# 2 THE STRUCTURE OF CHILDHOOD AND CHILDREN'S INTERPRETIVE REPRODUCTIONS

In Chapter 1 we discussed how interpretive reproduction argues that children affect and are affected by society. As a group, children are in a subordinate position in society in relationship to other groups. Therefore, even though children are active agents, the nature of their activities, power, and rights must be considered in relation to their role as a generational group in society and their place in the **generational order** (Alanen, 2000, 2009; Honig, 2009; Mayall, 2002). To capture these generational relationships, we must examine childhood from a structural perspective.

## ASSUMPTIONS OF THE STRUCTURAL PERSPECTIVE

In a series of theoretical articles the Danish sociologist Jens Qvortrup (1991, 1993, 1994a, 1994b, 2009, 2010) has outlined a structural perspective to the study of childhood. The approach is based on three central assumptions: (a) childhood constitutes a particular structural form, (b) childhood is exposed to the same societal forces as adulthood, and (c) children are themselves coconstructors of childhood and society. Let's examine each of these assumptions.

### Childhood as a Structural Form

Earlier we discussed the notion of childhood as a social form, noting that childhood is both a period in which children live their lives and a category or part of society, like social class. We also discussed the idea that although childhood is a temporary period for children, it is a permanent structural category in society. Qvortrup further develops the notion of viewing childhood as a structural form by contrasting it with perspectives that focus on childhood only as a period of life. He places these perspectives in three general categories. The first is the typical psychological view, which is individual and personality oriented. In this view, childhood is forward looking or anticipatory and is determined by an adult perspective. The second is the psychoanalytic view, which is also individual and personality oriented, but here the interest in individual adulthood requires the retrospective examination of the individual's childhood experiences. A third view is the life course perspective. This perspective is a mix of individual and nonindividual approaches in that it follows single individuals from childhood to adulthood or vice versa while at the same time stressing the impact of historical and societal events. All these views are like the traditional theories of socialization we discussed in Chapter 1 in that they (a) focus on the anticipatory outcomes of childhood (i.e., children's becoming adults) and (b) consider childhood and adulthood as necessarily belonging to different historical periods.

Qvortrup (2009) argued that, by conceptualizing childhood as a structural form, we can move beyond these individualistic, adult-oriented, and time-bound perspectives to pose and answer a wide range of sociological questions. Consider a few possibilities: How is childhood like, different from, and related to other age groups at any given time and place (e.g., consider the interrelationships of childhood, adulthood, and old age in the 1950s compared to the 1980s in the United States)? How has the conception and nature of childhood changed over different historical periods in particular societies (e.g., childhood in the 1890s compared to the 1990s in the United States)? How do conceptions and the nature of childhood vary across cultures at different points in time (e.g., childhood in the early years of the 21st century in Western industrial societies compared to non-Western developing societies)? We will examine these and related questions in detail in Chapters 4, 5, 9, and 10.

Let's now move to consideration of the general effects of societal forces on childhood.

## Effects of Societal Forces on Childhood

A key feature of Qvortrup's structural approach is that it sees childhood as integrated in society (Qvortrup, 1991, p. 14). Children in their childhoods are, like adults, active participants in organized activities (e.g., they engage in economic production and consumption). They both affect and are affected by major societal events and developments. Consider, for example, changes in Western societies such as higher divorce rates, greater female participation in the labor force, and lower fertility levels (especially among the middle and upper classes). Sociologists have increasingly documented the effects of these factors on the family and to some extent on individual children. But how are the lives of children—that is, contemporary children's childhoods—affected by such changes? Furthermore, how might children, through their collective activities, contribute to society's accommodation to such changes?

Let's address one of the issues related to the interrelations of different age groups in society and how these may change over time. How has increased longevity due to modern technology affected the interrelationships of the generations and the lives of children in American society? Consider the following case study of the new American grandparent.

## THE NEW AMERICAN GRANDPARENT

In their book *The New American Grandparent*, sociologists Andrew Cherlin and Frank Furstenberg (1986) charted the modernization of "grand-parenthood." They noted that a number of trends such as changes in mortality, fertility, communication, transportation, retirement, social security, and standards of living have transformed grand-parenthood since World War II. As a result, "more people are living long enough to become grandparents and to enjoy a lengthy period of life as grandparents" (p. 33). Furthermore, noted Cherlin and Furstenberg, grandparents "can keep in touch more easily with their grandchildren; they have more time to devote to them; they have more money to spend on them; and they are less likely still to be raising their own children" (p. 35).

Cherlin and Furstenberg (1986) interviewed grandparents to pursue the effects of this modernization of grandparenthood and to examine grandparenting styles, careers, and the effects of divorce on grandparenting. They also studied the influence

of grandparents on grandchildren. For this topic, the authors supplemented their interviews of grandparents with survey items from a larger study of adolescent grandchildren and their parents. Here the findings were somewhat surprising. Even though grandparenthood has seemed to change for the better, there was little evidence from the grandchildren's responses that greater involvement by grandparents had any major impact on their lives. In qualification of these findings, Cherlin and Furstenberg recognized the limits of their survey data, noting that surveys can "not reveal the subtle forms of influence that occur when grandparents and grandchildren interact over long periods of time" (p. 182). Nevertheless, they argued that the results are persuasive and lead them to see grandparents in America as "volunteer firefighters" who are "required to be on the scene when needed but otherwise keep their assistance in reserve" (p. 184).

Important changes have occurred since Cherlin and Furstengerg's study. First, was the major recession in the U.S. beginning in 2007 and stabilizing in 2009 with a slow recovery in recent years. As a result, grandparents of children, especially those from poor and working-class families, served as much more than "volunteer firefighters." In fact, the number of children living with a grandparent or grandparents has increased dramatically from around 6.6 million in 2000 to 7.7 million in 2011, an increase of 22%. Most of these children are living in a grandparent's household with a parent or parents, but more than 3 million children in 2011 were primarily cared for by a grandparent or grandparents (Livingston, 2016). Updating these data, the number of children living with grandparents was around 7.1 million in 2018 with about 2.4 million children primarily cared for by a grandparent or grandparents. In 2021 during the pandemic period these numbers decreased somewhat with around 6.5 million children living with grandparents and around 2 million (or 31.3%) of children primarily cared for by a parent or grandparent (see U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2020).

This final update relates to grandparent-grandchildren relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has peaked but is still with us (for an interesting study of children and their parents communicating with grandparents via Skype as well as a review of similar studies during the pandemic, see Busch, 2018). In the preface we discussed research and data about the number of children who experienced the loss of parents, grandparents, or other primary caretakers due to COVID-19 deaths. We will return to this issue in Chapter 5 when we discuss the changing nature and perspectives of American families.

However, we also want to note that like most traditional sociological research that involves children, Cherlin and Furstenberg's (1986) study focuses on the effects of a social phenomenon (in this case grandparenting) on individual children. Although the authors' acknowledgment of subtle forms of influence hints at the complexity of the worlds of children and their grandparents, the authors failed to push their study to fully consider children's perspectives and the complexity of the generational order. For example, they did not consider the possible counterpart of the conception of grandparenthood, which we can term *grandchildhood*. Just as adults are grandparents, children are grandchildren, and as the nature of grandparenting changes, so does the nature of being a grandchild. The difficulty of the word *grandchildhood* is due to the tendency of social scientists to think of children as individually affected (as dependent variables) rather than as agents of complex collective actions in their childhoods.

Surely the intergenerational lives of grandchildren have changed in ways that parallel those of their grandparents. We can consider a whole new set of vantage points: styles of being a grandchild, grandchild careers, and variations in these styles and careers by gender, class, race, and ethnicity (see Geraghty et al., 2015; Mayall, 2009). An important factor to keep in mind in this regard is the influence of parents on their children's lives as grandchildren (or, for that matter, the lives of their parents as grandparents). At least for younger children, for instance, parents control access to grandparents, and they both actively and reactively support children in their interpretation and appreciation of their interactions with grandparents. As we discussed in the preface and return to discuss in Chapter 5, the pandemic had complex effects on children's communications and time spent with grandparents early on. Finally, children's interactions with grandparents often occur in multigenerational settings (e.g., in the presence of grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, and cousins). These occasions provide an ideal setting for priming activities in which children are prepared for transitions into a variety of social relations in their lives (Corsaro & Molinari, 2000). One such family obligation—to serve as the adult child caretaker of elderly parents—may indeed be a long and demanding one for the present generation of children.

## Children's Activities and Contributions to Society

Like all theories that focus primarily on how the structural features of society affect individual societal members, a structural approach to the sociology of childhood runs the risk of undervaluing how the collective actions of individuals (including children) can affect society. Qvortrup is aware of this tendency, and he argued that "children are themselves coconstructors of childhood and society" (1993, p. 14; also see James, 2009, and Oswell, 2013, for detailed discussions of children's agency). While acknowledging the historical trend of an increasing sentimentalism and overprotectiveness of children, as noted by Zelizer (1985) and others, he challenged their accompanying contention that children have moved from being useful to useless. On the contrary, Qvortrup maintained that children have always been useful and that it is the nature of their contributions to society that have changed (1991, pp. 25–26). A wonderful example of Qvortrup's point in this regard is research conducted by the anthropologist Enid Schildkrout (1975/2002) in her study of a certain African culture.

## AGE AND GENDER IN HAUSA SOCIETY

In her study of Hausa culture in the Nigerian city of Kano in the 1970s, Enid Schildkrout (1975/2002) found that children were essential in maintaining an institution known as *purdah.* Purdah relates to Hausa beliefs about male-female interaction and places specific limits on both men's and women's spatial mobility. The vast majority of married Hausa women in Kano were in purdah, which meant that they generally did not leave their compounds except to visit relatives or close female friends; to attend ceremonies for births, marriages, and funerals; to go for medical treatment; or to visit the sick. Men also did not have free access in and out of each other's houses. A man could not, for example, enter the household of his younger married sister. Adhering to the rules of purdah meant there was little daily interaction between men and women, even between spouses, because most men worked away from their homes.

> Although purdah strongly affects the spatial mobility of adults,
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> Hausa children enjoy a freedom that no other group in the society commands—the right to wander in and out of people's houses. Children are not expected to observe formal greetings behavior, and they casually walk into the houses of neighbors, relatives, friends, and even strangers, to look for playmates, to make purchases, to offer things for sale, or to carry messages. (Schildkrout, 1975/2002, p. 357)
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> Children's freedom in this regard is essential for the institution of purdah because, if this were not the case, women (except for the very wealthy, who could replace children with paid labor) could not remain in purdah and still carry out their domestic responsibilities. Furthermore, children's freedom allowed women to be involved in independent economic activities. With their own children or those of relatives or neighbors to serve as street traders and messengers, "women sell cooked food outside their houses, and may invest in other commodities such as detergent, kola nuts, sugar, salt, fruit—just about anything that can be transported on a tray and sold in small quantities" (p. 352). Money from these economic ventures serves as insurance for divorce, which is frequent; it also can supplement the income of husbands. As a result of the experiences in this cash economy of adults early in life, many girls and boys develop their own "children's economy." They use allowance money provided for their work for their mothers and for running errands for other adults to set up their own small businesses. "By ten, many girls cook for sale on their own. With initial help from their mothers, or other adult female relatives, who may give them a cooking pot, charcoal, or a small stove, they purchase small amounts of ingredients and prepare various snack foods. These are then sold in very small quantities to other children" (p. 360). Hausa women's and men's sex roles could not be defined as they were without the children performing roles that were distinct from but complementary to those of adults.

By the time this study was first published in 1975, Schildkrout found that the development of Western educational beliefs and increasing primary school enrollment was viewed by adult members of the Hausa culture as threatening the institution of purdah and the complex socioeconomic relations and complementary roles of adults and children in these relations. Although few people objected to what were seen as the long-term benefits of Western education, the resistance that did exist was "very often based upon those very realistic appraisals of its immediate socio-economic consequences" (Schildkrout, 1975/2002, p. 365).

Although this case study is generally in line with functionalist views of society, which we criticized in Chapter 1, there is an important difference in this case from traditional functionalist views of children and socialization. In the Hausa culture, children do not simply internalize the norms of their society like those in line with purdah and then behave in accordance with them in later life. On the contrary, children are active contributors to society in that they cooperate with adults in the enforcement of norms and values. In the process of carrying out activities related to purdah, children do, of course, come to understand its significance, and in this way they contribute to societal maintenance.

In a more recent ethnography of the social life worlds of about twenty 6–12-year-old children living and growing up in the early 21st century in Hang'ombe Village, a rural chiTonga-speaking community in southern Zambia, Clemensen (2019) found similar patterns of adult-child relations as Schildkrout but not related to a cultural institution like purdah. In the Hang'ombe Village young children had relatively free exposure to adult

interaction and talk "by observing and eavesdropping on adults during work, meals and nightly fires at home or while passing through the township and marketplace on their way to or from school" (2019, p. 150.) In this way the children gained knowledge of a wide range of information even about delicate and moral matters related to sex, marital problems, drinking, as well as political tensions in the community and economic issues related to drought and so on. If children followed adult directives and did not enter such discussions, they were more or less taken for granted. So was the case with Shildkrout's research children, who were exposed to much of the world of adults.

Clemensen also found that young children appropriated this knowledge and incorporated it into their peer play and culture. She argued that

> in a rural, interdependent majority society like Hang'ombe, where families maintain a steep generational hierarchy and children's individual views and experiences receive limited adult attention, children's peer cultures and relationships might be especially significant to their appropriation of local practices, establishing their own voices and identities through hours and hours of chatting, fighting and joking. (2019, p. 164)

The children expanded on these activities in more autonomous ways in role-play where they would often mock and exaggerate the language and interactive styles of parents, teachers, ministers, and other important adults, something we will return to in Chapter 7.

Finally, and more in line with purdah, adults in Hang'ombe sometimes capitalized on children's relative freedom of movement and access to delicate knowledge, interrogating them about the behavior of other adults and even directing them to pursue certain issues for them. However, unlike in the cultural institution of purdah, Clemensen implied that such requests were rare and that children were uncomfortable in complying with them, even suggesting that it was seen as a disruption of their unencumbered incorporation of such knowledge in their peer cultures.

Overall, these two studies in African societies vividly illustrate the ways in which children serve as active contributors to society and how children and adults are complementary participants in the social system. Qvortrup points to other activities of children from industrialized societies—in school, the workplace, the home, and organized sports, and play and leisure settings—through which children make similar contributions.

## Children's Schoolwork

In line with historians and sociologists of education, Qvortrup noted children's movement from primarily agricultural labor in preindustrial society to a wide range of types of work during the transition to industrial capitalism (on farms, in factories, in mills, on city streets) and finally to formal schooling in modern industrial societies. He argues, however, that this last movement should not be seen as a break from the past, *because schooling is a continuation of children's work* (albeit of a different type); it is an investment in the future economic health of any modern society. Furthermore, schooling has some immediate payoff because children, along with their teachers, are coproducers of knowledge. This point is especially true in modern societies where children and youth spend long periods of time (stretching well into young adulthood) in educational institutions.

The notion of schooling as work is not widely recognized by adults, including social scientists. Qvortrup links this "collective amnesia" regarding the usefulness of schoolwork to the bureaucratic nature of schools—to their focus on functioning as accrediting

devices that shape immature and unskilled children into productive adults. Such views are clearly related to the traditional theories of socialization and child development; the focus is on preparing children for their future as adults rather than appreciating their present contributions.

## Children's Work Outside the Home

Given the amount of time children in Western societies spend on schoolwork, opportunities for work outside the home would seem to be limited. In fact, youth employment has declined in much of Western Europe and in Japan. The trend in the United States has been different, with youth employment rising steadily into the 1970s and then declining in the 1980s because of economic downturns. After the decline there was again a rise but not to the level of the 1970s (Blanchflower & Freeman, 2000; Harrisson et al., 1983; U.S. Department of Labor, 2000). In 2014, 49% of all youth ages 16–24 were employed in any work, full or part time. Youth enrolled in high school (the most relevant group for our interests) had an employment rate of 18%, whereas the rate for those in college, either full or part time, was 46%. Those not enrolled in school had an employment rate of 68% (Child Trends Data Bank, 2015b).

Regarding trends, employment among youth in all groups increased slightly from 1993 to 2000, followed by a general decrease between 2000 and 2003. After that point, employment rates held steady until 2006, when they began to decline, and there was a steep drop in youth employment overall in 2008 and 2009 during the recession. With the slow recovery employment has gone up for those youth not enrolled in school, from 63 to 68% between 2009 and 2014. Employment among high school students, has increased only slightly since 2009 (from 16 to 18%) and has remained steady for college students (Child Trends Data Bank, 2015b). Morisi (2017) presented more recent data on employment of 16–19-year-olds, noting that it was 34.1% in 2011 and rose slightly to 34.3 % in 2015, the last year covered in her report.

For the most recent years information is available only for persons ages 16–24. In July 2022, 55.3% of young people in this age range were employed according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022b). This rate was up from 54.4% in July 2021. The July rate remains below its level of 56.2% in July 2019, prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to the recession and then the pandemic, the decline in employment especially for high school students may be related to greater pressure for achievement and for gaining admission into college or university. They are taking more advanced placement exams and are more involved in community service, which is in some high schools and is beneficial to college or university acceptance. For a more detailed and nuanced analysis of the decrease in teen employment and its consequences, see Staff et al. (2023). We return to discuss the findings from this study in Chapter 5.

In developing countries, the pattern is somewhat different because children have always worked either for their families or for others to supplement family income. Although educational expansion has somewhat curtailed the number of hours children and youth can work, demanding work with long hours normally supplements schoolwork for even young children in these countries (see Abebe, 2007; Clemensen, 2019; Katz, 2004; Nieuwenhuys, 2009; United Nations, 2011).

In theory, children's work outside the home should have benefits. It can, for example, add variety to childhood and prepare children for future work roles. For both developing and industrialized societies experiences, however, there is much debate about what

children gain from work outside the home today, and they can be exploited (Mortimer, 2013; Nieuwenhuys, 2009; Runyan et al., 2013; Staff et al., 2023). We return to this debate in later chapters.

### Children's Work in the Home

As increasing numbers of women have entered the workforce, the study of domestic labor or housework has become an important research topic in American sociology. Most studies document the heavy work demands and stress on dual-income and single-parent families, most especially for women. In fact, study after study documents that women perform most of the housework in what Arlie Hochschild (1989) termed the "second shift." Beth Shelton (1992), for example, found that in 1987, employed women spent an estimated 33 hours a week on housework compared to employed men's 22 hours a week. We return to discuss this issue and how it was affected by the pandemic in Chapter 5.

In many of the early studies of domestic labor carried out in the 1970s and early 1980s, children were seen primarily as sources of additional work for mothers. Later, however, researchers have begun to take children's contributions into account. Most of these studies do not use children as respondents but rather use parental (usually mother's) reports of children's work in the home. Nonetheless, most of the studies reported a similar pattern, with younger children (8–13-year-olds) contributing 2 to 4 hours a week to domestic chores and older children (14–18-year-olds) 6 to 9 hours a week. In accounting for differences by age, the studies also consistently documented gender differences, with girls contributing more domestic labor than boys. Moreover, chores were highly gender typed, with girls doing cooking, cleaning, and other indoor tasks and boys more often engaging in outdoor tasks such as yard work. In one study of parental reports of the household labor of 5–18-year-old children, Sampson Blair found that "daughters perform significantly more total labor than sons (5.62 versus 4.63 hours) per week" and that daughters spent "the majority of their time in those tasks traditionally defined as 'female-dominated'" (1992, pp. 187–188; for a more recent review of research in this area see Blair, 2013). Other later studies captured the importance of housework (and especially sibling care) by both girls and boys in primarily single-parent, low-income families (Berridge & Romich, 2011; Dodson & Dickert, 2004). In more recent studies, parents have reported additional benefits of having their children engage in chores as means to foster their development in Australia, Brazil, and Germany (Aplin et al., 2016; Drummond et al., 2019; Schulz, 2021). All these studies as in earlier work found girls were much more likely to engage in household chores than boys.

### Children's Play and Leisure Activities

In his book *Childhood's Future*, the journalist Richard Louv (1990) recounts an episode when he was playing catch with his son in a city park. The park was filling with children's soccer teams, and as Louv and his son Jason threw the ball back and forth, they were approached by the mother of one of Jason's classmates. Louv reports the following conversation:

"Whatcha doing? Waiting for a team?" she said with a friendly smile.

"Nope. Just playing catch," I answered, tossing the ball to Jason.

"Killing time, eh?" she said. (p. 109)

This exchange captures the recent trend in Western societies toward the institutionalization of increasingly more children's leisure-time activities; the woman assumed the father and son would not be in a park with a ball and a mitt unless they were waiting for an organized event to take place. Qvortrup reported that in all the 16 industrialized countries participating in the international project "Childhood as a Social Phenomenon," more than 50% of children were involved in organized sports and leisure activities, with many involved in several such activities (Qvortrup, 1991, p. 29).

Commentators such as Louv and Qvortrup challenge the assumption that such activities are voluntary on the part of the children, pointing to the highly structured, closely supervised, and rigidly scheduled nature of what Qvortrup termed "planned spontaneity" (Qvortrup, 1991, pp. 29–30; see also Chudacoff, 2007; Louv, 1990, pp. 109–116). Children Louv interviewed echoed this theme. One fifth grader commented,

> I don't really have much time to play at all because I have piano lessons. My mom makes me practice for about an hour every day, and then I have my homework, and that's about an hour's worth, and then I got soccer practice, and that's from 5:30 to 7:00, and then there's no time left to play. On weekends we usually have soccer games, and I have the chores, and then I'm free to play—which is only about two hours, three hours something like that. (Louv, 1990, p. 110)

This child's distinction between planned activities, such as soccer and piano practice, and play is intriguing.

However, in a study of children's participation in three types of after-school activities (chess, dance, and soccer), Hilary Levey Freidman (2013) found a more complex picture. Given negative conversations about over-pressured children by Louv and others, she was surprised to find most of the elementary school-age kids she interviewed generally have fun while doing these activities with their friends while still acquiring what she calls competitive kid capital. By competitive kid capital, Freidman means general skills or credentials parents see as necessary for their children in the upper-middle class and the good life that accompanies it (2013, p. 14).

Other recent research shows a variation in positive and negative effects regarding children and youth participation in after-school and summer activities, especially sports (Messner & Musto, 2016). In Chapter 1 we discussed the concept of interpretive reproduction and the orb web model and how children spontaneously participate as active members of both childhood and adult cultures. When it comes to participation in sports and other activities outside of school, these two cultures are interwoven in intricate ways. First these activities often serve as **priming events** (Corsaro & Molinari, 2000, 2005) in which children attend prospectively to ongoing or anticipated changes in their lives. In this way they are crucial to children's social construction of temporal aspects of their lives, including important life transitions. In fact, we can look at children's participation in after-school activities and especially sports as temporal careers. Peter and Patricia Adler (1998) laid out a sequence of types of after-school activities that normally involved sports participation from spontaneous or informal play to recreational activities, competitive activities, and elite activities. They documented a sort of funneling frame from wide participation in spontaneous play to narrowing participation in the other activities, with many children not entering or opting out of elite activities. In another study of sports careers, Sabo and Veliz (2016) studied patterns related to gender, race, and class. They generally found that a large percentage of children participate in sports from an early age but that participation

rates are higher for white middle- and upper-class boys, with boys entering at an earlier age than girls. They also found "that children leave organized sports in droves as they age—a pattern that is especially prevalent among girls and kids of color" (2016, p. 23). They offer various explanations for these findings, such as girls' growing interest in other activities with age and a lack of support for girls' participation compared to boys, especially among fathers. Finally, working- and lower-class girls (especially of color) often face demands of helping with child care and other family work.

Children's participation in after-school and sports activities can also have positive and negative effects related to mentoring and media and consumer culture. Mentoring from coaches or activity leaders in an out of school often provides children and youth with positive intergenerational experiences and supports positive identity, self-esteem, and optimism (see Musto, 2016). McKeever (2016), in an impressive longitudinal ethnographic study of his own and others' experiences as mentors in a low-income predominately Latino/a community recreational center in Los Angeles, brought to life the interwoven positive intergenerational experiences that existed over many years among adult coaches, referees, parents, neighbors, and children and youth. Further, given variation in the age of the children and youth sports participants, their friends, and siblings, we see strong communal intergenerational bonds among the children and youth themselves. However, other more publicized mentoring programs often are mixed in their promotion of positive effects on participating children and youth. Montez de Oca et al. (2016) found that the NFL widely commercialized Play 60 program does indeed promote healthy physical activity among children and youth and while they receive the valued attention of their football heroes. Yet, although the NFL wants to be seen in a positive way to be promoting children and youth health, they also have the ulterior motive of combating recent perceptions of football as a highly dangerous sport, especially given growing concerns about concussions.

Despite the complexity of these debates about the increasingly organized lives of children and the mixed effects of organized play activities, it does seem that kids have less and less time to be kids. In fact, many commercial establishments (pizza restaurant chains, indoor playgrounds, or amusement areas) try to convince parents that they can provide "kid play" for their children. But why aren't kids allowed to find their own fun, to set out on their own play quests in the neighborhood, in nearby parks and playgrounds, or even in their own backyard? This shift toward the **institutionalization of childhood** and less opportunity for children to have time for free play—especially outdoors—has led to what Louv (2008) called **nature-deficit disorder**. As we discuss in Chapter 12 there are a growing number of nature schools and environmentally sustainable schools in Scandinavia and Indonesia that support Louv's goals. However, he is still fighting an uphill battle because there are many structural and cultural reasons for the institutionalization of childhood in modern society. Finally, the pandemic led to a disruption of children's participation in organized play activities including physical play and sports as well as lessons of various types. For a review of the international literature on these effects of the pandemic, see Kourti et al. (2021). However, children are returning to similar levels of such activities as before the pandemic, but it has varied by race, ethnicity, and social class.

The major reason for an increase in organized activities for children may well be an accompanying increase in parental concerns regarding children's safety. Given modern conditions, parental preoccupation with children's well-being, even while playing in their own neighborhoods, is understandable. Such fears have been heightened by the media's reporting and depiction of children as victims of kidnappings and physical and sexual abuse.

Much debate exists about the accuracy of descriptive accounts and statistical reports of child victimization and other threats to children (Best, 1990; Glassner, 2010). Violent crimes in general have declined after peaking in the 1980s. However, gun violence has increased dramatically and is now the leading cause of death for children in the United States, which we will return to discuss in later chapters. A disturbing percentage of this gun violence has occurred in school shootings. These shootings have resulted in the deaths, critical injuries, and a high degree of trauma of children and teachers in American elementary, middle, and high schools. These shootings have occurred in a wide range of schools regarding socioeconomic status. Worse, children have been caught up in gun violence (some of which is related to domestic terrorism) in other public settings like shopping malls, grocery stores, and neighborhoods. After the last election we saw an insurrection and assault on Congress by those unhappy with the results including many White supremacists. Former President Trump's role in this insurrection is still under investigation, and he continues to deny the election results, has never conceded, and despite many investigations into a range of alleged illegal activities, is the leading candidate in the Republican party for the 2024 election. These unprecedented events have increased fears of political violence and calls for stricter gun laws, which for the most part have gone unheeded. There is little doubt that concerns about the physical safety especially of poor children in the United States and throughout the world are justified. We discussed many of these issues in the preface and will return to them in later chapters.

A second reason for the increased institutionalization of children's activities is that structured leisure activities and lessons provide parents with needed child care. In a national child care survey in the United States conducted by the Urban Institute, Sandra Hofferth and her colleagues found that "many parents use lessons as a way to care for school-age children after school, as well as to expand their academic, physical, social, and cultural skills" (1991, p. 67). The percentage of families relying on lessons for after-school care is highest for households with working mothers, where 22.4% rely on such care for their 10–12-year-old children. This is the most frequent type of arrangement, except for "father care"—or care by fathers—which was the type of care in 33% of households with working mothers. Hofferth and colleagues pointed out the "two-for-one" advantage of after-school lessons: The child gets to pursue an area of interest, and at the same time the parent benefits from child care. The data also suggest that lessons may become a necessary replacement for child center care (child care at an institutionalized setting) as children move from preschool into elementary school. For example, 42.8% of families with employed mothers rely on center care for 3–4-year-olds, 16% for 6–9-year-olds, and only 3.2% for 10–12-year-olds; the corresponding figures for families relying on after-school lessons is 0.6% for 3–4-year-olds, 13.6% for 6–9-year-olds, and 22.4% for 10–12-year-olds (Hofferth et al., 1991, p. 50).

After-school care and programs have been increasing throughout the United States since the 1990s, with more parents relying on such programs in recent years most especially for elementary school-age children. Children in after-school programs benefit from a wide variety of essential supports and activities that encourage healthy behaviors, increase knowledge and skills, and provide learning opportunities. Overall participation in after-school programs has increased nearly 60% from 2004 to 2014, with almost 4 million more children in such programs in 2014. However, this number decreased during the pandemic but is now again rising to the earlier levels in 2019. Also, parents' satisfaction

with aspects of after-school programs—such as the quality of care, staff, and program activities—has significantly increased 2014 to 2020 on several factors including providing their children with physical activities, engagement with peers, safe supervision, caring adult mentors, healthy meals, and snacks and also reducing the likelihood of risky behavior and keeping their children out of trouble. Although important gains have been made in after-school program quality and participation, the unmet demand for after-school programs continues to rise. In 2004, the parents of 15.3 million children said they would enroll their child in an after-school program if one were available; in 2014 that number increased to 19.4 million children and was in greater demand in 2020 (Afterschool Alliance, 2014, 2022a, b).

A third reason for an increase in organized activities for children may be demographic changes in American families. As social demographer Don Hernandez (1993a, 1993b) recently documented, children have experienced a dramatic shift from large to small families during the past 100 years. For example, noted Hernandez, "the typical child born in 1890 lived, as an adolescent, in a family in which there were about 6.6 siblings, but the typical child born in 1994 is expected to live in a family that is only one-third as large—with 1.9 children" (1993b, p. 418). Although there was a brief lull in this dramatic shift during the baby boom period from about 1945 to about 1957, it was more than offset by the baby bust period in later years. As Hernandez noted, this shift has drastically reduced the number of siblings who are available for companionship. Without siblings to integrate them into informal neighborhood activities and children's cultures (or to serve as caretakers and protectors), children find they must rely more on parents. And for the two reasons we discussed, parents often turn to organized (and often age-segregated) activities.

## CHILDHOOD, CHILDREN'S ACTIVITIES, AND INTERPRETIVE REPRODUCTION IN PEER CULTURE

Qvortrup's approach to childhood as a social phenomenon and his emphasis on children as active coconstructors of their social worlds reflect an important shift away from individualistic views of socialization in which the individual child internalizes adult skills and knowledge. His view leads us to a better understanding of children's place, stake, and importance in both cultural production and cultural maintenance. Children do not only actively contribute to the adult culture and their own childhoods in a direct way, however. Children creatively appropriate information from the adult world to produce their own, unique peer cultures. As we saw in Chapter 1, the process of interpretive reproduction enables children to become a part of adult culture—to contribute to its reproduction and extension—through their negotiations with adults and their creative production of a series of peer cultures with other children. Let us turn now to a more detailed discussion of this notion of interpretive reproduction within **children's peer cultures**.

In Chapter 1, we discussed examples of young children's participation in cultural routines in the family. For example, we considered the importance of parent-infant games such as peekaboo for providing infants with opportunities to participate in everyday family life and to develop a sense of security in belonging to a social group. Also, in the case study of the 2-and-a-half-year-old child (Buddy) and his mother, we saw that the everyday

routine of conversation at lunch helped establish a strong emotional bond between mother and son, and it also provided Buddy with numerous opportunities to explore and learn about his social world. Through their participation in such cultural routines in the family with parents and siblings, young children initiate their evolving membership in their culture. We can see this evolving membership as a process in which children refine and expand their place in the culture over time and with experience (Corsaro, 2020, Lave & Wenger, 1991, Rogoff, et al., 2018). This process continues as children, from very young ages, begin to participate in cultural routines and other collective activities outside the family. By interacting with playmates in play groups and preschools, children produce the first in a series of peer cultures in which childhood knowledge and practices are gradually transformed into the knowledge and skills necessary to participate in the adult world (Corsaro, 2020)

We will consider children's peer cultures in detail in Chapters 6 through 9. Here we want to stress that children's production of peer cultures is neither a matter of simple imitation nor direct appropriation of the adult world. Children creatively appropriate or take information from the adult world to produce their own unique peer cultures. Such appropriation is creative in that it extends or elaborates peer culture; children transform information from the adult world to meet the concerns of their peer world. In this way they simultaneously contribute to the reproduction of adult culture. Thus, children's peer cultures have an autonomy that makes them worthy of documentation and study in their own right.

## Three Kinds of Collective Action

In Chapter 1, we referred to the process of creative appropriation as *interpretive reproduction*. This is made up of **three kinds of collective action**: (a) children's creative appropriation of information and knowledge from the adult world; (b) children's production and participation in a series of peer cultures; and (c) children's contribution to the reproduction and extension of adult culture. These activities follow a certain progression: Appropriation enables cultural production, which contributes to reproduction and change. The activities, however, are not historically partitioned. That is, children do not proceed through a specific period in which they appropriate all the needed information to produce a peer culture and only then make contributions to reproduction and change in adult culture. Instead, these collective actions occur both within the moment and over time. To better understand this idea, it is helpful to consider how children acquire and use language. Children do not first learn all the rules of grammar, phonology, and semantics; practice these rules; and only then begin to use them to communicate with others. Instead, children use their developing language skills to communicate at specific moments in time, and they refine and further develop the skills through repeated use in interaction over time. It is the same for the creation of and participation in peer culture. Children appropriate information from the adult world to create and participate in a peer culture at specific moments in time. These same collective actions, through their repetition in peer culture over time, contribute to children's better understanding of the aspects of the adult culture they have appropriated. Furthermore, these repetitions over time can even bring about changes in certain aspects of adult culture. Let us consider the following case study.

# PRESCHOOL CHILDREN'S SECONDARY ADJUSTMENTS TO TEACHER'S RULES

In Corsaro's greater than 30 years of ethnographic research in nursery schools in the United States and Italy, he found that children attempt to evade adult rules through collaboratively produced **secondary adjustments**, which enable children to gain a certain amount of control over their lives in these settings. According to Goffman, secondary adjustments are "any habitual arrangement by which a member of an organization employs unauthorized means, or obtains unauthorized ends, or both, thus getting around the organization's assumptions as to what he should do and get and hence what he should be" (1961, p. 189).

Corsaro found that children produced a wide variety of secondary adjustments in response to school rules. For example, the children employed several concealment strategies to evade the rule that prohibited bringing toys or other personal objects from home to school. This rule was necessary: Personal objects were attractive to other children simply because they were different from the everyday materials in the preschools, and as a result the teachers were constantly settling disputes about these items. Therefore, such objects could not be brought to school; if they were, they had to be stored in the child's locker until the end of the day. In both the American and Italian schools, the children attempted to evade this rule by bringing small personal objects that they could conceal in their pockets. Some of their favorites were small toy animals, model cars, candies, and chewing gum. While playing, a child often would show their "stashed loot" to a playmate and carefully share the forbidden object without catching the teachers' attention (see Corsaro, 2003). The teachers, of course, often knew what was going on but simply ignored minor transgressions. The teachers overlooked these violations because the nature of the secondary adjustment often eliminates the organizational need to enforce the rule. Children shared and played with smuggled personal objects surreptitiously to avoid detection by the teachers. If the children always played with personal objects in this fashion, there would be no conflict and hence no need for the rule. That is not the case, however; the careful sharing took place only because the adult rule was in effect. Thus, in an indirect way, the secondary adjustment endorsed the organizational need for the rule. We see, then, that children's secondary adjustments (which are innovative and highly valued features of the peer culture, as we shall see in Chapter 7) often contributed to the maintenance of the adult rules.

The story does not end here, however. The children's secondary adjustments to school rules often led to the teachers' selective enforcement of the rules and, in some cases, to changes in the rules and in the organizational structure of the nursery school. Bill often found that teachers relaxed the enforcement of school rules because they recognized the creativity of certain features of peer culture. For example, in an American school, teachers first relaxed a rule prohibiting children from moving objects from one play area to another; they allowed the children to use string and blocks from a worktable to create a "fishing" game by dangling the string from an upstairs playhouse to their peers below, who then attached the blocks. The teachers then actually endorsed the secondary adjustment by joining in the play (see Corsaro, 1985, p. 257). In these instances, the teachers themselves appeared to be engaged in a secondary adjustment to their own rules and exposed children to a basic feature of all rules—that is, knowledge of the content of a rule is never sufficient for its application; rules must be applied and interpreted in social context (Wootton, 1986).

## SUMMARY

In recent years we have seen the beginnings of a new sociology of childhood, one that breaks free from the individualistic doctrine that regards socialization as the child's private internalization of adult skills and knowledge. In this new approach the focus is on childhood as a social construction resulting from the collective actions of children with adults and each other. Childhood is recognized as a structural form and children as social agents who contribute to the reproduction of childhood and society through their negotiations with adults and through their creative production of a series of peer cultures with other children. This new view of childhood as a social phenomenon replaces the traditional notion of socialization with the concept of interpretive reproduction. Interpretive reproduction reflects children's evolving membership in their culture, which begins in the family and spirals outward as children create a series of embedded peer cultures based on the institutional structure of the adult culture and the changing nature of **intergenerational relations**. Overall, the notion of interpretive reproduction challenges sociology to take children seriously and to appreciate children's contributions to social reproduction and change.

## KEY TERMS

Children's peer culture

Generational order and intergenerational
relations

Institutionalization of childhood

Nature-deficit disorder

Priming events

Secondary adjustments

Three kinds of collective action