

In Defense of Being a Kid

By James Bernard Murphy

Ammy Chua, the “tiger mother,” is clearly hitting a nerve—especially among the anxious class (it used to be called the upper class), which understands how much skill and discipline are necessary for success in the new economy.

What Ms. Chua and her critics agree on is that childhood is all about preparation for adulthood. Ms. Chua claims that her parenting methods will produce ambitious, successful and happy adults—while her critics argue that her methods will produce neurotic, self-absorbed and unhappy ones.

It took economist Larry Summers, in a debate with Ms. Chua at the World Economic Forum in Davos, to point out that part of the point of childhood is childhood itself. Childhood takes up a

quarter of one’s life, Mr. Summers observed, and it would be nice if children enjoyed it.

Bravo, Larry.

Children are not merely adults in training. They are also people with distinctive powers and joys. A happy childhood is measured not only by the standards of adult success, but also by the enjoyment of the gifts given to children alone.

What are the unique blessings of childhood?

First is the gift of moral innocence: Young children are liberated from the burdens of the knowledge of the full extent of human evil—a knowledge that casts a pall over adult life. Childhood innocence permits children to trust others fully. How wonderful to live (even briefly) with such confidence in human goodness. Childhood innocence teaches us what the world ought to be.

Second is the gift of openness to the future. We adults are hamstrung by our own plans and expectations. Children alone are free to welcome the most improbable new adventures.

Third, children are liberated from the grim economy of time. Children become so absorbed in fantasy play and projects that they lose all sense of time. For them, time is not scarce and thus cannot be wasted.

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Finally, we parents are so focused on adult superiority that we forget that most of us produced our best art, asked our deepest philosophical questions, and most readily mastered new gadgets when we were mere children.

Tragically, there is a real conflict within childhood between preparation for adulthood and the enjoyment of the gifts of youth. Preparation for adulthood requires the adoption of adult prudence, discipline and planning that undermine the spontaneous

adventure of childhood.

Parents are deeply conflicted about how to balance these two basic demands: raising good little ladies and gentlemen, while also permitting children to escape into the irresponsible joys of Neverland.

Our wisest sages also disagree fundamentally about the nature of childhood. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle famously declared that “no child is happy” on the grounds that children are incapable of the complex moral and intellectual activities that constitute a flourishing life. Aristotle said that when we describe a child as happy, what we mean is that he or she is anticipating the achievements of adult life. For him, the only good thing about childhood is that we leave it behind.

By contrast, Jesus frequently praised children, welcomed their company, and even commanded adults to emulate them: “Unless you become like a little child, you shall not enter the kingdom of God.”

Tom Sawyer enjoyed a childhood of nearly pure adventure with minimal preparation for adult life. The 19th-century philosopher John Stuart Mill, by contrast, barely survived a “tiger father” who enforced a regime of ruthless discipline and learning that would make Ms. Chua blanche.

Most of us would like Tom’s childhood followed by Mill’s adulthood. But as parents we are stuck with trying to balance the paradoxical demands of both preparing our children for adulthood and protecting them from it.

As the current dustup shows, many parents today would benefit hugely by taking a reflective time-out from teaching our children to discover how much we might learn from them.

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Notable & Quotable

From a Feb. 6 editorial in the Denver Post:

The Egyptian government’s recent efforts to tamp down massive protests by shutting off Internet access has reignited debate in this country over a proposal to give the president emergency powers over the Internet. We are wary of the legislation and remain unconvinced it’s needed. . . . Some critics have decried the measure as one that would give the president an “Internet kill switch,” a characterization that supporters vehemently deny. Proponents of the bill . . . contend their mea-

sure would make it far less likely the president would use the broad authority already vested in the office. That authority stems from the Communications Act of 1934, which says the president may close or control any “facility or station for wire communication” if the country is in a state of war or faces such a threat. The way we see it, if the president already has such expansive power, why is it necessary to further elaborate on it? And if he doesn’t, he’s probably going to assume such authority in a true doomsday emergency anyway, when second-guessers will be few and far between.