

The Role of Children in a Degrowing Society

Debates on degrowth, sustainability or transition towns rarely mention the role of children in a future world worth living in or for paths leading to more sustainable and humane living conditions. If so, mostly they deal with the design of schools and working conditions for parents. This is just the same as is the state of the actual debate on children in German social science.¹

In this contribution, I argue, that firstly children have special needs compared to adults and that they have a right to fulfil their needs. Secondly, children who have the opportunity to fulfil their needs, develop competences helpful for a life in degrowing societies. In this context, I will address the right to self-determined play and exploration of children's environment.

First I will discuss the actual childhood mainly in Germany. But there are no great differences in other western countries or in the global middle class. Then I will explain the right to play, to leisure time and cultural life, art. 31 of the UN convention of the right of the child. I will put forward why children should live more autonomously than they do now. At last I will present ways to develop living conditions which lead to more autonomy for children.

Childhood has changed. This is a consensus in the debate. Elements from an upbringing by socialisation disappeared, as is participation in work and cultural life of adults and self-determined play outdoors. When change started, whether and which reforms are necessary is subject of discussion. It is stated, that modern childhood mainly takes place indoors. It is seen to be mainly steered by adults' inputs, whether pedagogically welcomed as in schools, other day care institutions or by parents, or whether criticised as influence of electronic media and an abundance of toys. Children's life takes place on isolated "islands", designed for them and mostly separated from adult's life. Children often cannot pass by their own from one to another location.² In Germany for the last ten years former half-day schools and kindergartens have turned to all day care institutions.

Mainly the industrial society with rational and functional land use, which prevents cross use for different purposes, as for work, provision and play, and the motorized transportation, is made responsible for this development. Some aspects of modern childhood are reclaimed to have harmful influences, as e.g. lack of physical exercise and overweight or lack of concentration for learning. They are answered by the mind-set of the industrial society: new special professions for adults and new special rooms for children are created.

On the other hand the UN convention of the right of the child explains:

States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts. (Art. 31 (1))

1 Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend: 14. Kinder- und Jugendbericht, 2013

2 Zeiher, Helga (1995): Die vielen Räume der Kinder. Zum Wandel räumlicher Lebensbedingungen seit 1945. In: Ulf Preuss-Lausitz (Hg.): Kriegskinder, Konsumkinder, Krisenkinder. Zur Sozialisationsgeschichte seit dem Zweiten Weltkrieg

In 2013 art. 31 was explained by a general comment. Concern of the situation of children's autonomy is expressed. More leisure time, more free space to play and more opportunities to take part freely in cultural life are demanded.³

Children have an urge to play and to explore their environments. Even many young animals, all mammals, do so. Thus, evolution biologists conclude that play and exploration urge must be very important for the fitness of the being. Moreover, ethnologists found that children in hunter-gatherer societies mostly fill their days with play in groups of age-mixed children or mimicking adult's activities. Neither much formal education nor extended chores were observed. In societies which might have had a similar structure, mankind developed as a biological being.⁴

Thus, it could be harmful for children's development to ignore their need for autonomous exploration. I propose that experiential learning has to be a very important part of childhood towards a degrowth society. This includes free participation in adult's work and provision as well as free time and space for self-determined play. This concept does not exclude time for learning structured by adults, which will always be important in a complex and alphabetised society.

Children have a right to play. As well, in a society changing towards less material consumption children need competences, as in later life as in childhood, that are fostered by autonomous exploration.⁵

Lack of physical exercise has already mentioned as one characteristic of modern childhood. It leads to overweight, poor motor skills, postural defects, and greatly increases the probability to fall sick from diabetes, heart diseases, osteoporosis and cancer. Kohl and Craig call it a pandemic of the modern society.⁶ Many surveys show that physical exercise is strongly intertwined with cognitive skills and mental wellbeing. Physical and mental health is crucial for child's development.

Pedagogically unregulated play is connected with intensive negotiation about matters, roles and fairness. It is creative, as children find new solutions for their intentions. It is not dependent from prefabricated consumer goods.

Towards a society where consumption is to be organised intelligently in order to improve distributive justice and ecological sustainability, creativity, the ability to fulfil one's needs with less material goods, is an important feature. Children, who have many opportunities to play and act autonomously, train their creativity and their social skills. They perceive themselves as self-efficient beings, i.e. they

3 United Nations, Committee on the Rights of the Child: General comment No. 17 (2013) on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts (art. 31)

4 Konner, Melvin (2010): *The evolution of childhood. Relationships, emotion, mind.* Cambridge, Mass.

5 Richard-Elsner, Christiane (2009): *Das freie Kinderspiel im Freien. Nostalgie oder Notwendigkeit?* In: *Unsere Jugend* (3), S. 123–131.

6 Kohl, Harold W.; Craig, Cora Lynn et al (2012): *The pandemic of physical inactivity: global action for public health.* In: *The Lancet* 380 (9838), S. 294–305.

consider themselves to be able to implement tasks and plans successfully based on their own abilities and resources.

Children playing outdoors prefer natural surroundings, as many materials and diverse spaces are available. This leads to a sympathetic and realistic attitude towards nature.

Good neighbourhoods and a diverse network of relationships would make it easier to have an eye on children and to constitute a stimulating social space. Free and diverse open spaces for children can easily be made available in a society with less motorized transport, reliable neighbourhood relations and less specialised working areas.

It is recommendable to start with the implementation of features towards an active childhood. Thus, nowadays children would have the option to be less dependent from consumption and to organise their lives as adults creatively, socially active and healthily.

Realistic steps to open spaces and time for children in nowadays' society are available or may be implemented without big effort:

- Instead of the mere implementation of isolated play grounds with monotonous play devices, municipalities have to include children's play and mobility in planning activities. In Germany "Spilleitplanung" is a method to participate children, young people and residents in urban planning. The target is a living environment, where children can easily and safely reach their schools, diverse spaces open for play, and other destinations of their interest.⁷
- Unregulated spaces for children are rare. "Naturerfahrungsräume" are spaces not smaller than 10000 m², not more than 300 m away from home without play devices but destined for play in nature without regulation.⁸
- Anonymity in living environment can be reduced by offering safe places for children, where they can get help from trustworthy adults, get sticking plasters, and can ring up at home. These places, mostly shops, are labelled.⁹
- Adult play guards are walking through the residential environment, motivate to play and have an eye on play obstacles in the space.¹⁰
- Day care institutions have to provide time and space for unregulated play, not only on their small grounds but have to use free spaces in their environment." Waldkindergärten", kindergartens with only a hut in the woods, and "Waldtage", days where children stay in a wood or in other natural spaces are well proven measures.¹¹

7 <http://www.spielleitplanung.de/>

8 <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naturerfahrungsraum>

9 e.g. <http://www.helfendehand.net/>

10 <http://www.dortmund-spielt-draussen.de/>

11 <http://bvnw.de/>

- Parents and other caregivers have to be informed, that children's sound development includes opportunities to act and play autonomously.

In a degrowing society the child is not considered as an object of education by adults, but as a subject with its own rights and needs.
