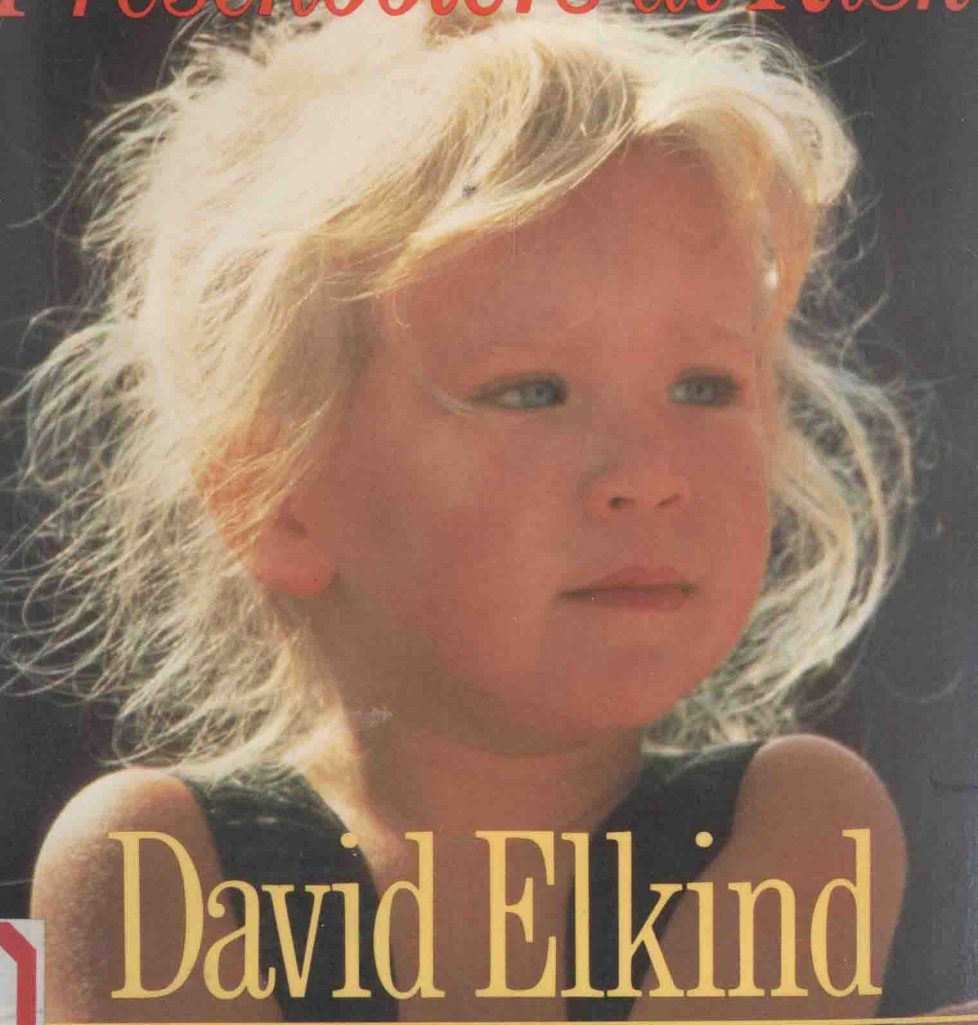


MISEDUCATION

Preschoolers at Risk



David Elkind

AUTHOR OF THE HURRIED CHILD

MISEDUCATION

Preschoolers at Risk

David Elkind



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*To my brothers, Jules, Ben, and Lee,
and to my sister, Kay,
with love and appreciation*

Acknowledgments

I HAVE BEEN working with nursery school children and their teachers and parents for more than a quarter of a century. Much of what I have learned during those years is distilled in this book, particularly the last five chapters. While it is not possible to acknowledge everyone individually, I do want to thank them collectively. In addition, I want especially to thank Marjorie Ford, the director of the children's school at Wheaton College, my first academic appointment, where I carried out my first studies on young children's thinking. With a great deal of patience, forgiving kindness, and expert knowledge, she taught me how to behave with young children, how to engage them in conversation, and how to appreciate their unique world-view. From Piaget I learned about how young children think, but from Marjorie Ford I learned about what young children feel and fantasy.

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David Elkind
South Yarmouth, MA
Winter 1987

Preface

MORE THAN A DECADE ago I published a paper entitled "Early Childhood Education: Instruction or Enrichment." At that time I was concerned because some programs for young children were attempting to teach academic skills such as reading and math. By today's standards, the number of children affected was quite small, and the bulk of early-childhood programs had child-centered and age-appropriate curricula. After a few years I became involved in other issues, particularly the parental and social pressures on children and teenagers to grow up too fast too soon, and I published the results of my observations and research in two books, *The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast Too Soon* and *All Grown Up and No Place to Go: Teenagers in Crisis*.

In the past few years, however, my attention has once again been drawn to what is happening in early-childhood education. Today it is not just the occasional preschool that is introducing academics to young children, it is the public school system as well. And it is not just academics that are being taught to young children but gymnastics, swimming, ballet, skiing, and karate. The minor ailment of a few preschools in the seventies has become an epidemic in the eighties.

At first, I thought that this was nothing more than a down-

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ward extension of the “hurrying” that I had written about in my earlier books. But as I listened to the parents whom I see in my small private practice and to the parents, educators, and health professionals I encounter when lecturing around the country, a somewhat different picture emerged. The parents who had had their first children in the early 1980s were quite different from the parents who had had their first children in the early 1970s. Whereas, in the past, parenting psychologies and practices might remain the same over decades, they now seem to be changing at a much faster rate, in a decade or less.

The parents who had their first children during the early seventies bear the psychic wounds of the extraordinary social revolution that changed our attitudes toward sex, marriage, divorce, and child-rearing. These challenges to fundamental values and beliefs required vast and far-reaching adjustments by the parents of that time, and all but exhausted parental energies for dealing with stress in general and the stress of child-rearing in particular.

In many ways, hurrying was a direct result of the fact that, after adapting to such enormous social changes, parents had few resources left to cope with the unending needs of children. Expecting, indeed demanding, that children grow up fast was one way of avoiding the expenditure of energy that goes along with parenthood. The media both reflected and encouraged this “hurrying” with its abundant images of “adultified” children. And the schools cooperated by downward extensions of the curriculum and test-driven instruction.

Hurrying children, expecting them to feel, think, and act much older than they are, stresses children. It puts extraordinary pressures upon them for adaptation. The consequences of hurrying are the usual symptoms of stress: headaches and stomachaches in preschoolers; learning problems and depression in elementary school children; and the whole gamut of teenage drug abuse, pregnancy, eating disorders, and suicide.

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Whatever the problems stemming from his or her individual life history, the hurried young person is clearly responding as much to external pressures as to internal conflicts.

The dynamics of parents who miseducate their infants and young children, however, appear different from those that gave rise to hurrying. Many of the parents who engage in miseducation have grown up with the new values and do not experience the same conflicts and stresses of adjustment experienced by their parents. Young men and women today, for example, take current sexual mores and the new status of women as given because they have never known anything else. Although there are stresses, aplenty, parents who have their first children in the eighties generally do not undergo the conflicts of conscience experienced by parents of the seventies.

Whereas the parents who reared their children in the seventies felt overwhelmed and needed their children to grow up fast to reduce some of the pressure on themselves, parents today feel much more in charge of their lives and of their child-rearing. It is this sense of mastery, of being in charge and controlling things, which is so striking in the parents of this decade in contrast to those of the past decade. Parents today believe they can make a difference in their children's lives, that they can give them an edge that will make them brighter and abler than the competition. Parents who started out in the seventies hurry their children; parents of the eighties are miseducating theirs. Parents who started in the seventies need mature children, while parents of the eighties want superkids.

The effects of miseducation are also different from those of hurrying. For, while miseducation also stresses children, it does so in a different manner. A latchkey child, for example, is hurried because he or she is expected to cope with a difficult situation—being home alone for extended periods of time. Or a child who has to go to a baby-sitter and then a day-care

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center and then a baby-sitter again is hurried because the child has to make too many adaptations in too short a time. In many such cases, the parents have little if any choice in the matter, inasmuch as they may have to work and adequate child-care facilities are simply not available. Likewise, some single parents who use their child as a confidant usually do so out of a deep-seated need to share with somebody.

Compare these examples with an infant whose parent is attempting to teach him or her to read, to swim, or to do gymnastics. In this situation, the parent clearly has a choice and chooses to engage in practices that are more reflective of parental ego than of parental need. Although parents who miseducate their children may justify this on the basis that it is for the child's "own good," it is really parental "good" that is at issue. And this fact changes the effects of miseducation and makes them different from those of hurrying.

Infants and young children accept and participate in miseducation because it pleases those to whom they are attached, namely, their parents, not because they find it interesting or enjoyable. Miseducation can thus invoke internal conflicts and can set the groundwork for the more classical psychological problems such as neurosis and neurotic character formation. In some ways, miseducation is more pernicious than hurrying because it can lead to more deep-seated and less reversible problems than does hurrying. For example, some young people who have been hurried academically may take a year or two off after leaving college before getting on with their lives. But miseducation can leave the child with lifelong emotional disabilities.

I must say that I have had some trouble writing this book. As a father and as a family therapist who knows how difficult and unrewarding as well as rewarding parenting can be, I am generally sympathetic to parents. And I could empathize with parents who were hurrying their children because I knew their

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stresses first hand. But I have found it difficult to be sympathetic with parents who miseducate their children, because it is so unnecessary and so misguided.

Eventually I realized that today's parents are basically no different from parents of the past, and that there is a considerable overlap between hurrying and miseducating. Parenting styles are not new; they just recycle with changing times and are recycling faster today than ever before. In many ways, parents who miseducate their children are a reissue of the pre-hurrying parents who "spoiled" their children. Today's parents, like parents of the past, want to do what is best for their children and genuinely believe that early formal instruction is going to benefit their child. And today's parents, too, are victims of social pressure, of media oversell, and of the faddishness that marks educational practice in this country.

When I finally overcame my emotional block, I was at last able to sympathize with parents who miseducate their children and to write this book. My aim is to help parents of young children understand the dynamics of miseducation, the short- and long-term risks of such practices, and ways to identify healthy education in schools and to practice it at home. Although I am writing primarily for parents, I hope the book will also be helpful to teachers, administrators, and health professionals who work with young children and their families.

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MISEDUCATION



1

Education and Miseducation

WHAT IS HAPPENING in the United States today is truly astonishing. In a society that prides itself on its preference for facts over hearsay, on its openness to research, and on its respect for “expert” opinion, parents, educators, administrators, and legislators are ignoring the facts, the research, and the expert opinion about how young children learn and how best to teach them.

All across the country, educational programs intended for school-aged children are being appropriated for the education of young children. In some states (for example, New York, Connecticut, and Illinois) educational administrators are advocating that children enter school at age four. Many kindergarten programs have become full-day kindergartens, and nursery school programs have become pre-kindergartens. Moreover, many of these kindergartens have introduced curricula, including work papers, once reserved for first-grade children. And in books addressed to parents a number of writers are encouraging parents to teach infants and young children reading, math, and science.

When we instruct children in academic subjects, or in swimming, gymnastics, or ballet, at too early an age, we miseducate them; we put them at risk for short-term stress and

long-term personality damage for no useful purpose. There is no evidence that such early instruction has lasting benefits, and considerable evidence that it can do lasting harm.

Why, then, are we engaging in such unhealthy practices on so vast a scale? Like all social phenomena, the contemporary miseducation of large numbers of infants and young children derives from the coming together of multiple and complex social forces that both generate and justify these practices. One thing is sure: miseducation does not grow out of established knowledge about what is good pedagogy for infants and young children. Rather, the reasons must be sought in the changing values, size, structure, and style of American families, in the residue of the 1960s efforts to ensure equality of education for all groups, and in the new status, competitive, and computer pressures experienced by parents and educators in the eighties.

While miseducation has always been with us—we have always had pushy parents—today it has become a societal norm. If we do not wake up to the potential danger of these harmful practices, we may do serious damage to a large segment of the next generation.

THE EARLY-CHILDHOOD EDUCATION BOOM

Until the 1960s the education of young children was not regarded as a significant enterprise, and only a relatively small proportion of the early-childhood population attended nursery schools. The aim of early-childhood education was to provide enriched social and play experiences that children might not receive at home. It was assumed that such socialization and play fostered mental development as well, but this was seen as a by-product of the other nursery school activities. Nursery schools were regarded as providing social enrichment rather than intellectual stimulation.

Moreover, full-day out-of-home programs for young chil-