

A painting of an elderly man with a beard and three children. The man is in the background, looking down. The children are in the foreground, looking up. The style is painterly and somewhat somber.

A Child's Right to Respect

Janusz Korczak



THE REPUBLIC OF POLAND
OMBUDSMAN FOR CHILDREN



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Janusz Korczak

translation Sean Gasper Bye



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A Word of Introduction

A Child's Right to Respect is short, but it is the most important of Janusz Korczak's pedagogical publications. It should be treated as an educational manifesto, the Old Doctor's credo.

A Child's Right to Respect, first published at the end of 1928, is a synthesis of Korczak's thinking and educational activities. By the time this foundational work was written, Korczak was mature and nearly fifty years old, with sixteen years of running the Orphans' Home on Krochmalna Street behind him. He enjoyed fame and recognition as a doctor, educator, writer, journalist, social activist and children's author: *King Matt the First*, *King Matt on the Desert Island*, *The Bankruptcy of Little Jack*, and *When I'm Little Again*, as well as his pedagogical essay *How to Love a Child*.

This publication can be considered an academic textbook or a cycle of original lectures stemming from Korczak's many years of research as an educator, researcher, and practitioner. "I have stubbornly kept seeking and, little by little, have found an answer" – writes Korczak in *A Child's Right to Respect*. This deceptively small book is the clearest presentation of Korczak's pedagogical thinking around children's rights. Its target audience is first and foremost professionals working with children: teachers, educators, and social workers, but also families and all those close to children's issues. It consists of a declaration of children's rights, which the Old Doctor formulated over many years of observing and becoming acquainted with young people, his actions inscribing

themselves onto the Polish and international movement for the guardianship and protection of children's rights.

Korczak addresses these experts with an original vision of children, childhood, and children's rights: but this time, unlike in *The Rules of Life* or *How to Love a Child*, he does not draw the connection to practice. He refers to axiomatic principles. He appeals to values, he orders, argues, and demands that a child has the right to respect. What does he mean by this?

Children are our greatest treasure. They are entitled to the same dignity as every person, and in that dignity, they are equal to adults. Korczak proves "there are no children – there are people."

Children are experts and authorities on their own worlds. They discover and fashion their own reality, giving adults cause to reflect and often revealing new truths to them.

Children occupy an important place in the family and society. Children create their own "people, nation, and class." They are an important part of the social fabric, they have civic, societal, and cultural rights.

For the sake of and on behalf of the young, Korczak demands respect for children's ignorance, their failures and tears, their possessions and their budgets, and also respect for the current hour, the day today.

Despite the 80 years that have passed since the Old Doctor wrote these words, today many families, teachers, educators, doctors, judges, police officers, journalists, and religious instructors subscribe to them, and so does the Ombudsman for Children's Rights – not only in the Year of Korczak.

Marek Michalak

Ombudsman for Children's Rights

Chancellor of the International Chapter of the Order of the Smile

Disdain – Mistrust

From the very beginning, we grow up believing something large is more important than something small.

“I’m big,” children joyfully declare when placed on a table.

“I’m taller than you,” they say proudly when measuring up against a peer.

It is unpleasant to stand on tiptoe and not reach; keeping up with adults is hard if you have short legs; small hands can lose their grip on a glass. Climbing onto chairs, into vehicles, or up a flight of stairs is awkward and laborious; children cannot grasp door handles, look through windows, take things down or hang them up, because everything is too high. In crowds, their way is blocked, they cannot see, they are jostled around. It is uncomfortable and disagreeable to be small.

What is large and takes up more space inspires respect and admiration. What is small is ordinary, uninteresting. Small people means small needs, small joys, and small sorrows.

Great cities, high mountains, tall trees: these are impressive.

We say:

“Grand deeds make a great man.”

Children are small, insubstantial, there is less of them. We are obliged to bend over and lower ourselves to their level.

What is worse, children are weak.

We can pick them up, toss them in the air, sit them down against their will, forcibly stop them from running, and frustrate their efforts.

If ever they do not obey, I can resort to strength. I say: “Do not wander off, do not move, get out of my way, give it back.” They know they have no choice, making so many attempts before they understand, surrender, and give in.

Who would dare to shove, pull, or strike an adult? And when, under what extraordinary circumstances? Yet how commonplace and innocent to slap a child, jerk them hard by the hand, or squeeze them painfully in affection.

The feeling of powerlessness engenders a veneration for strength; anyone – not merely adults, but anyone older and stronger – may forcibly express their unhappiness, using strength to bolster a demand or enforce obedience. They may do harm with impunity.

By our own example, we teach disdain for the weak. This is a poor education, a dark omen.

The countenance of the world has changed. Now it is not muscle power that labors and defends us from enemies, not muscle power that reclaims the earth, the forests, and the sea, that grants us control, gratification, and security. Machines are our subjugated slaves. Muscle has lost its unique privilege and no longer wields the upper hand, giving way to increased reverence for intellect and knowledge.

The questionable cabinet of curiosities and the contemplative's modest cell have developed into the lecture halls and edifices of the researcher. Libraries add additional floors, shelves sag under the weight of books. Proud reason's temples teem with people. Persons of knowledge build and command. Time after time, hieroglyphs made of numbers and pen-strokes fling new achievements to the crowds, testifying to the power of humankind. Our memory and understanding must come to grips with all this.

The arduous years of learning continually lengthen; schools, examinations, and printed words multiply. But small, weak children, their lives yet so short, have not read, are not able...

It is a daunting question how to share out the regions we have conquered: upon whom shall we bestow what tasks and what payment, how can we cultivate the globe we have mastered? Where and how do we distribute workshops to sustain hands and minds hungry for work; how do we maintain obedience and order among the human ants; how do we safeguard against individuals' ill-will and madness; how do we fill the hours of life with labor, rest, and recreation; and how do we fend off apathy, satiety, and boredom? How do we confine people in penal institutions, how do we facilitate understanding, when do we distribute and divide up? Speed and encouragement here, restraint there; ignite here, extinguish there.

Politicians and lawmakers make tentative efforts, but time and time again they fail.

When it comes to children, they advise and reflect, but who would naively ask a child for their opinion or approval? What could they have to say?

Apart from good judgement and knowledge, in the struggle for survival and power, it is important to have quick wits. With foresight, a person may catch wind of something and earn more than honest accounting would consider their worth. Such people swiftly and effortlessly climb to the top, charming others and earning their envy. A shrewd understanding of human nature is called for – not the altar of life, but the pigsty.

Yet children awkwardly toddle around with their schoolbooks, balls, and dolls; they can tell important, powerful things are taking place without their participation, over their heads, which will determine fortune and misfortune, which will punish, reward, and shatter.

Flowers are harbingers of fruit to come, chicks will become chickens that lay eggs, calves will one day give milk. In the meantime, however, there comes effort, expense, and worry: will they survive, will they succeed?

We fuss over the young; though the wait to adulthood is long, perhaps when we are old they will support us and pay us back with interest. But life knows droughts, frosts, and hail that blasts and destroys crops.

We search for signs, longing for foresight and certainty, in restless anticipation of that which is to come, while ever more neglecting that which is.

The young have little market value. Only in the eyes of the Law and of God is the apple blossom worth as much as the apple, or are green shoots equal to mature grain.

We nurse, protect, feed, and educate. Children accept our offerings, unconcerned; what would they be without us, to whom they owe everything?

Only, solely, nothing but – us.

Children have a future, but they also have a past: unforgettable events, memories, many hours of essential solitary reflection. Just as we remember and forget, cherish and disdain, logically reason – their errors are also out of ignorance. They weigh carefully whether to trust or doubt.



We know the paths to success, we offer directions and counsel. We encourage virtue, stamp out vice. We guide, correct, and train. They are nothing – we are everything.

We give orders and demand obedience.

Morally and legally responsible, with knowledge and foresight, we are the sole judges of children's actions, movements, thoughts, and intentions.

We give instructions and see to it they are fulfilled according to our will and understanding. Our children are our property – hands off!

(In truth, things have changed somewhat. Today there is more than just the will and exclusive authority of the family – there is also a present, if still cautious, social control. Only a little, barely perceptible.)

Beggars may dispose of their alms as they please, but children have nothing of their own and must account for each object they have acquired at no cost and for their own use.

They may not tear, break, or soil; they may not give gifts, may not reluctantly throw away. They are to accept and be glad. Everything in its proper place and time, rationally, and according to its purpose.

(Perhaps this is why they value small, worthless objects that earn their astounded sympathy: after all, castoffs – a string, a box, some beads – are their only true property and treasure.)

Because children are poor and trapped in material dependency, the relationship of adults to children is unjust.

We disrespect children because they do not know, cannot reason out, and lack intuition.

They do not know the trials or complexities of adult life, they do not know the causes of our periods of excitement, discouragement, and weariness that drive away our calm and sour our mood: they have

no knowledge of grown-ups' failures and bankruptcies. It is easy to put them to bed, deceive the naïve little ones, and put on a masquerade.

Children believe life is simple and easy. There is papa and there is mama, father earns and mama purchases. They know nothing of betraying one's duties or fighting for one's share and more.

They themselves are free of material woes, powerful temptations, or disruptions – once again, they do not know and cannot evaluate. We analyze children on the fly; seeing through them with a casual, piercing glance; exposing their feeble ruses without investigation.

But perhaps we delude ourselves, thinking children are only what we wish them to be. What if they hide from us, what if they suffer in secret?

We plunder mountains, cut down trees, exterminate animals. Communities proliferate where once there were forests and swamps. We continually settle people in new territories.

We have subdued the world, put iron and animals to our use, subjugated the colored races, coarsened relations among nations, and placated the masses. A righteous order is still a long way off, while injury and misery grow.

The doubts and uncertainties of a child seem frivolous.

Children's clear democracy knows no hierarchy. For the moment, the sweat of laborers and the hunger of their peers, the suffering of a tormented horse or a slaughtered hen pains them. Dogs and birds, butterflies and flowers are their friends; in pebbles and seashells they find their brothers. With the haughty pride of an arriviste, they lack solidarity for their fellow man, unaware only humans have a soul.

We disrespect children because they have many hours of life ahead of them.

We feel the labor of our own steps, the burden of actions undertaken in our own interest, the impoverishment of our perceptions and feelings. But children run and jump, they gaze without purpose, they are surprised and inquiring, they cry at the drop of a hat and are generous in their joy.

In autumn, the sunlight is rarer and so there is value in a beautiful day; springtime will be green no matter what. Nothing particular is needed, it takes little to make children happy – why make an effort? We hurriedly and carelessly brush them aside, neglecting the abundance of their lives and the joy we can so easily bestow.

For us, important quarter-hours and years are slipping away. Children have time yet, they will get there, they will live to see the day.

Children are not soldiers, they do not defend the homeland, though they suffer along with it.

There is no need to court their opinion, for they cannot vote: they do not threaten, demand, or speak.

They are weak, small, poor, and dependent until they become citizens.

Lenient, coarse, or brutal treatment – but always disrespect.

A tiny tot, just a kid – a future person, not one right now. Not real until later.

Keep an eye on them, do not let them out of your sight for a moment. Keep an eye on them, do not leave them alone. Keep an eye on them, do not step away.

They fall down, hit, cut, soil, spill, tear, break, ruin, fling, lose, start fires, and let robbers into the house. They hurt themselves and us; injure themselves, us, and their playmates.

Watching over them means depriving them of independent action – we have the unlimited right to control and criticize.

They do not know what to eat or how much, when and how much to drink, they do not know the limits of fatigue. So be ready to watch over their diet, sleep, and rest.

For how long, until when? Forever. While their needs change with age, they do not lessen, and our suspicions even increase.

Children cannot distinguish the important from the trivial. Order and systematic labor are foreign to them. Absent-minded, they forget, ignore, and neglect. They do not know what responsibilities they will have one day.

We feel the need to caution, guide, drill, contain, rein in, correct, warn, prevent, impose, and combat.

Fight against frowns, caprices, and stubbornness.

We impose a program of vigilance, caution, fear, and concern, of foreboding and of dark predictions.

From our experience, we know danger lies all around, ambushes, traps, misadventures, catastrophes.

We know the greatest caution offers no absolute guarantee, and are the more suspicious for it: so that our consciences remain clear, so that in times of sorrow we find no fault in ourselves.

Children enjoy pushing the boundaries of insubordination, they are strangely drawn straight to wickedness. They gladly surrender to negative urges, following the worst examples.

They easily go wrong and are difficult to set right.

We long for goodness, wish to ease the way, and we offer all our experience wholeheartedly: they need only reach out their hands and

be ready. We know what harms children, remembering what harmed us – let them steer clear, be spared, avoid danger.

“Remember, know, understand.”

“You will learn, you will see.”

They do not listen—seemingly on purpose, seemingly to spite us.

We must ensure they obey, ensure they accomplish their task. On their own, they will openly tend toward evil and choose the worse, more dangerous path.

How can we tolerate their thoughtless pranks, silly antics, and baffling outbursts?

The immature are suspicious. They seem submissive and innocent, but are in fact cunning and treacherous.

They know how to slip through our fingers, dull our vigilance, and deceive us. They always have an excuse prepared, a defense; they will dissemble and outright lie.

They are untrustworthy and suspect.

Disrespect and mistrust and suspicion and blame. The analogy is painful: a troublemaker, a drunk, a rebel, a madman. How can we live with them under one roof?

Reluctance

Never mind. We adore children. In spite of everything, they are a consolation, encouragement, and hope; a joy and reprieve, the shining light of life. We do not frighten, burden, or harry them, they feel free and happy...

Why then do they seem to be a weight, a hindrance, an inconvenient addition? Why this unfavorable view of children?

Confusion and limitations creep into a family's life even before their child has greeted the unwelcoming world. The short months of long-anticipated, deserving joy collapse irreversibly.

A long period of heavy incapacity is followed by sickness and pain, restless nights and unplanned expenses. Troubled peace, spoiled order, an unbalanced budget.

Alongside the sour stench of diapers and the piercing cry of a newborn, the chains of marital slavery rattle.

Communication is onerous when the other is incomprehensible. Inventions and guesswork become necessary. We wait, perhaps even patiently.

When they can finally speak and walk, they get underfoot, they move everything around, they peek into every corner, the little scallwags are just as good at getting in the way as sowing disorder – despoils!

They cause damage, resist our rational will, make demands, and understand only what they care to.

We must not ignore small things: we resent children for too-early mornings and for crumpled-up newspapers, for stains on dresses and wallpaper, for wet carpets, broken binoculars and souvenir vases, spilled milk and perfume, and doctors' fees.

They do not speak when we wish, they do not eat what we want; when we think they are about to burst into giggles instead, frightened, they cry. And they are frail: any error risks illness, any novelty presages difficulty.

The more we forgive, the more easily they accuse and antagonize; not only mothers, but fathers, nannies, maids, and neighbors shape a child's character – dealing out punishments in secret or contrary to the mother's wishes.

A little mischief-maker can cause friction and hard feelings among adults; someone is always hostile or offended. Where one is lenient, another is vindictive. Often, ostensible goodness is mindless negligence, and the child is held responsible for others' faults.

(Older boys and girls do not like it when we call them children. This word they share with the very youngest forces them to answer for the past and share the bad reputation of babies – while they themselves are targets of just as many accusations).

How rare are children who is just as we desired, how often is their growing up accompanied by feelings of disappointment?

“After all, by now they should be...”

In exchange for what we have given in good will, children are meant to do their best; they are to understand, accept, and abandon, but above all – feel grateful.

Their demands and requirements increase with age, most often in a different way and less than we had hoped.

We hand over a portion of time, responsibilities, and authority to schools. Vigilance is redoubled, responsibility is deepened, divergent competencies collide. Gaps are revealed.

Parents will kindly forgive, their leniency flowing from a clear sense of guilt at their responsibility for bringing their child into being, of the harm done to an imperfect child. How often does a mother seek to use a child’s alleged illness as a weapon against others’ accusations and her own doubts?

By and large, a mother’s voice is not appreciated. She is partial, unauthoritative. Instead, we turn to the views of educators, experts, experienced people: do children deserve kindness?

In private homes, educators rarely find conditions conducive to living with children.

Constricted by mistrustful supervision, educators are forced to maneuver between others’ instructions and their own views, between external requirements and their own peace and comfort.

In taking responsibility for a child entrusted to them, they suffer the consequences of questionable decisions made by the child’s virtuous caretakers and breadwinners.

When forced to mislead and avoid difficulty, it is easy to become corrupted – perhaps by hypocrisy – or to become embittered and indolent.

Over years of work, the gap widens between what adults demand and what children desire, and the educator grows more proficient in impure methods of bringing a child to heel.

The reward for this thankless labor is plain: whom God would to punish, He makes a children's educator.

Active, noisy children, curious about life and its mysteries, exhaust us; their questions and astonishments vex us; their discoveries and undertakings often have unfortunate outcomes.

Advisors and comforters are rare, while strict judges are common. Summary verdicts and punishments have only one result: the antics of boredom and rebelliousness grow rarer, but stronger and more perverse. So we strengthen supervision, overcome resistance, guard against surprises.

Thus is the decline of an educator: disrespect, mistrust, suspicion, investigation, discovery, reprimand, accusation, and punishment; ever more frequent prohibitions and more absolute coercion in search of suitable means of prevention, ignoring a child's efforts to carefully fill up a piece of paper or an hour of life, and offering cold condemnation.

The sky-blue of forgiveness is rare, the scarlet of anger and indignation – common.

The more understanding is required in raising a group of children, the easier it is to fall into the error of accusation and resentment.

A single small, weak child is wearying and individual transgressions are infuriating, but how maddening, beleaguering, demanding, and unpredictably impulsive is a group!

Show me dad!



Children are rational beings, intimately familiar with the requirements, difficulties, and obstacles in their lives. What is called for is neither despotic command, nor imposed discipline, nor untrusting control, but tactful understanding, trust in experience, cooperation, and coexistence.

Understand once and for all: not children but a group. A bunch, a gang, a pack – not children.

One is accustomed to thinking one is strong; suddenly, one feels small and weak. A crowd is a giant, with tremendous combined power and huge combined experience; in a moment, it rises up in unified resistance, then only to collapse into dozens of pairs of arms and legs – or heads, each concealing different thoughts and secret demands.

How difficult it is for the new teacher in a classroom or boarding school, where children are governed by strict discipline and where the unruly and alienated have organized themselves on the principles of thuggish force. How powerful and threatening it is when they attack one's will in united effort, aiming to burst the dam – not children, but an elemental force.

How many hidden revolutions, whereof a teacher does not speak out of shame at accepting they are weaker than a child?

Lesson learned, teacher resort to any means to tamp down and control. Familiarity or innocent jokes are not tolerated: no curt responses, shrugs, stubborn silences, angry glances. Uproot and vengefully destroy insolence and stubborn recalcitrance. Buy the ringleaders off with privileges, select confidants, have no regard for fair punishment – the stricter the better, to make an example, to stifle the first sparks of rebellion, so even in their thoughts the horde-colossus makes no attempt to demand or go on the prowl.

A child's weakness may elicit affection, but the strength of a group is enraging and terrifying.

There is a false allegation that kindness emboldens children, that gentleness will be answered with impunity and disorder.

But let us not mistake carelessness, incompetence, or feeble stupidity for goodness. Among educators, apart from cunning brutes and misanthropes, we also encounter incompetents spurning all technique and unfit to take on any responsible post.

Sometimes a teacher wishes to get on children's good side and quickly, cheaply win their trust with no effort. They wish to romp around when in good humor, not laboriously organize the lives of the group. Often paternalistic leniency is interspersed with sudden outbursts of bad temper. They make fools of themselves before the children's very eyes.

Sometimes ambitious people believe it easy to reshape a child through persuasion and friendly moralizing; that it suffices to touch the emotions and extract a promise of improvement. Such people are wearisome and tedious.

Sometimes the apparently kind, showing support in insincere platitudes, are the more insidious enemies and wrongdoers. They provoke disgust.

Ill-treatment will be answered with disdain, kindness with hesitation and rebelliousness, and mistrust – with conspiracy.

Years of work have made it ever more clear that children deserve respect, trust, and kindness; that they prosper in a sunny atmosphere of gentle feelings, cheerful laughter, lively first efforts and surprises; of pure, bright, loving joy; where work is dynamic, fruitful, and beautiful.

One thing has caused doubt and concern.

Why, at times, does the most certain child disappoint? Why are there rare, though occasional, sudden explosions of insubordinate group action? Perhaps adults are no better, but they are more reliably level-headed, confident, and calm.

I have stubbornly kept seeking and, little by little, have found an answer.

1. If educators seek out qualities of character and values they consider especially worthwhile, if they desire to shape children to fit a single model, to pull everything in one direction – then they will be led astray. Some children will imitate these dogmas, others will honestly give in to suggestion – for the time being. But when the child's true face is revealed, not only will the educator sense failure, but the child as well. The more effort is made to maintain a façade or submit to an adult's influence, the stronger the backlash will be; once children's underlying tendencies are unveiled, they no longer have anything to lose. How important the lesson that comes from this.

2. Teachers have one measure of morals, while groups of children have another. They both see a richness of spirit: teachers wait for them to develop, while the children wait to see which of these richesses will be of use today, whether they will share what they have or – haughty, jealous, selfish, and miserly – consider their privileges theirs and theirs alone, refusing to tell stories, play games, make drawings, assist, lend a hand: “he's only doing it as a favor,” “you'll have to ask him.” Isolated, they aim for a grand gesture to ingratiate themselves into the community, which gladly accepts their conversion. They are not ruined immediately, on the contrary, they have understood and made a correction.

3. When they have disappointed collectively, when the group has done harm.

I found an explanation for this in a book about training animals and I will not conceal the source. It says a lion is not dangerous when angry but when playful, wanting to have fun, and a group of children is as strong as a lion...

We must seek solutions not merely in psychology, but rather in books of medicine, sociology, ethnology, history, poetry, criminology, and prayer as well as training manuals. *Ars longa*.

4. Now comes the sunniest, and let us hope not the final, explanation. Perhaps a child can become drunk upon the oxygen in the air just as an adult can on vodka. Excitement, impairment of the centers of control, risk, mental barriers; and the reaction – embarrassment, nausea, a feeling of distaste, and guilt. My observation is specific – clinical. Even the most honorable person may have a weak mind.

Do not reproach: children's cheerful drunkenness is thrilling and virtuous; it does not distance or set apart, but brings closer and unites.

We conceal our own faults and reprehensible deeds. Children are not permitted to criticize or point out our vices, addictions, or amusing qualities. We masquerade as perfection. On pain of deepest resentment, we defend the secrets of the ruling clan, the caste of initiates – we are dedicated to a higher cause. Children are the only ones who may be undressed without embarrassment or spanked.

When it comes to children, we play with marked cards, trumping the weaknesses of young childhood with the aces of adult virtue. Cheats, we stack the deck so as to oppose their worst with that which is good and precious in us.

Where are our slobby and reckless, our covetous gluttons, idiots, idlers, ne'er-do-wells, troublemakers, cheats, swindlers, drunks, and thieves? Where are our violence and crimes both notorious and concealed? How much discord, deceit, jealousy, spitefulness, blackmail, cutting words, shameful actions? How many quiet family tragedies in which the children suffer, first victims of martyrdom?

How dare we blame and accuse?

After all, the community of adults is assiduously sifted and filtered. How many have sunk into the grave, the jail, or the madhouse, been swept into the sewers of residue and scum?

We tell children not to reason, to obey the older and more experienced; but their nearest, more experienced elders are adolescents, with their meddlesome provocations and pressure.

Delinquent and unbalanced, they run wild, knocking into people, pushing them over, doing injury and infecting others. And all children are assigned joint responsibility (since at times they too may be a slight nuisance). These few outrage sober-minded public opinion, standing out like clear blemishes on the face of childhood life, dictating the norms of treatment: brief, though oppressive; harsh, though wounding; and stern, meaning brutal.

We do not allow children to organize. Disdainful, untrusting, and reluctant, we do not provide the necessary care: we cannot manage without the assistance of experts, and the experts are the children.

Are we so gullible as to consider the caresses with which we torment children to be kind? Do we not understand that in cuddling a child it is we who cuddle up to them; helpless, we hide in their embrace; we seek protection and escape in hours of homeless pain and derelict abandonment; we burden them with our sufferings and yearnings.

Every other caress, if not fleeing to our child and begging for hope, is shamefully searching within them and arousing sensual feeling.

I hug because I am sad. You can have it if you give me a kiss.

Selfishness, not kindness.

The Right to Respect

It is as though there are two kinds of life: one serious and respected, another forbearingly tolerated and less valued. We say that they are future people, future workers, future citizens. That they will be, that their life will truly begin later, that it is not serious until the future. We indulgently allow them dally alongside, but we are more comfortable without them.

But this is wrong, for children have been and will be. They have not dropped out of the blue and only for a short time. Children are not friends we come across fleetingly, whom we can hurry past, whom we brush aside with a smile and our best regards.

Children make up a large percentage of the human race, the population, the nation, its inhabitants, our fellow-citizens – they are permanent comrades. They have been, will be, and are.

Does life exist to be treated jokingly? No, the years of childhood are long and important ones for a living being, for a person.

The cruel but candid law of Greece and Rome permitted killing children. In the Middle Ages, fishermen pulled drowned corpses of infants from rivers in their nets. In 17th century Paris, older children were sold to beggars and babies were given away free in front of Notre Dame. Not so long ago. To this day, children are cast aside if they get in the way.

The quantity of illegitimate, abandoned, neglected, exploited, depraved, and abused children is growing. The law defends them, but is its protection sufficient? Much has changed and old laws require revision.

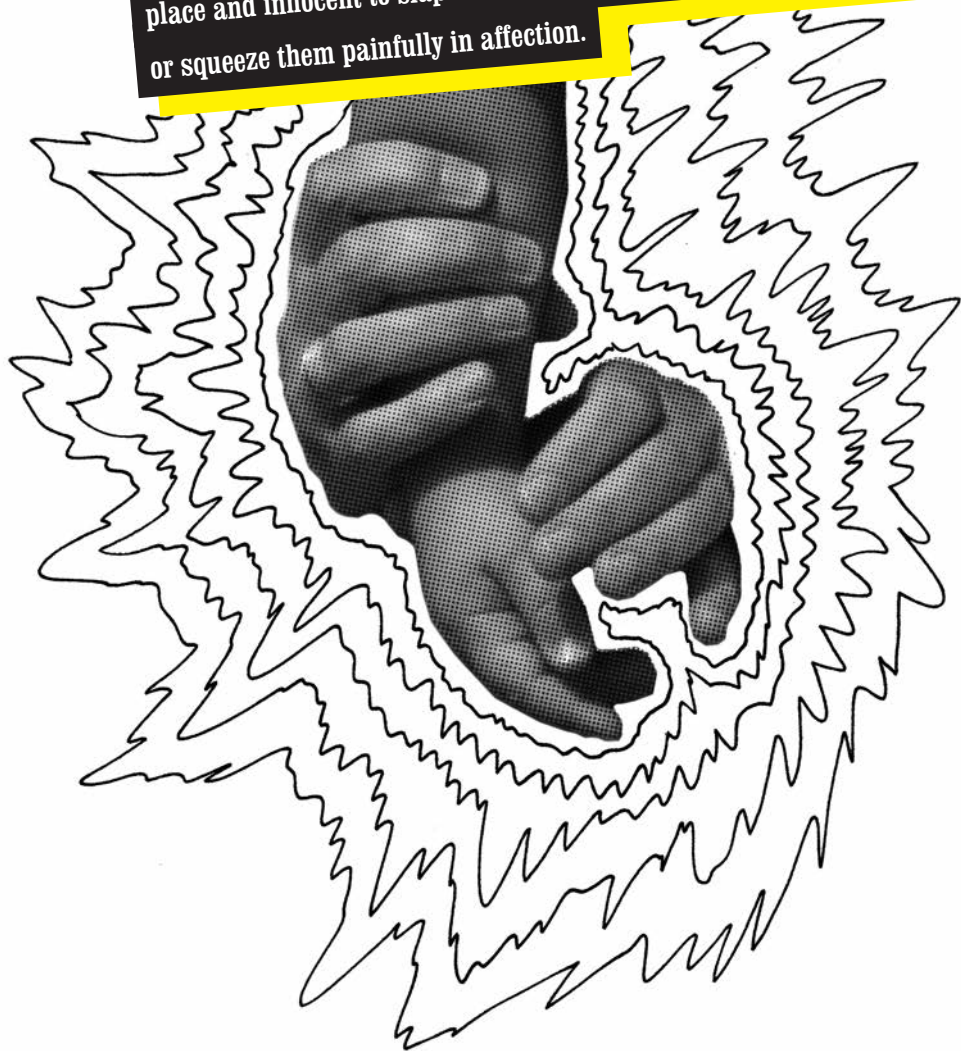
We have become wealthier. We no longer benefit from the fruits of our own labor. We are heirs, executors, co-owners of an enormous fortune. How many cities, buildings, factories, mines, hotels, and theaters do we own, how many goods are on the market, how many carts transport them – customers surge forward, asking to live life to the fullest.

Let us strike a balance, let us estimate how much of the general budget belongs to children, what share falls to them, but not as a favor, not as charity. Let us thoroughly examine how much we set aside for the use of the race of children, the nation of the immature, the class of serfs. How much is their inheritance, how should it be divided, have we dishonest caregivers not deprived them of it, expropriated it?

Life is unsafe for children, stifling, impoverished, dreary, and harsh.

We have introduced universal education, forced intellectual labor, we have enlistment and conscription for school. We have burdened

Who would dare to shove, pull, or strike an adult? And when, under what extraordinary circumstances? Yet how commonplace and innocent to slap a child, jerk them hard by the hand, or squeeze them painfully in affection.



children with the hardship of reconciling the contradictory interests of two equal authorities.

School makes demands and parents are reluctant to oblige. Conflicts between family and school weigh on children. Parents accept the school's sometimes unfair accusations against their child and defend themselves against taking the care the school demands.

The strenuousness of soldiers' service is preparation for the day when they will be called to action, since in fact the government ensures all their needs are met. The state provides a roof over their head and food, uniforms and rifles; their pay is earned, not charity.

Yet children must beg from their parents or community and are subject to the constraints of universal education.

The lawmakers of Geneva confused obligations and rights. The tone of the Declaration is one of persuasion, not of insistence: it is an appeal to goodwill, a request for kindness.

School creates a rhythm of hours, days, and years. School officials are meant to fulfill young citizens' present needs. Children are rational beings, intimately familiar with the requirements, difficulties, and obstacles in their lives. What is called for is neither despotic command, nor imposed discipline, nor untrusting control, but tactful understanding, trust in experience, cooperation, and coexistence.

Children are not fools, there are no more idiots among them than among adults. Bedecked in the crimson robes of age, how often we thoughtlessly, uncritically impose impossible demands. Often reasoning children stand amazed at our malicious, geriatric, sneering stupidity.

Children have a future, but they also have a past: unforgettable events, memories, many hours of essential solitary reflection. Just as

we remember and forget, cherish and disdain, logically reason – their errors are also out of ignorance. They weigh carefully whether to trust or doubt.

Children are foreigners, ignorant of the language, of where the roads lead, and of laws and customs. Often, they prefer to explore for themselves, asking for directions and advice when they find themselves in difficulty. They require a guide to courteously answer their questions.

Respect for their lack of knowledge.

Villains, swindlers, and rascals exploit foreigners' ignorance, give incomprehensible responses, and deliberately mislead. Simple folk mutter reluctantly. We snap and quarrel with children, chastising, reprimanding, punishing, unkindly withholding information.

What pathetic lamentations would children's knowledge amount to if they did not draw it from their peers, from eavesdropping, from snatches of adults' words and conversations.

Respect for the work of acquiring knowledge.

Respect for failures and tears.

Not only the torn stocking, but the skinned knee; not only the broken glass, but the gashed finger and the bruise, and the lump, and so the pain.

A blot in a notebook is an accident, a vexation, and a failure.

"When papa spills his tea, mama says: 'no harm done,' but when I do it she always gets angry."

Children, unaccustomed to pain, hurt, and unfairness, suffer acutely and are quicker to cry; even a child's tears prompt teasing remarks, seem less important, cause anger.

Whining, blubbing, sniveling, squealing.

(A selection of words the adult lexicon has invented for use with children.)

Tears of stubbornness and caprice are really tears of powerlessness and revolt, a desperate attempt to protest, a call for help, a complaint of negligent care, testimony of irrational discomfort or compulsion, a symptom of discomfort, and always a sign of suffering.

Respect for children's possessions and their budgets. Children agonizingly share in their family's material woes; they are aware of shortages, they compare their poverty to a friend's prosperity and fret over the bitter pennies by which their destitution worsens. They do not wish to be a burden.

What can they do when they need a hat, and a book, and a movie ticket, a notebook when the old one is full, a pencil when one is lost or stolen, when they wish to give a keepsake to a kind person, and buy a pastry, or make a loan to a friend. So many essential needs, wishes, and temptations, but no money.

Does the fact that theft makes up the majority of cases in juvenile court not call out to us, not rouse us to action? Disregarding children's budgets takes its toll and punishing them does no good.

Children's possessions are not rubbish, they are a beggar's materials and work tools, hopes and keepsakes.

The worries and cares of today, the bitterness of young years and of disappointment – these are not make-believe, but essential.

Children grow. They live more strongly, their breath hastens, their pulse quickens, they build up – they become larger, reach deeper into life. They grow by day and by night, when sleeping and feeling, when

happy and sad, when they misbehave and when they stand repentant before you.

There are springtimes of redoubled development and autumns of retreat. Sometimes the skeleton grows and the heart cannot keep up; too little here, too much there, a new chemical system of glands vanishing and awakening, new worries and surprises.

Sometimes the urge to run matches the urge for rest, they want to wrestle, to move, to conquer, and then hide, dream, and bind together wistful memories. Resilience alternates with a need for calm, warmth, and comfort. They waver between intense, passionate desire and discouragement.

Fatigue, suffering from pain or congestion; too hot, too chilly; drowsiness, hunger, thirst, surfeit, shortage, discomfort – these are not ruses, not ploys to get out of school.

Respect for the secrets and doubts of the hard work of growing.

Respect for the current hour, for today. How can they know how to face tomorrow if we do not allow them to live an aware, responsible life today?

Respect for each individual moment, for these will pass and never come again. Always treat these seriously, for a wounded moment will bleed and the ghost of a murdered one will haunt a person with bad memories.

Let us eagerly drink in the joy of young life and trust one another. This is precisely what children wish. They do not regret time spent telling a fairytale, talking to a dog, playing catch, carefully examining a picture, or practicing their letters – they do all this warm-heartedly. They are the ones who have got it right.

We naively fear mortality, not realizing life is a succession of moments dying and being reborn. A year is merely an attempt to grasp eternity for everyday purposes. One moment lasts as long as a smile or a sigh. Mothers wish to raise their children. But they will not see the day: one by one, a new woman will greet their child and then bid them farewell.

We clumsily divide our years into the more and less mature, yet there is no unripe today, no hierarchy of age, no higher and lower ranks of pain and joy, hope and disappointment.

When I play with or talk to children, two moments from my life and theirs intertwine, equally mature; when I am with a group of children, I always take time to say hello and goodbye to one of them with a look and a smile. When I am angry, we are once again joined together – but my anger, a single vengeful moment, violates and poisons this mature, important time of their lives.

Do we go without for tomorrow's sake? What attractions does the future hold? Too often we paint it in dark colors. This is a self-fulfilling prophecy: the roof collapses because the building's foundations have been neglected.

Children's Right to Be What They Are

“What will become of them,” we ask nervously. “What will they be when they grow up?”

We long for children to be better than us. We dream of the perfect person of the future.

We must vigilantly catch out this lie, deride the hidden selfishness of this platitude. It seems self-sacrificing but in truth is a base deception.

We have come to an understanding with ourselves and are reconciled, we have forgiven ourselves and no longer demand betterment. We were raised badly. It is too late for us: our faults and vices are now deeply ingrained. We forbid children to criticize us, though we do not control ourselves.

Absolved, we have renounced the struggle with the self, and pass the burden of it onto our children.

Educators readily grow accustomed to adult privilege, watching over children but not themselves, noting the children's faults but not their own.

Whatever is detrimental to our peace, ambition, and comfort we consider to be the fault of children; whatever jeopardizes and angers, disrupts our routines or requires time and thought. We do not believe in wrongdoing without ill-will.

Children do not know, have not heard, have not understood, have misheard, mistaken, failed, are unable – everything is their fault. Every difficult moment a child has – whether failure or discomfort – is willful and their fault.

When they go too quickly or not quickly enough, or do not perform a task well enough – to us, this is carelessness, laziness, forgetfulness, foot-dragging.

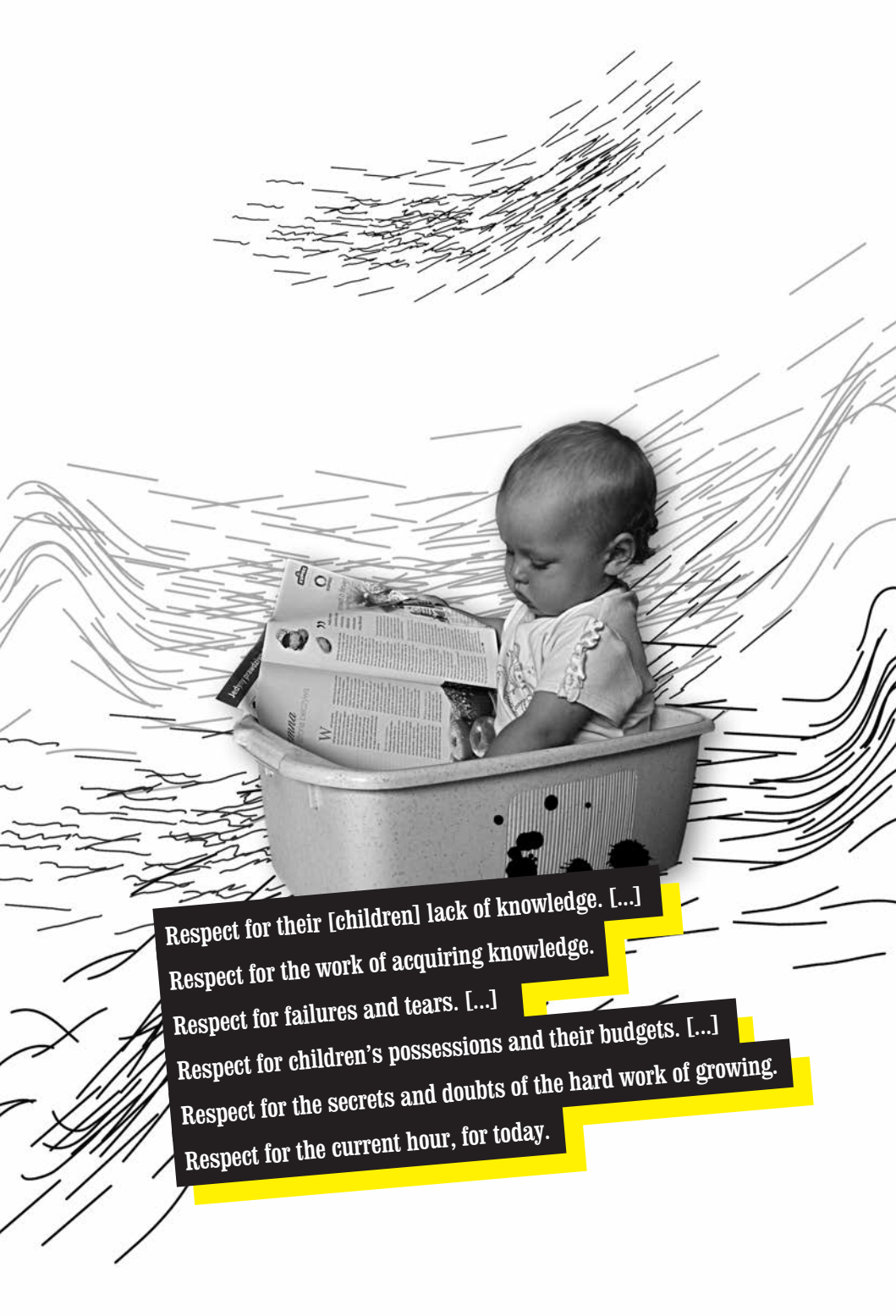
Not carrying out a dangerous or impossible task – they are at fault. Having angry, misplaced suspicions – they are at fault again. When we are anxious and suspicious, or frustrated by their attempts to better themselves, the child is the one at fault.

“You see: you can do it if you want to.”

We always find an accusation to make, greedily increasing our demands.

Do we make tactical retreats, avoid needless friction, do we ease our lives together? In truth, is it not we who are stubborn, exacting, aggressive, and capricious?

Children compel us to pay attention to them; the only moments we notice and remember are when they bother and disturb us. We do not see when they are calm, serious, focused. We disregard the sacred moments when they talk to themselves, to the world, to God. Children are forced to hide their longings and urges in the face of mockery and harsh comments, to conceal their desire to understand, not to disclose their resolution to better themselves.



Respect for their [children] lack of knowledge. [...]

Respect for the work of acquiring knowledge.

Respect for failures and tears. [...]

Respect for children's possessions and their budgets. [...]

Respect for the secrets and doubts of the hard work of growing.

Respect for the current hour, for today.

They obediently hide their penetrating gazes, surprise, worries, regrets – and their anger and rebelliousness, too. We wish to see them jumping up and down and clapping, so they put on the smiling face of a jester.

Bad actions and bad children speak louder, drowning out the whispers of the good, though there are a thousand times more good ones than bad. Yet good is strong and it stubbornly endures. It is untrue that it is easier to break than to repair.

We keep our attention and imagination sharp by uncovering bad behavior, spotting it, ferreting it out and tracking it down, catching it red-handed; by making unfavorable predictions and holding harmful suspicions.

(Do we keep watch over the elderly to stop them from playing soccer? Yet how vilely relentless we are in sniffing out masturbation in children.)

One door slammed, one bed unmade, one coat flung on the floor, one blot in a notebook. When we are not scolding, we are at least grumbling, rather than being glad it was only one.

We do hear complaints and arguments, but so much more forgiveness, acquiescence, aid, care, favors, good deeds, profound and beautiful influences. Children do more than shed truculent and angry tears, they also sow smiles.

We lazily wish for perfection – that out of ten thousand seconds of school time (count them!) not one should be difficult.

How can the same child be good in one teacher's eyes and bad in another's? We demand a uniformity of virtues and moments – and more than that, we demand they fit our predilections and standards.

Has history ever known such tyranny? A generation of Neros has proliferated.

Good health comes with bad; virtue and morals exist alongside deficiencies and flaws.

Beside the few joyful and saintly children – for whom life is a fairytale and a splendid legend, who are trusting and kind – there is the mass of children, to whom since their earliest days the world has proclaimed grim truths in austere, unyielding declarations.

Broken by the contemptuous ill-treatment of coarseness and want, or broken by the tender, sensual neglect of satiety and refinement.

They may be filthy, untrusting, alienated from others – but they are not bad.

It is not only the home that provides models for children, but the entryway, the corridor, the yard, and the street as well. They speak in the words of their surroundings, they state their views, rehearse gestures, follow examples. There is no such thing as a pure child – each one is tarnished to one extent or another.

Oh, how quickly they emancipate and cleanse themselves; they do not need healing, only to be wiped clean, and children will gladly lend a hand, pleased to have found a role. They have waited, yearning for their bath, beaming at you and one another.

Every educator celebrates such naïve triumphs from storybook orphan stories, and cases like these lure gullible moralists into believing it is easy. The incompetent relish them, the ambitious claim credit for them, the brutish are furious it does not always work out this way; some wish to repeat these results everywhere by increasing the dose of persuasion, others – the dose of pressure.

Alongside the merely soiled we find the mutilated and wounded. There are slashes that leave no scars, knitting themselves back together under clean dressings. Lacerations take longer to heal and painful scars remain, which must not be aggravated. Pustules and ulcers demand more effort and patience.

We commonly say: the body is healing, but we ought to add: so is the soul.

There are so many scrapes and ailments in schools and boarding-houses, so many temptations and meddlesome whisperings, and so many fleeting and innocent influences. No need to fear dangerous contagions if the aura of the boarding-house is healthy, if the air is fresh and full of light.

How intelligently, slowly, and marvelously the healing process occurs. How many noble secrets hide themselves in human blood, fluids, and tissues. How hard each disrupted function and wounded organ works to regain balance and be equal to the task. How many miracles there are in the growth of a plant and a human being; in the heart, the brain, the breath. At the smallest excitement or effort, the heart already beats stronger, the pulse quickens.

Children's spirits possess the same power and persistence. They possess moral balance and sensitivity of conscience. It is not true that children are easily tainted.

Correctly, though sadly belatedly, pedology has found its way into school curriculums. Without understanding the harmony of the body, one cannot fathom respect for the sacred mystery of children's bet-terment.

Incompetent diagnoses are heaped onto active, ambitious, thoughtful children, each of whom are flawed, but healthy and clean – relative to

the miserable, moody, and mistrustful or the polluted, tempted, and reckless, who are meekly obedient to adverse examples. Immature, careless, and superficial examination confounds and mistakes them for those rare immoral children who are freighted with malice.

(We adults have known not only how to render the stepchildren of fate harmless, but also how to deftly exploit the labor of these dispossessed.)

Healthy children forced to coexist with the bad suffer in dual measure: they are marred and drawn into immorality. But do we not recklessly accuse them all, do we not impose collective responsibility?

“You see what they’re like, what good are they?”

This is perhaps the worst possible injury.

The progeny of drunkenness, violence, and madness. Their transgressions are the echoes not of voices from without, but of commands from within. Dark moments when they see that they are different, that life is hard, that they are maimed, that others will curse them and egg them on. They make their first decisions to combat the urge to do wrong. What others have obtained for free and with such ease, what in others is commonplace and trivial – clear days of internal equilibrium – for them is a reward for meeting bloody demands. They seek power, hold fast to those they trust, ask, demand: “save me.” They have confided a secret, they wish to set themselves right once and for all, instantly, in a burst of effort.

Rather than prudently restraining this reckless impulse, deferring their resolution to better themselves, we clumsily encourage and accelerate it. They wish to break free, but we do our best to ensnare them; they wish to escape, but we hypocritically lay traps. While their desire is clear and honest, we teach only to dissemble. They give us

a whole, long, unblemished day, and we reject them on account of a single bad moment. Is this proper?

A boy used to wet himself every day, though now it's less common, it had been better, but it has gotten worse again – there is no harm in that. An epileptic has longer gaps between attacks. A child with consumption coughs less often and their fever has gone down. Not even improvement, simply not getting worse: a doctor would record that as a successful treatment. Here, tricks and coercion will do no good.

Desperate, rebellious, contemptuous of the submissiveness and fawning of common virtue – these children stand before their teachers retaining a single, and perhaps the ultimate, saintly quality: hatred of hypocrisy. And this is what we wish to strike down, to execute. What a bloody crime we commit! We overpower them with hunger and torture, yet our brutality does not break the rebellion, but rather drives it underground. We are recklessly fanning the flames of hatred for deceit and hypocrisy.

The children do not forsake their plans for revenge but postpone them until the time is right. If they believe in good, they bury this urge in absolute secret.

“Why did you let me be born? Who asked you to give me this miserable life?”

I am reaching for the highest level of initiation, the most challenging revelation. The only thing transgressions and offenses call for is patient, kind understanding; wrongdoers require love. Their angry rebelliousness is justified. We must spurn easy virtue and take the side of the lonely, maligned offense. When will they receive the flower of a smile, if not now?

When I play with or talk to children,
two moments from my life and theirs intertwine, equally mature...



Yet correction centers still contain the Inquisition, the torture of medieval punishments, uniform obstinacy, and vindictive ill-treatment. Can you not see the best children feel sorry for the worst: of what are they guilty?

It is not long since humble doctors dutifully gave their patients sickly sweet drinks and bitter concoctions, strapped down the feverish, practiced bloodletting, and starved their patients in gloomy antechambers of the grave. They indulged the powerful and were cold to poverty.

Until they began to demand – and they received.

For children, doctors have obtained space and sunlight, just as – to our shame – generals have given our children exercise, thrilling adventure, the joy of selfless service, the resolution to lead an upstanding life as heard in a tale told by the fire under the camp's starry sky.

As educators, what is our role, what is our share of labor?

Guardians of the walls and furniture, the calm of the yard, the cleanliness of ears and floors; shepherds for the youngsters so they do not stumble into harm, do not bother adults at work or happily on their days off; stewards of ragged knickerbockers and shoes; and miserly dispensers of porridge. Defenders of adult privilege and idle perpetrators of unprofessional caprices.

A little jumble-store selling anxieties and admonitions, a market stall offering moral odds and ends, a license to sell denatured knowledge which intimidates, confuses, and lulls to sleep instead of awakening, enlivening and cheering. Agents of cheap virtue, we are meant to force honor and humility onto children while warming adults' hearts and touching their positive emotions. Build a solid future on a shoestring budget, mislead and conceal that children are a multitude, a will, a power and a law.

Doctors have snatched children from the jaws of death; now the task of educators is to give them a reason to live, give them the right to be children.

Researchers have declared that a fully-grown person is driven by reason and a child by impulse; an adult is logical while a child is caught in misleading flights of fancy; an adult has character, an established moral countenance, while a child is tangled in the chaos of instinct and craving. They investigate children not on their own terms, but as baser, weaker, and poorer psychological beings. As though all adults were learned professors.

Yet adults are a muddle: a backwater of opinions and convictions, herd mentality, superstitions and customs, the reckless activities of fathers and mothers, and the whole of irresponsible adult life from top to bottom. Carelessness, sloth, obtuse stubbornness, thoughtlessness, adult preposterousness, madness, and drunken mischief.

But children possess seriousness, sagacity, and stability, unwavering commitment, expertise in their area, a wealth of fair judgements and assessments, tactful restraint in their demands, sensitive intuition, and an unfailing sense of right and wrong.

Does everyone who plays chess with a child win?

Let us demand respect for bright eyes, bare cheeks, youthful efforts and confidences. Why should dim gazes, knitted brows, rough gray hair, and stooped resignation deserve the greater honor?

The sun rises and sets. We pray in the morning as well as the evening. Both inhaling and exhaling, the heart both contracting and relaxing.

A soldier when he goes off to battle—and when he returns, covered in dust.

New generations grow, new waves arise. They come with vices and virtues, so provide them the conditions to grow up better. We cannot defeat the coffin of hereditary illness; we will not command cornflowers to turn into grain.

We are not miracle-workers – and we do not wish to be charlatans. We renounce hypocritical longing for the perfect child.

We demand: the eradication of hunger, cold, damp, airlessness, cramped spaces, and overcrowding.

It is you who sire the sick and infirm, you create the conditions for rebellion and plague: your recklessness, thoughtlessness, and irrationality.

Beware: it is the strong brutes who mold modern life, homo rapax: they dictate the way forward. Their concessions to the weak are lies, their respect for the elderly, the equal treatment of women, and their kindness to children are dishonest. Emotion roams homeless – like Cinderella. And it is precisely children who are the princes of emotion, poets, and thinkers.

Respect, if not reverence, for pure, bright, immaculate, holy childhood.



Janusz Korczak

(real name Henryk Goldszmit, 1878/79?–1942): doctor, educator, writer, and social activist. Director of the Orphan's Home for Jewish children and co-founder of Our House for Polish children, in both of which he implemented an educational program of his own design. Member of many social and educational associations, lecturer in seminars and higher education institutions, speaker

and expert witness on children's affairs. Author of over twenty books (including "How to Love a Child", "The Rules of Life", "King Matt the First", and "Kaytek the Wizard") and over 1,400 articles published in over a hundred publications.

"A Child's Right to Respect", first published in 1928, consists of a declaration of children's rights, which Korczak formulated over many years of observation and acquaintance with young children. Appealing to the inalienable rights of every human being, Korczak makes the case that "There are no children – there are people" and demands respect for a child's day today. Respect for their ignorance and the work of getting to know, for their failures and tears, for children's property and their budgets. Children have the right to be what they are. Although over eighty years have passed since the publication of this book, its contents are still topical, and when it comes to guaranteeing children's rights there is still much to be done.

This publication may be treated as an academic script, a series of lectures that comprised the results of his long search as a pedagogue, researcher and practitioner. "I have been stubbornly searching and slowly finding the answer" – he wrote in the Child's Right to Respect. This book, very modest at first sight, is the most explicit interpretation of Korczak's pedagogical thought focused on the rights of a child. He addressed this book first of all to all professionals who worked with children: teachers, educators, social workers and parents and also to all those who cared for the fate of child. It includes a declaration of children's rights formulated by Old Doctor after many years' observation and research on the life of the youngest, by which he joined the Polish and international movement in support of care and protection of children's rights.

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