

# CHILDREN'S RIGHTS AND TOURISM

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## **The silent child object**

Historically, children have been identified as being 'less than' adults. Rather, they have been viewed as something that will, with careful guidance and patience, in due course become an adult. In this way, childhood is viewed not only as a period of physical growth of the child but also one of cognitive and emotional development. In turn, this growth is twisted into notions of *becoming*, where childhood is about developing into an adult. In this way being a child has the potential in childhood to be forced into second place in favour of the process of becoming an adult. It is the recognition that a child must grow, in every sense, in order to become an adult that has allowed them to be defined as being less than adults.

This definition has been imposed on children by an adult society that has constructed itself as holding power over and above children. In this way it has constructed and reinforced the notion that children as passive social objects rather than active social agents, the latter being what adults are, or so society tells us.

While adult society has been keen to define childhood as a period of becoming and children as passive objects it has also been keen to define it as a time of 'innocence', when children are unaware of and unfettered by adult obligations. In this way there is a nostalgic desire for the childhood lost among adult society that arguably reflects the ultimate desire of adults to escape the rigours and responsibilities of daily life. Based on this notion, the desire of adults to protect childhood can be seen to be as much about adults as about the children who inhabit it.

## **Adult and parent responsibilities**

Following on from the defining of children and childhood, the notion of children as the responsibility of adults has been constructed. Such responsibilities can be viewed through a positive lens that highlights the protective and developmental roles of adults in the lives of children. This protection encompasses both the child and their childhood. The responsible adult society is constructed as one that ensures childhood remains a period of innocence even in the face of apparently ever increasing pressure from multiple sources. Furthermore,

it seeks to protect children from all forms of physical and emotional harm. At the same time, through formal and informal mechanisms society seeks to develop children in its own image, to ensure they become fully functioning and ‘useful’ members of society as they enter adulthood. Against this backdrop the notion of *parenthood* and the *good parent* is developed. Both are social constructs, with the latter being one that encapsulates all of the values already mentioned in relation to the responsible adult society’s views on children and childhood. As with all social constructs, it is one that all parents are pressured by society, overtly and covertly, to aspire and conform to. As individual parents do this, they of course reinforce the notion of the good parent in a continual feedback loop.

Viewed through a different lens, the adult centric definitions of children, childhood, and the good parent can be seen as stymying the freedom of children. If children are merely passive social objects then this is not a problem as an object requires no freedom and would have no use for such a thing. However, if children are sentient beings then this may be a significant problem. It effectively robs children of any freedom and instead imposes adult rules upon them that force them down specific, preordained paths of development.

### **Freedom, rights and welfare**

It is clear today that children are not merely objects; they are not akin to a car, a house, or a plant. Instead, they are clearly sentient beings that are capable of independent thought and action. While these thought processes and related potential actions may be different from those of adults this does not diminish their value or importance. If we recognise children as sentient, socially active, beings then we must also recognise that they have specific welfare needs and associated rights.

Protection, development, and freedom are, today, enshrined in the conceptualisation of the rights of children and yet we must recognise that these rights have largely been written by adults from adult centric viewpoints regarding the conceptualisation of children. In other words, adults have constructed children as vulnerable and childhood as a stage in the development of a fully functioning adult member of society. Following on from this, adults have enshrined these definitions of children and childhood in the rights of children. They have built laws around these rights to protect them and give them legitimacy. Yet, however well-meaning these rights and associated actions have been they are arguably limited by their adultcentric nature and the associated lack of engagement with children to allow them to give voice to what they see as their welfare needs.

Within all of the rights of children ‘freedom’ is a hugely important but also contentious one, especially in relation to tourism. The entire tourism experience is grounded on the notion of escape from the everyday, from the mundane, and from control. In this way tourism is linked to conceptualisations of leisure and, especially important within the context of children, play. Tourism, leisure, and play share freedom as a common cornerstone. This freedom is seen to be not a decadent luxury but a vital ingredient for personal development. Yet

it is a problematic concept because it is set within the reality that humans are social animals. As a result, freedom of the individual is socially bounded, constructed, and controlled. It is the way and degree to which this happens that shapes the tourism experiences of the child.

### **Tourism industry interpretations of children's rights**

Within the tourism experience children occupy a variety of positions. They may be viewed as social agents that are akin to consumers in some instances but in others are treated more like objects that are owned by their parents/caregivers. They can also play a role in the tourism experience as employees (both willingly and unwillingly) and members of the broader host society.

In relation to the consumption side of tourism the industry, in line with society in general, has been guilty of prioritising adult-defined protection and development over child-driven freedom. It has also, arguably, been guilty of exploiting children in general and the adult centric definitions of their welfare needs in particular. In a similar way, the industry has exploited societal definitions of the good parent. More discussion of these points is provided in the following section.

In relation to the production side of tourism, the industry also has a history of exploitation of children. In this instance it is not an exploitation of their needs and rights wrapped up in a veneer of benefits for the child. Instead these rights and needs are simply ignored in the search for profit maximisation. This exploitation is not socially sanctioned and is therefore hidden in the dark. Here we see child labour and child sex tourism exploiting the vulnerability of the child for the benefit of adults without a care about the welfare of the child.

### **OVERRATING THE CHILD HOLIDAY EXPERIENCE**

The family holiday experience has been constructed by the tourism industry as the pinnacle of good parenting. The offerings by Disneyland and Mickey Mouse are prime examples of the way in which the industry seeks to exploit the notion of the good parent as being one who spends time with their children and gives them special moments and experiences that will stay with them forever and help to develop them into socially responsible adults. This can lead to legitimate questions of who the family holiday is really for.

The tourism industry has also answered the societal call to focus on the developmental needs of children and their adult centric conceptualisation as vulnerable. As a result, a plethora of experiences are now offered to children (or their parents) by the tourism experience that seek to aid their education (in the broadest sense) but constantly strive to do so in a safe manner. The summer camp experience is a prime example of this. It is sold, arguably primarily, though not exclusively, to adults as something that will enable their children to develop a raft of soft skills necessary for their future success as adults. At the same time, it is stressed that this development will take place in a safe and controlled environment.

In opposition to these constructed experiences is the notion that the development of children is best enabled in a free and unstructured context. Consequently, it is suggested that if parents and the wider adult society wish children to develop in a healthy and productive way the best thing they can often do is get out of the way and simply allow children to be children. This does not require the consumption of leisure products but simply access to free time and the operationalisation of the right to do as they wish in it.

### **Adult obligations to children**

In society, adults are in a position of power relative to children. It is both a soft and a hard power that is enshrined in adult-defined and monitored laws. It is against this background that the recognition of the creation of the rights of the child and the enshrining of these in national and global standards has taken place. As a consequence, as noted earlier, these rights are adult centric rights. Herein lies a contradiction; imbedded in these rights is the recognition of the child as an active social agent but this agency is denied by not allowing children to define their own rights and welfare needs.

It may therefore be suggested that it is not sufficient to merely define children's rights and their welfare needs. Rather, adults have an obligation to exercise their power, and also to consciously not exercise it, in a manner that helps to facilitate the freedom of children to define and enact their own welfare needs. In this way it may be argued that an important obligation of adults is to let children be free – free to succeed to do what they want to do yet also free to not succeed and even to do what may appear to adults to be meaningless, valueless activities or nothing at all if that is what they wish to do.

As with all freedom available in society there is still the need for safeguards. Although much can be learned from failure, while allowing for this possibility adults have an obligation to ensure that the potential for harm outweighing the benefits of failure is avoided. Similarly, adults have the obligation to protect children from exploitation in all its myriad forms.

### **What can the tourism industry do?**

The tourism industry is an adult construct; one that was created by adults for adults and that is run by adults. While children may have a prominent place in the tourist population it is ultimately adults who pay for this. In this way the tourism industry, like many other industries, is faced with the conceptual problem of having to deal with two sets of consumers. One pays the bills (i.e., the parents) while the other does not (i.e., the child). Furthermore, the needs and desires of the child may not always be seen to be the same amongst parents and children. This leaves the industry in a dilemma; who should it pay attention to? While it has traditionally followed the money it is increasingly recognised that this is neither morally or financially necessarily the best path to take. The moral reasoning has already been discussed. The financial aspect is related to the recognition that placating the desires of parents

may not lead to happy children if these desires are not also the desires of the child. The re-sult may be stressful and negative experiences for the entire family. Such experiences are not what a successful tourism industry needs to be providing.

Consequently, the tourism industry needs to embrace the conceptualisation of children as active social agents that prioritises their welfare over adult-defined children's rights. It has a social obligation to do so for the wellbeing of children today and the health of society into the future as the children of today grow into the adults of tomorrow. It also needs to do this for its own economic survival. Providing positive experiences for children that engage with children's desires rather than impose notions of what children need onto them will cre-ate happy family experiences and develop future potential consumers. In this way the in-dustry needs to become better at listening to and providing for children.

However, the ability of the tourism industry to listen to and provide for children is ham-pered by the adult centric nature of society and the contemporary obsession of adult society with protecting and structuring the lives of children. Consequently, the tourism industry ne-eds to play a role in shifting this mind-set rather than simply buying into it to ensure short term economic gain. Tourism, as a representation of society, cannot do this alone. However, it does have the potential to help change social values and in the process improve the welfa-re of children and through this the welfare of society in general.

Does this all mean that the tourism industry has no obligation other than to ensure the freedom of children? No, this is not the case at all. Rather, the industry, like society in gene-ral has the far harder obligation to achieve of ensuring this freedom while at the same time guarding children from danger. It is the balancing of these two competing values that must be achieved so that the welfare of children (both as children and future adults) can be reali-sed. This balance needs to be struck both in relation to children as consumers, hosts, and employees of the tourism industry.