



G756.108.9  
W988

# Growing Up Suburban

by Edward A. Wynne

*Foreword by James S. Coleman*



University of Texas Press  
Austin and London

Drawing by Seanna Wray, age 13

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Wynne, Edward A . 1928—

Growing up suburban.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Suburban schools—United States. I. Title.

LB1566.W94 370.19'346'0973 77-3905

ISBN 0-292-77538-5

Copyright © 1977 by University of Texas Press

All rights reserved

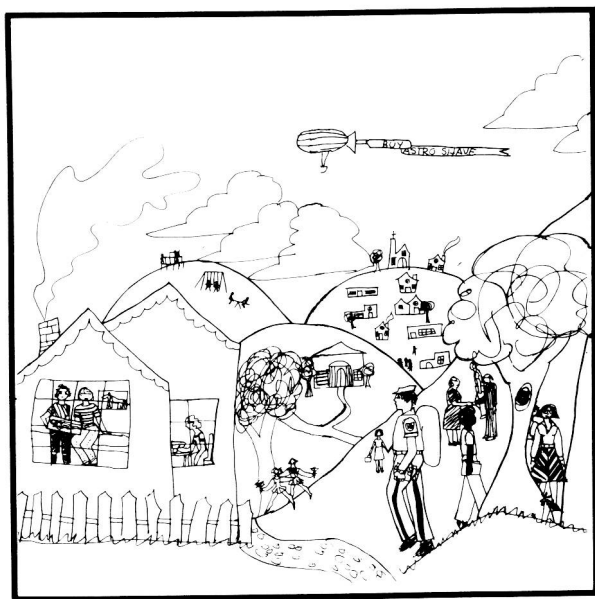
Printed in the United States of America

7962679



E7952679

# Growing Up Suburban



To Judith F. Wynne, my wife  
*Every page reflects her advice, patience, and love*



## Tables

1. Chicago Area Adult Employment and Residence, 1970 7
2. Percentage of Marijuana Use among Male San Mateo County High School Students, 1968-1976 20
3. San Mateo County, California, Student Use of Harmful Substances 22
4. Haverford College Sample MMPI Items for Classes, 1948-1949 through 1968-1969 24
5. Clinical Ratings of Men and Women on Psychological Functioning, by Economic Deprivation and Class Origin, in Mean Scores 49

## Foreword

The discourse on education in recent years has been notable for its selective perception. Almost without exception, it has focused on inequalities in education, on the “disadvantaged” and the “delinquent,” and on various pathologies, either of the educational system or of the young people who pass through it. Implicit in this discourse is the notion that somewhere, in the middle classes, in the schools which have numerous National Merit Scholarship finalists, in the clean, safe, and open suburbs, is the ideal from which these other schools and these other young people deviate. Among these undisadvantaged, nonproblem youth, all is presumed to be well; and if only the disadvantaged children could be transformed, and their school environment transformed as well, all educational problems would be solved.

I have perhaps overstated the case; there are anomalies that sometimes give us pause: the increasing numbers of runaways from middle-class families; the high drug use in the fresh, open, nonblighted, well-to-do California schools (higher than anywhere else in the country); the great increase in suicide rates among middle-class young people. Despite these disturbing facts, there is among most commentators an implicit assumption something like that I’ve described.

Yet all is *not* right in the schools with ample budgets, educated parents, and bright children. The daily diet of activities for children in this “ideal” setting may well be far from that which will serve them best for becoming adults. It is the merit of this book that it refuses to make the assumption I’ve described. It asks instead what is wrong even in nonproblem schools, what is wrong even for nonproblem children. This book, in short, asks the fundamental questions—not about how we are raising some children better than others, and some with greater opportunity than others, but, rather, about what is going wrong when there are no longer constraints

imposed by tight school budgets, slow learning, poor health, and low income. If we fail when these constraints are gone, then the failure is immeasurably worse. It is a failure to know and to act: to know how to make young people's youth most productive for their futures, and to act on that knowledge. It is no longer a failure that can be remedied "if only there were enough money, or enough time, or enough reading skills." It is a failure that can be explained only as a defect in the society of adults: an incapacity for wisely bringing young people into adulthood.

Wynne raises the fundamental question in this book, the question of what a child needs to become an effective adult. He then asks just how schools now satisfy these needs, or fail to, and how they might come to do so in the future. The book is part of an awakening that is slowly taking place, a recognition that the function of schools is no longer the simple one of teaching cognitive skills. Ever since public schools began, their task has been defined in much the same way it was at the beginning, in terms of the cognitive skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Even in the most recent wave of program evaluations in education, the issue at question is nearly always "Did the children's achievement in reading and mathematics increase?"

This single-minded focus on cognitive function of the schools may be responsible for the lack of concern with middle-class suburban schools. Children in these schools perform adequately in standardized achievement tests in mathematics and reading; thus there are no perceived problems. Unexamined is the question of whether the youths in these schools are gaining the other qualities they will need as adults, and whether the school is aiding or impeding this acquisition.

Very likely the reason that such questions remain unexamined is that these "other" aspects of becoming adult are presumed to be learned in the family and in other contexts outside school. This presumption was probably not too incorrect some years ago, when the family was multifunctioned, a production unit as well as a consumption unit, a unit with a large number of members and relatively stable composition. But as the family has been eroded over the years, that presumption can no longer be reasonably maintained. And the presumption that these other aspects of becoming adult were learned outside school was not misplaced when school was a relatively short period of time in most young people's lives: a portion of the day for a portion of the year from ages six or seven to fourteen, that is, to the seventh or eighth grade.

But the multifunctioned full-blown family and the minimal school are relics of another day. The school is now multifunctioned and full-blown, while the family has become minimal. Yet in this new context, when more and more of a young person's time, for an increasing number of years, is absorbed by the school, when the family has fewer and fewer functions by which it can bring about education in noncognitive areas, there has developed no new set of educational principles by which schools can be organized. There are efforts in this direction, and there is emerging a recognition of what is necessary. It is to this developing discourse that the present book will contribute. It is probably the most comprehensive contribution to this discourse to date. It raises precisely the right questions for education of the future, and it even begins to offer some answers. It will, I hope, help focus the national discourse in education on the fundamental problems which exist for all children who grow up in a society like our own.

James S. Coleman  
*University of Chicago*

## Preface

It is likely that this book will quickly become obsolete. It is an early work on an important, dynamic subject that will inevitably become the focus of growing concern. And, as an early work, it may be surpassed by future events, more data, and increasingly refined analyses. Still, there must be a starting place.

The most definitive current bibliography on suburbs contains over twelve hundred entries.<sup>1</sup> About 10 percent of its entries apparently relate to suburban education or child rearing, and most of those are concerned with the political and economic conflicts that have arisen around suburban schools or with simple statistical comparisons between student cognitive learning in suburban and urban schools. Only between five and ten of the entries even touch on the relationship between the suburban social and physical environment and the child-rearing patterns in suburban neighborhoods and schools. Even these works usually discuss the matter in an unsystematic or brief fashion; for example, none of the studies discusses the connection between local observations and the data for regional and national suburban development. In other words, we have not paid serious attention to the quality of suburban childhood and adolescence; nor have we considered the long-range trends that shape that quality. It is as if we have ignored the developments uniquely affecting the largest pool of children and parents in America.

Of course, we do know that suburban children are in schools and colleges and that—as measured by achievement tests—many of them are doing reasonably well. But these raw facts do not tell us about the kinds of children and adolescents being reared in suburban environments or about the kinds of adults they become. Furthermore, as this book will demonstrate, many suburban environments are historically unique communities: the level of technology, affluence, and economic development underlying the modern suburb did not exist before (let us say) about 1950. Technically, we

can call such communities post-industrial environments: essentially, their structural patterns and the life styles of their residents apply forms that are typical of post-industrial America. In effect, we have raised our first post-industrial adults. And it seems likely that unique environments might produce unique effects on the children reared in them. Still, we have not yet begun to seriously consider what these unique effects might be. Nor have we begun to consider whether any unusual effects appearing in suburban children have implications for children being raised in other American environments.

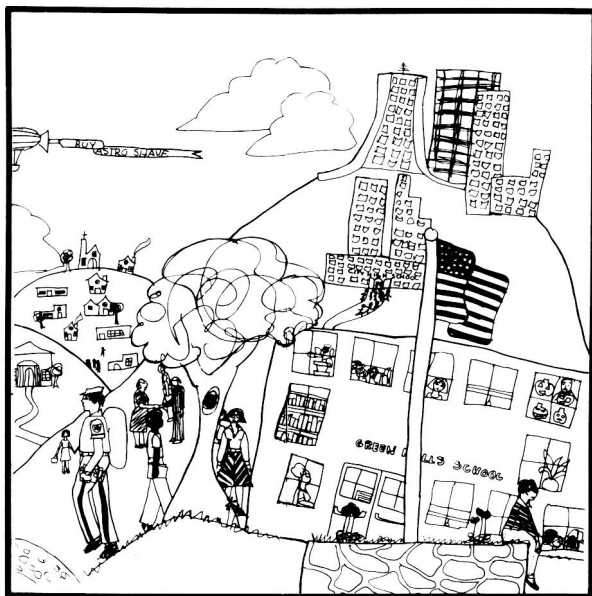
We can be sure that the quality of suburban childhood and adolescence will become a topic of growing importance. This book is an effort to contribute a theoretical framework to this concern and to propose potential solutions to the complex problems it identifies.



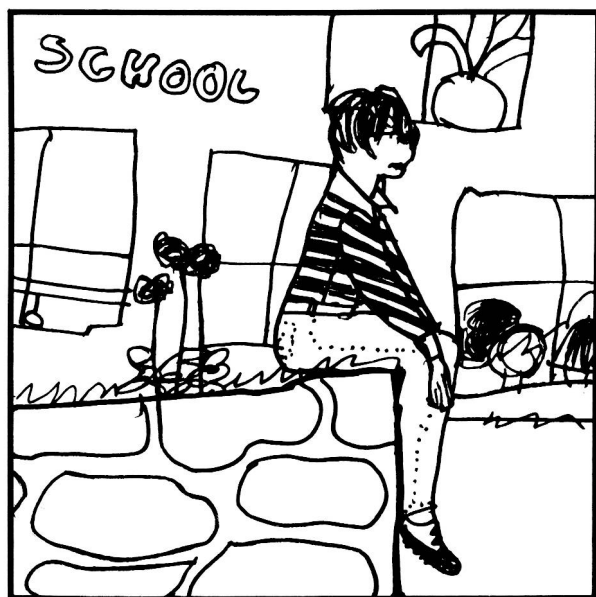
## Contents

Foreword	ix
Preface	xiii
1. Why Worry about Suburban Children?	3
2. How We Attain Adulthood	43
3. Administering Suburban Schools—I	73
4. Administering Suburban Schools—II	111
5. Teaching in Suburban Schools	133
6. Improving Suburban Communities	147
7. Being a Suburban Parent	165
8. Education and Sexual Identity	187
9. Summing Up	207
Notes	219
Index	233

# Growing Up Suburban







*To escape isolation, a person must be able to become a member of a group, and this is not just a problem of finding a group. The capacity for relating one's self easily to other men and women is not inborn, but a result of experience and training, and that experience and training is itself social.*

—George C. Homans<sup>1</sup>

## CHAPTER 1

# Why Worry about Suburban Children?

#### 4 · *Why Worry about Suburban Children?*

As children mature, they should attain increasing competency in meeting the central challenges of adult life: finding satisfying work, earning a living, initiating and carrying through a successful marriage, raising healthy children, maintaining friendships, and participating in community life. We should not assume that competency in meeting such challenges is necessarily related to academic skills—beyond some minimal level. In other words, prolonged attendance in typical modern schools and colleges is not enough. To really achieve such competency, children and adolescents must be raised in environments that stimulate them to develop adaptive and realistic attitudes, significant coping skills, and the potential for judicious and profound commitment. Many suburban environments fail to provide such stimulation.

We must first recognize that more American children live in suburbs than in either central cities or rural areas.<sup>2</sup> This pattern of suburban growth is a comparatively new historical phenomenon. For instance, in 1950, 25 percent of American families lived in suburbs; in 1970, the figure was 37.25 percent.<sup>3</sup> In 1972, the Bureau of the Census made a population forecast for the year 2000, based on two alternative assumptions. The forecast estimated that between 1970 and 2000, depending on the assumption applied, the suburban population would increase by 72 to 84 million above its 1970 figures.<sup>4</sup> Suburban growth will thus continue to be the dominant national population trend. But the phenomenon of population growth is only one of many special elements that bear on suburban child rearing.

#### Post-Industrial Environments

Modern suburbs are unique primarily because they are post-industrial environments. David Riesman gave currency to the term “post-industrial” to characterize the major elements that make contemporary American work and life different from the earlier industrial society, just as industrial America was different from the previous agricultural society.<sup>5</sup> “Post-industrial environments” are physical and social environments which are strongly affected by the special factors that characterize post-industrial society. Even as we have locations we describe as agricultural environments (a farm or a farming town) or industrial environments (a factory or people traveling together in a subway train) we also have post-industrial environments.

## 5 · *Why Worry about Suburban Children?*

When such social scientists as Riesman and Daniel Bell talked about America becoming a post-industrial society, they understood that this “becoming” would not occur all at once.<sup>6</sup> Some American environments would be becoming post-industrial while others were still industrial and still others were primarily agricultural. But the expectation is that the proportion of America called “post-industrial” will grow and the earlier forms will decline.

Suburbs are a segment of American life pervaded with post-industrial characteristics because most of them have been built since 1950, that is, after the time that post-industrial influences began to prevail in our society. In contrast, older residential environments—cities, farm communities, and suburbs created before World War II—contain many characteristics of industrial or agricultural life. Still, some post-industrial characteristics are found in most communities; and to the extent such characteristics do exist, the problems now affecting modern suburban child rearing will begin to appear there also.

But what do I mean when I call a modern suburb a post-industrial environment? Let me present a definition. A post-industrial environment is an environment in which:

- The design, structure, and operation of the environment—be it office, library, or community—rely heavily on contemporary technology.
- The technology is more concerned with the management and processing of information than the actual production of consumer goods; thus, the technology relies on such devices as the computer, television, telephone, and microfiche.
- The activities undertaken involve the coordination of many large, widely dispersed, often decentralized organizations with complex decision-making processes; most of these organizations are profit making and some of them are government agencies.
- The inhabitants have relatively high levels of income and cognitive knowledge.
- The intense interpersonal cooperation practiced among its inhabitants is based on an elaborate network of remote, specialized, and abstract systems.
- The inhabitants attach special importance to the values of privacy, emotional self-control and flexibility, rational analysis, individualism, and the attainment of material goods, physical health, and comfort.