

Growing up in the 1960s (Retrospective Account, 2012)

Abstract

A television program aired by Südwestfunk (Southwest Broadcasting) in 2012 described the atmosphere in which most children in the 1960s grew up. Tradition prevailed in the classroom and at home; the authority of teachers and parents was unquestioned. However, the generational rebellion of the late 1960s encouraged experiments, such as the alternative kindergartens known as *Kinderläden*. In the name of an “anti-authoritarian” education, *Kinderläden* advocated greater personal freedom and downplayed strict discipline. Such experiments influenced subsequent reform efforts that led to a more open and democratic school system.

Source

Childhood in the ‘60s

Education on the Hamster Wheel: Stressed-out Children–Overextended Parents

Upswing in the Federal Republic. In the 1960s, the postwar shortages had been overcome. The table was richly laid. The economy was humming along, as was consumption! Optimism was in order. But abundance had not yet arrived. This also shaped the way that children were raised and educated. In an age of full employment, one could get a decent job with a basic secondary school leaving certificate [*Hauptschulabschluss*]. This reduced the pressure of having to start climbing the professional ladder in school.

Authoritarian Education

School was defined by authority to an extent that is hard to imagine fifty years later. But most teachers were respected as authorities by students and parents. It is equally hard to imagine that teachers were also able to exact that respect from students by force, if need be. This was not questioned; at most, the specifics were debated, as documented by an excerpt from an expert statement: “As of yet there is no clear age limit where the use of corporal punishment in education must stop. According to the minister, it is between the ages of ten and twelve. The question arises: Is every thirteen-year old mature enough to get away without blows?” Authority and drills already in kindergarten: certainly, that was part of the darker side of the sixties.

But Also Lots of Time for Play

Overall, however, childhood in the sixties was carefree thanks to the generally optimistic basic attitude of the population. After all, things were a little better every year. For children, there was hardly any television programming, no computers, instead lots of free time outside, which was filled with fantasy and imagination. For very few had money for expensive toys.

Clear Lines

The child-parent relationship was still straightforward in the sixties. Parents were parents, children were children. No mother would have entertained the idea of asking a small child what he or she wanted to wear. Unthinkable! No talk about engaging one another “as equals.” The grown-ups were in charge.

Student Protests and Rebellion

This first changed with the '68 generation. Student unrest. Protests. Rebellion against traditional authoritarian structures. Pedagogy did not go untouched. Suddenly, anti-authoritarian education was fashionable. Under no circumstances should children be impeded in their free development. *Kinderläden* came into vogue in the big cities—these were places where little ones could rampage undisturbed by grown-ups. And there was definitely a reason behind it, if one accepts the explanation offered by a convinced mother: “Existing society raises children to be obedient and dependent. We are trying to raise our children to be disobedient and independent.” A radical concept, albeit one that was partly revised in subsequent decades.

Source: Frank Wittig, “Kindheit in den 60ern,” Südwestrundfunk, March 26, 2012.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

Recommended Citation: Growing up in the 1960s (Retrospective Account, 2012), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/two-germanies-1961-1989/ghdi:document-5040>> [July 20, 2024].