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'There is no doubt that parents who act on their principles may have difficulties to face, difficulties not only in the quite probably low educational standards but in what one might loosely call the quality of life.'

The ideal school, the British Association were informed last week, would contain more than 50 per cent of middle class children because Inner London Education Authority research chiefs say all children do better in schools with a high middle-class concentration and worse in a high working class composition. Which may be fascinating to the British Association but is extremely irrelevant, not to say irritating, to anyone like me who actually has children at schools that fall far short of this ideal and will continue to fall far short for a long time to come since there are not enough middleclass children to go round—only something like 3 per cent of the nation earn over £2,000 a year.

The many parents who believe, as I do, that one of the most vital elements to their country's health is a first-class State School system may well feel a duty to send their children to State schools, even if they could afford to do otherwise. Like private medicine, private schools represent freedom of choice only to those who have always had freedom of choice—the affluent—and their continuing existence poses continuing hazards to that State system in three ways: (a) the creaming off of top teaching talents, (b) the corraling of those middle-class children considered so important by State education authorities and (c) the weaning away of influential interest from State schools.

The man who sends his son to Eton will, simply because he is human, find it more difficult to remain exercised about the weaknesses of State schooling than if his own child were a hostage to that system. I cannot honestly believe, for instance, that Mrs Margaret Thatcher would implement the policies she does if her own children had been at State schools—the lady suffers, as would we all, from a lack of immediate personal experience as well as of imagination or, if you like, heart.

Nor is it a solution, in my book, to do what some middle class parents do, rush about selling and buying houses until such time as they find a State school with the "right" pupil composition, the best available teachers and the most streamlined of modern facilities. This way, they use their money to their children's advantage—and other children's disadvantage—in exactly the same way as the man with a son at Eton.

Yet there is no doubt that parents who act on their principles have many difficulties to face, difficulties not only in the quite probably lower educational standards but in what one might loosely call the quality of life, an aspect not often discussed from a general fear. I think, of being labelled a snob or, worse, concerned only with trivialities when other parents must cope with the more concrete worries of bad housing and poverty.

One of the most common problems is the accusation levelled by friends and relatives of putting principles above the welfare of one's children. I have, at one time or another, been roundly attacked by everyone from minicab drivers making sacrifices to send their kids to private schools to close friends who themselves had what they now consider a rotten State education. The accusations fall into two categories: first, that it is every parent's duty to



do everything he can for his own child and if this includes private schooling, all well and good. But does parental duty include the right to do something for your child that directly undermines other children? Secondly—and most pernicious—comes the jesuitry that the better a child can be educated, the more likely he is to attain influence in later life and be in a position to implement his parents' principles. This is the sort of sophisticated argument the snake must have handed Eve, so tempting in its burden of the end justifying the means. Yet who can guarantee that an elitist education will produce anything other than elite?

The second and most practical worry arising out of State schooling is the simple one of safety. To make a broad generalisation, middle income mothers tend to have more time or opportunity to watch over their children, and even if such mothers work they are able to employ au pairs hired specifically to look after the child. Less affluent mothers may or may not work: if they don't, they often have more children in more restricted circumstances; if they do, their school-age children must look after themselves until mother returns home.

This means that the primary school working class child tends to be, by necessity, very much more independent than the middle class child and also to run more risk of accidents. He may go to school by himself, often crossing busy main roads, when the middle class child is still being escorted and collected (much to his annoyance) by an adult. After school he may be used to coping on his own, finding his way from one friend's house to another, buying his own tea, making his own amusements. The middle class child will be brought home and expected to stay at home or in the garden, his post-school activities supervised in one way or another.

In practice, these *modi vivendi* clash.

My son asks to go to a friend's house after school. I do not want to shame him in front of that friend by showing anxiety about the roads he must cross. Nor am I able to do the usual middle class thing of finding out where the child lives and telephoning his mother. For one thing, she is not often on the telephone, for another the whole business of school parent socialising is not a familiar one to a working class woman and, if I do meet or telephone her, she may well come to regard my child's visits as too much of a responsibility because, by my inquiries, I have turned a casual encounter into a rather more formal occasion.

Since the worst thing, I suppose, that one can do to one's child is to make him feel "different," I am forced to take risks with his safety that would not be required of me if he attended a school where most of the parents could afford to indulge in my standards of safety. The most I can, in practice, hope to do is wrinkle out his friend's address and train him, heart in mouth, to cross bigger, busier roads than, given the choice, I would consider wise. The penalty for failure is an unhappy child who complains that he is cotton woolled in an unforgivable way.

Even the question of what children do in their time off is full of pitfalls. Most experts agree that the working class parent tends to exercise authority without explanation—don't climb up that wall because I say so—where the middle class parent is more likely to add "because you may fall and hurt yourself" and any other blood-curdling details deemed necessary. So you arm your child with caution, yet that very caution comes to look like cowardice when he is confronted with mates who perform feats of derring do he knows very well would give his own parents heart failure.

Later, when a child is somewhere around 14, other complexities rear their heads. All children need

to rebel against "authority," if only to know where they themselves stand. At a headmasters' meeting some time ago, the Head of Charterhouse School commented on the desire of many of his boys to be taken for Secondary Mods during the holidays—a form of rebellion against parental standards that involved, he said, "a classless appearance, long hair, an adjustment of clothes and guitars," plus an effort to speak in a less noticeable accent. Now, whatever a parent may think about his suddenly long-haired, hippie-clad, guitar-wangling off-spring, however much he might like him to be short-haired, suited and piano-playing, he cannot fear that this sort of rebellion endangers his son in any physical way, nor is it likely to bring him to the attention of the law. In other words, middle-class children have the scope to rebel either intellectually or in appearance.

On the other hand, the working-class child is forced (particularly, I think, if he is intelligent) to rebel by way of physical acts or by pitting himself against "authority" in the shape of the law—about 30,000 of the juvenets found guilty in 1968 were under the age of 14. His rebellion thus involves all manner of petty crime from shop-lifting and minor theft to vandalism and house-breaking. The problem here is not so much the deed as the repercussions. In order to establish his manhood or identity, this boy may find himself committed to Borstal for a year, a rather more disastrous penalty than the middle-class burden of constant parental rows. The son of a friend of mine, friendly with a group of working class boys in his State school, only just escaped joining with them in a relatively light-hearted adventure that ended, apallingly, in indictment for murder and long Borstal sentences. If he had been sequestered in a cosy public school, the most he might have managed was to run away or smoke pot, neither of which activi-

ties is likely to leave lifetime scars.

There are other worries built in to the State school system, too, though by comparison less important. One of these is the question of accent, and here, of course, the howls of "snob" are most easily earned. But the sort of parent who sends his children to State schools is not a snob—he does not object to the fact that his child's accent changes, only that it becomes increasingly sloppy and ungrammatical.

In theory, at least, a child should be able to manage with one accent at school and another at home, though I don't personally know of any children who have yet succeeded in this. I should feel happier if I could believe that what will finally emerge from this accent melting-pot would be a genuinely classless accent, but if people insist on calling accents like David Frost's "classless," then the future is bleak. My own standards are purely aesthetic; I find a "C" cockney or nasal Liverpool appeal but not clear enough and the upper middle class drawl as nerve-racking as chalk on slate. The ideal, surely, is to equip one's child with an instantly comprehensible way of talking that does not signal his background or locality, so that he arouses as little mindless prejudice in later life as possible. There seems little point in excluding in school an irritating drawl for an irritating glottal.

One of the side effects of a school-formed accent is the problems the child himself may face from his relatives and privately educated friends. My own mother is quite obviously distressed by my son's accent and feels it her duty to correct him fairly frequently.

The fact is that the child will suffer for his parents' principles, growing up as he does between two standards rather than having a rigid frame of reference as he would if he were always within a middle class environment.

Lately, I have also found myself wishing that State schools provided uniforms—a thought I never thought to think after having spent what seemed a lifetime myself in dreary navy blue. My son, yearning to be one of the boys, wants to look like a mini-Hell's Angel and deplores his own rather less militant gear. He will no longer wear his Donald Duck T-shirt, his short pants, or his sandals on the grounds that the other boys call him a baby. All he wants in life are bover boots and brass-studded jackets. When I see him in his favoured clobber, standing beside his 8-year-old privately educated cousin (short grey trousers, shirt, tie, V-necked navy sweater, short hair) blood no longer tells.

Then there is the business of what children learn at home and at school, particularly any information that touches on sex. In common with many middle-class mothers, I have answered all my son's questions about the facts of life as soon as asked and, by the age of 4, he knew most of the nuts and bolts of it. Then he began going to school and shortly afterwards informed me that what I had told him of the way babies were born was poppycock and balderdash. "It's not like that," he said, "you get them behind bushes," and he eyed me reproachfully, saddened by the burden of a mother who refused to tell the truth.

A year later he is still convinced that we have a very odd idea indeed of procreation, since his friends laugh at him for his "rude" theories. Indeed, "rude" is another school word. Emerging from home without a trace of shame at his own or our nudity, he now giggles with purple-faced embarrassment at the sight of another child, nude, and any stranger witnessing his wild shrieks at the word "bum" would conjure up a fearsome picture of repressed, tight-lipped parents.

And then, of course, there is the other side of my coin—the whole divisive area of homes, holidays, possessions and presents. How does a working class mum, with three kids in a small flat, feel about her children attending the "ideal" 50 per cent middle class school? Don't her children notice the difference when they visit homes, will they not complain of the toys they lack, the bicycle they haven't got, the holidays at home and abroad they don't have, the Christmas presents outlined in post-Christmas English essays? There is a real danger here that the middle class child will throw his weight about, boasting of "my cottage," "my boat," even "my bathroom," becoming overconfident in his comparative worldliness, degenerating into a thoroughgoing brat. God knows, all children boast, but when the backgrounds are more or less similar the Opposition is not hard put to it to come up with rival claims.

Obviously, these problems will not disappear overnight, aired or unaired. Sometimes I even wonder if they are real problems or all in the mind. Do State school children actually gain by their enforced independence and toughness, a new form of survival of the fittest? And anyway the alternative, private schooling, throws up many more spectres to my mind, albeit less immediately threatening. State schools, for all their current faults, represent the only real future for all our children but, in the meantime, in between time, do we have fun?