

Birth Rates are at Historic Lows and Here's a Major Reason

For 100 years, the US government has tracked the birth rate. It is now at [historic lows](#). There are many reasons, but one has to do with the dramatic change in the way society regards the economic value of kids.

To illustrate the point, let's reflect on the continuing popularity of [Anne of Green Gables](#), the 1908 book by Canadian writer Lucy M. Montgomery. Yes, it is charming, and ridiculously so. It's beyond me why the new Netflix rendering ([Anne with an E](#)) is getting bad reviews. It's probably because so many people are attached to the book and the myriad previous cinematic renderings. Still, I find the new one delightful in every way, and I've been thinking on precisely why.

Beyond the solid acting and timeless story of a brilliant orphan growing up and finding her way in the world, the show introduces us into a time gone by. It is set on Prince Edward Island sometime in the late 19th century, before cars, phones, and indoor temperature control. So, sure, that's different. So is the language and cultural mores.

The Status of Kids

That's not what truly strikes us, however. What is dazzling to watch is the completely different relationship between kids and adults that existed then. The status of kids in society was unlike today.

They were aspiring adults and given as many responsibilities as they could handle within their range of competence, which was always shifting in the direction of more and more.

There was no Department of Labor and Department of Human Resources to “protect” them from living full lives. Kids in those days were regarded as valuable because they were tangibly productive. They worked, gained skills, and produced for their families or otherwise worked for businesses here and there. They were assets. As they gained skills, discipline, and a work ethic, they could become ever more valuable to their custodians and communities. This is a major reason why people wanted them. And the kids, in turn, were socialized to be grateful to their benefactors whether at home or work.

And notice from the story of Anne that a main job of kids in those days was to care for people in their aging years. So kids were valuable on both ends of the life spectrum: as co-workers when the kids are young and then as helpers as their custodians age.

What’s different today? Now kids are mostly a financial cost and defined as such, because the law, educational system, and welfare state make it that way. Oh sure, people still love their kids. Emotionally and spiritually, we speak piously and beautifully of the infinite value of their lives.

And, of course, everyone agrees. There is a social status that comes with having kids and they can be an entryway to new friend networks.

And yet. Let’s talk dollars and cents. When considering whether to have kids, people know that they will contribute little to household management, and nothing positive to the bottom line, and then they must consider how much they will have to spend. You can [look it up on online cost calculators](#). For example, if you are married and want two kids in the American South, you are going to spend \$732K. That’s a daunting figure, and that’s before you start shelling out for college.

In return for which, they offer...the infinite value of their very existence.

Is it any wonder that the birthrate has fallen to its [lowest level in more than 100 years](#)? Yes, there are other reasons having to do with technology and greater economic certainty. Still, if you forcibly reduce the value of anything, and people have any choice over it, they will produce less and less of it. This is precisely what has happened to the status of children over the last century.

Why Would You Want to Be Anne?

How did this happen? Let's look at the story of Anne.

Anne is 13 years old when the story starts. She has lived a very hard life due to circumstances beyond her control. She has lived in the orphanage but gets a new start when a family adopts her, in order to get a obtain a worker who only needs room and board. The family asked for a boy from the orphanage but there was some mix up and they sent a girl. The adoptive family (an aging brother and sister) reluctantly agree to keep her only after she charms them and proves that she can bring productivity to the household. She shows off her skills, among which include her incredible erudition.

It was a much poorer world, obviously, and only the rich kids could afford to be in school full time. Anne was mostly self taught but she loved reading, dreaming, fantasizing, imagining. She read whenever she could, by candlelight, exhausted at the end of the day. And she was brilliant, even without focus or being institutionalized.

A reason this story has riveted children for so many generations comes down to the challenges, opportunities, tragedies, and triumphs she experiences in an exciting, varied, interesting life – which is to say, a life in an economically free society. She was a child in a world that aspired for her to become an adult, and deal with actual

adult-like tasks and responsibilities. Yes, that involved schooling but this was not forced and it was not the only purpose of her life. She could even [drink wine](#)!

Back then, kids were not nationalized by the state, their every move controlled by public institutions, and forbidden from working by the government. They were challenged with as many adult responsibilities as they could handle. That Anne works hard, can do anything a boy can do, picks up vast skills, and her path of learning is largely unscripted is a real source of delight for readers and viewers. She proves herself up to the task.

What Changed?

Soon after the book was written, public policy concerning kids began to change. Public schooling was made nearly universal in the developed world. Private schooling began its long path of decline to the point that by mid-century they were operated either by churches or only available to the rich. These public schools entered on the trajectory of every government project: planned, managed from the top, treating every student as an unindividuated unit of an aggregate, soldiers in a kid army, each put through the paces for twelve years.

Then school was made compulsory in the Progressive Era. Families and kids had no choice. In such a world, would Anne have been adopted? Why would she be? Instead of realizing her value, she would have been stuffed into a holding cell for twelve years, and her caretakers would have been fiduciarily responsible for providing room and board with no compensation. There would have been no market for her person at all.

A couple of decades later, public policy went the full way. During the New Deal, "Child labor" was completely banned. It remains so today, with rare exceptions (you can be a child actor and you can work for your family business). Mostly kids are denied their inherent human rights to work and prevented

from being valuable to others according to their own skills and desires.

The law books say you can work from 14 but the limits are too strict and the paperwork too long. Even at 16, there are jobs you can have and jobs you are allowed to accept. You aren't really free to earn money serving others until you are 18, by which time kids are socialized to want to do anything but that.

And all of this is done for their well being.

Then governments instituted Social Security, medical care for the aged, and publicly funded homes for the "retired." That lets kids completely off the hook for taking care of their parents. The inverse also becomes true: they are less valuable to parents because they are no longer necessary for end-of-life care.

The upshot is that public policy killed the value of kids in the world, denying their rights to choose, work, and serve others. Society literally decided to devalue them to the point that they are all cost when young and unnecessary when their caretakers are old.

It's even worse. Kids today are corralled into collectives defined by age, given an authority figure to lord over them and lecture them for 12 years, and the only job they are allowed to have is to cough back the information the teacher tells them, sitting in desks, day after day for the whole of their growing up.

When we discover that the kids are bored and misbehave, we stuff them full of drugs, belittle them, jail them for misbehavior, and finally turn them out into the world at the age of 18 with no skills, work ethic, or knowledge of what it means actually to succeed in life.

We no longer live in an agricultural or even industrial age

that was physically grueling (the great excuse for why we stop allowing them remunerative work). In digital times, there are whole worlds of safe work that kids could do while learning and enjoying life. Kids would have [such better lives](#). We just don't allow it.

We think Anne's orphanage was cruel. But she escaped because an adoptive family saw her value. She found her groove. At least she didn't grow up in today's regimented, regulated, exclusionary world from which there is no escape for any kids, ever.

Bring Back Green Gables

My own theory of why we love this book and can't get enough of the movies about a story so far back in time is simple: kids in those days were regarded by society as real human beings with rights and dignity and opportunity. They could live full and wonderful lives. They lived real lives as part of real life.

Their rights were not systematically violated by the law in the name of helping them. The Progressives came along and deployed the violence of the state to make their lives better, and here we are today.

Is it any wonder that we are nostalgic about the life of kids in those days? And is it any wonder that people have to think very carefully about producing them today?

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