The helplessness of childhood

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Objectives: This article has two objectives: to review concepts of childhood and adolescence, and to analyze relationships of domination during these stages.

Methodology: Descriptive analytical.

Results: The author reviews different concepts of childhood and adolescence in a range of contexts and domains, from compassion and social investment to the role of NGOs and the emerging focus on rights. The central argument employed is Michel Foucault’s vision relating to children as being victims of biopolitics, of disciplinary control, and of the construction of their subjectivity as “subjected” subjects. Also included is a focus on rights based on what Giorgio Agamben calls the “state of exception.” The author analyzes the “distorting and oppressive” discourse used to co-opt the “unwary” who think they are serving children and adolescents, claiming that in the end what they are doing is legitimizing the existing dominance relation. A program centered on childhood and adolescence, taking into account the historicity of society and its future in terms of key institutions such as the family, schools and the media, has certain problems, which are indicated by the author. The two-sided nature of mass media becomes apparent; on one hand, it entertains, distracts, defends and legitimizes biopower, concealing its oppressive structures, but on the other hand it confounds and controls protest, directing it under the control of the power of the status quo it claims not to represent.

Conclusions: The author proposes a strategy based on an appropriate balance between autonomy and heteronomy in education and also in the ongoing political struggle to claim children’s rights.