’ is thus a shifting, relational term, whose meaning is defined primarily through its opposition to another shifting term, ‘adulthood’. Yet even where the respective roles of children and adults are defined in law, there is considerable uncertainty and inconsistency. Thus, the age at which childhood legally ends is defined primarily (and crucially) in terms of children’s *exclusion* from practices which are defined as properly ‘adult’, most obviously, paid employment, sex, drinking alcohol and voting. Yet in each case, children are seen to attain majority at a different age. In the UK, for

example, they can pay taxes at the age of sixteen, yet they cannot receive state benefits until they are seventeen, and they cannot vote until they are eighteen. They are entitled to have heterosexual sex at the age of sixteen; yet they cannot witness explicit images of such behaviour on film until they are eighteen. And yet, of course, real children engage in many of these activities well before they are legally entitled to do so.

Representing childhood

Broadly speaking, the definition and maintenance of the category 'childhood' depends on the production of two main kinds of discourses. First, there are discourses *about* childhood, produced by adults primarily *for adults* – not only in the form of academic or professional discourse, but also in the form of novels, television programmes and popular advice literature. Indeed, 'scientific' or 'factual' discourses about childhood (for example, those of psychology, physiology or medicine) are often intimately connected with 'cultural' or 'fictional' ones (such as philosophy, imaginative literature, or painting). Second, there are discourses produced by adults *for children*, in the form of children's literature, television and other media – which, despite the label, are rarely produced by children themselves.

Thus, the period in which our characteristic modern definition of childhood emerged – the second half of the nineteenth century – was characterized by an explosion of such discourses. During this period, children were gradually and systematically segregated from the world of adults, for example through the raising of the age of consent, the introduction of compulsory education, and attempts to eradicate child labour. Children were gradually moved out of the factories, off the streets and into the schools; and a whole range of new social institutions and agencies sought to oversee their welfare in line with a broadly middle-class domestic ideal, and thereby to ensure the 'health of the nation'.⁴

This demarcation of childhood as a distinct stage of life – and the removal of children from what Harry Hendrick has termed 'socially significant activity'⁵ – was both justified by and reflected in discourses of both kinds. The work of the Romantic poets and Victorian novelists, for example, placed a central emphasis on the innate purity and natural goodness of children. For writers as diverse as Dickens and Wordsworth, the figure of the child became a powerful symbol in their critique of industrialism and social inequality. Childhood became, according to the historian Hugh Cunningham, 'a substitute

for religion'.⁶ It was also at this time that the scientific study of children – most notably in the form of paediatrics and developmental psychology – began to be established;⁷ and such work quickly found its way into popular advice literature directed at parents.

Meanwhile, this period is also often seen as the Golden Age of children's literature: the work of writers such as Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear and J. M. Barrie reflected the widespread fascination and longing for childhood – not to mention the unresolved tensions around children's sexuality – which were characteristic of the time.⁸ At the same time, the origins of more 'vulgar' (and indeed 'violent') forms of popular literature aimed at children – and particularly at working-class boys – can also be traced to this period; as can the first wide-scale marketing of toys and educational materials designed for use in the home.⁹

Of course, this is not to say that 'children' were somehow conjured into existence by these means, or indeed that such discourses and representations had not previously existed. It is merely to note that broader historical shifts in the social status of children are often accompanied by this kind of proliferation in discourse. As we shall see, similar developments occurred in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and are also taking place at the present time.

Inevitably, the audiences for these two types of discourse are bound to overlap. Children are often extremely interested in certain forms of discourse *about* childhood, particularly where this touches on the most obviously forbidden forms of adult behaviour. And adults play a significant part in mediating texts *to* children, for example by buying and reading books for them, or by accompanying them to the cinema. Certain kinds of texts – the contemporary 'family' films of Walt Disney or Steven Spielberg, for example – could be seen precisely to unite these two audiences: they tell both adults and children very powerful and seductive stories about the relative meanings of childhood and adulthood. As in a good deal of nineteenth-century literature, the figure of the child here is at once a symbol of hope and a means of exposing adult guilt and hypocrisy. Such films often define the meaning of childhood by projecting its future loss: both for adults and for children, they mobilize anxieties about the pain of mutual separation, while offering reassuring fantasies about how it can be overcome.¹⁰

These cultural representations of childhood are thus often contradictory. They frequently say much more about adults' and children's fantasy investments in the *idea* of childhood than they do about the realities of children's lives; and they are often imbued with nostalgia for a past Golden Age of freedom and play. However, these

representations cannot be dismissed as merely illusory. Their power depends on the fact that they also convey a certain truth: they must speak in intelligible ways, both to children's lived experiences and to adult memories, which may be painful as well as pleasurable.

As Patricia Holland argues, these representations of childhood are part of a continuous effort on the part of adults to gain control over childhood and its implications – not only over actual children, but also over our own childhoods, which we are constantly mourning and constantly reinventing. Such imagery, she argues,

displays the social and psychic effort that goes into negotiating the difficult distinction between adult and child, to keep childhood separate from an adulthood that can never be fully achieved. Attempts are made to establish dual and opposing categories and hold them firm in a dichotomy set against the actual continuity of growth and development. There is an active struggle to maintain childhood – if not actual children – as pure and uncontaminated.¹¹

As Holland emphasizes, these cultural constructions of childhood serve functions not merely for children, but also for adults. The idea of childhood serves as a depository for qualities which adults regard both as precious and as problematic – qualities which they cannot tolerate as part of themselves; yet it can also serve as a dream world into which we can retreat from the pressures and responsibilities of maturity.¹² Such representations, Holland argues, reflect 'the desire to use childhood to secure the status of adulthood – often at the expense of children themselves'.¹³

Childhood, power and ideology

This view of childhood as a social and cultural construction is thus to some extent a relativist one. It reminds us that our contemporary notion of childhood – of what children are and should be – is comparatively recent in origin, and that it is largely confined to Western industrialized societies. The majority of the world's children today do not live according to 'our' conception of childhood.¹⁴ To judge these alternative constructions of childhood – and the children whose lives are lived within them – as merely 'primitive' is to display a dangerously narrow ethnocentrism. Likewise, this perspective causes us to question the notion that the modern age was one in which the innate 'needs' of children were truly recognized for the first time. On the contrary, such definitions of children's unique characteristics and needs are themselves culturally and historically produced; and

they necessarily imply particular forms of political and social organization.

Furthermore, this view of childhood reminds us that any description of children – and hence any invocation of the idea of *childhood* – cannot be neutral. On the contrary, any such discussion is inevitably informed by an *ideology* of childhood – that is, a set of meanings which serve to rationalize, to sustain or to challenge existing relationships of power between adults and children, and indeed between adults themselves.¹⁵

This is most apparent when one considers how the figure of the child is invoked by social movements, ranging from the broadly progressive to the distinctly reactionary. In his analysis of the moral panics that have characterized British social life over the past two decades, Philip Jenkins identifies a ‘politics of substitution’ which has been practised by moral entrepreneurs of both left and right.¹⁶ In a climate of growing uncertainty, invoking fears about children provides a powerful means of commanding public attention and support: campaigns against homosexuality are redefined as campaigns against paedophiles; campaigns against pornography become campaigns against child pornography; and campaigns against immorality and Satanism become campaigns against ritualistic child abuse. Those who have the temerity to doubt claims about the epidemic proportions of such phenomena can therefore easily be stigmatized as hostile to children.

However, this is not to imply that such concerns are necessarily illegitimate or false. On the contrary, they would not be so widely felt if they did not in some way build on pre-existing anxieties – which, as Jenkins indicates, are themselves a response to fundamental social changes, for example in the nature of the family. Nevertheless, invoking the figure of the threatened child clearly serves particular functions, both for campaigning groups and for government. The wave of concern around child abuse in the 1980s, for example, furthered the political ambitions both of Christian evangelical groups and of feminists, whose influence came to dominate social work and welfare agencies. Yet it also enabled the government to distract attention from the more intractable economic and social problems of the time; and as a result, the extent to which children themselves can be seen to have benefited from such campaigns is certainly debatable.

Of course, moral panics of this kind are not the only arena in which the notion of childhood is invoked in this way. The discourse of environmentalism, for example, is often implicitly addressed to children, on the grounds that they represent ‘the future’ and are somehow

'closer to nature'. The figure of the child within feminism, or in the history of the Labour movement, is equally highly charged. The child is often seen as the most helpless victim of social policies that are primarily directed against women, or against the working classes; and here again, the call to protect children acts as a powerful means of mobilizing support.¹⁷ For those with a wide range of motivations, adult politics are often carried out in the name of childhood.

Likewise, the production of texts *for* children – both in the modern electronic media, and in more traditional forms like children's literature – can also be seen to sustain particular ideologies of childhood. Such activity has traditionally been characterized by a complex balance between 'negative' and 'positive' motivations. On the one hand, producers have been strongly informed by the need to protect children from 'undesirable' aspects of the adult world. Indeed, in some respects, texts for children could be characterized primarily in terms of what they are *not* – that is, in terms of the *absence* of representations that are seen to constitute a negative moral influence, most obviously in the form of sex and violence.¹⁸ On the other hand, there are also strong pedagogical motivations: such texts are frequently characterized by the attempt to educate, to provide moral lessons or 'positive images', and thereby to model forms of behaviour that are seen to be socially desirable. Cultural producers, policy-makers and regulators in this field are thus concerned not only to protect children from harm, but also to 'do them good'.

In both domains, adult definitions of childhood are thus simultaneously repressive *and* productive. They are designed both to protect and control children – that is, to keep them confined to social arenas and forms of behaviour which will not prove threatening to adults, or in which adults will (it is imagined) be unable to threaten *them*. Yet they are seeking not just to prevent certain kinds of behaviour, but also to teach and encourage others. They actively produce particular forms of subjectivity in children, just as they attempt to repress others. And, as I have suggested, they serve similar functions for adults themselves.

Yet, perhaps inevitably, adults have always monopolized the power to define childhood. They have laid down the criteria by which children are to be compared and judged. They have defined the kinds of behaviour which are appropriate or suitable for children at different ages. Even where they have purported merely to describe children, or to speak on their behalf, adults have unavoidably established normative definitions of what *counts* as child-like. To be sure, children can and do 'speak for themselves', although they are rarely given the opportunity to do so in the public domain, even on matters which