The Importance of Being Innocent
Why we worry about children

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Encounters with childhood

Series Editor Tony Moore

In recent years no issue has evoked more community passion and angst than the fear that childhood innocence is under threat. Asking difficult questions to uncover truths has always been the philosopher's burden and in *The Importance of Being Innocent*, philosophy scholar Joanne Faulkner does just that with the growing anxiety that the innocence of our children is no longer sacred.

Threats to childhood innocence have been the subject of a succession of moral panics: the commercial exploitation of children; physical and behavioural disorders; the early sexualisation of pre-adolescent 'tweenies'; exposure to media violence and internet porn; child abuse and neglect; and most alarming of all, sexual predation by paedophiles. The other side is a middle-class obsession with perfecting the childhood experience, as 'helicopter' parents with fewer children regulate a regime of value-adding activities and tuition. Faulkner asks if adults in fact fetishise the innocence of children, to compensate for their own feelings of alienation and powerlessness.

Bill Henson's photographs of a young girl on the cusp of puberty disturbed and outraged many Australians, and led to police seizing the offending images. But the furore over these artworks raises the question: why can politicians, interests groups and media invoke the defence of childhood innocence, certain that it will garner widespread community support and silence opposition?

In seeking to understand our anxieties, Faulkner begins with what we mean by childhood innocence and why it is so important to us. How have notions of the child collided with recent changes in our society, especially adults' sense of control over their own lives? It was only in the twentieth century that children in the West were removed from the adult world of toil by the state and confined in the safe havens of the family and school. After tracing Western notions of innocence in myth, religion, literature and philosophy, and discussing enlightenment and romantic idealisations

of childhood, Faulkner considers the historical pathways leading to what she deems Australia's particular obsession with innocent children: colonialism and dependence on a 'mother' country; convict transportation and concern to wash away the 'stain'; the dispossession of the Indigenous inhabitants; fear of the environment; and an enacted desire to purify our population from the corruption of the old world, and the non-white foreigners at our doorstep. Faulkner then examines how accelerated economic and social changes over recent decades have left us more insecure in our communities and working lives. In compensation do adults obsess about those over whom they still exercise control – their children? Are children increasingly an extension of adults' own barely articulated needs?

The contemporary ideal of pristine innocence is revealed to be verging on fantasy. What happens to the many children who fail to meet its exacting standards? In much of the world children must work to support their families, and routinely run the gauntlet of poverty, famine, natural disasters, war and tyrannical government. Some children fleeing oppression and crises in developing, war-torn countries breach our borders and comfort zone as refugees, and present a very different image of childhood. What of those local children, both Indigenous and settler, compelled to contend with collapsing communities and arbitrary and at times cruel state surveillance? Children who hang in gangs, who abuse alcohol or other substances, who commit crimes, who harm other children or adults, who have sex, are condemned by media and politicians for delinquency and deviancy.

The ultimately unsuccessful exclusion of children from the adult market economy is mirrored by a legally enforced exclusion from political rights. Working class adults, women and Aborigines were once deemed unable to govern themselves, popular prejudice dismissing them as too childlike to exercise citizen rights such as voting. Thinking laterally about the future trajectory of citizenship and human rights, the author challenges us to take a leap, and consider how our perception and treatment of children might change to enhance Australian democracy.