

William Stephens. *The Gentle World of Childhood: Starting School in England*. Tallahassee: Severn Books, 2001. iii + 103 pp. \$11.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-889574-10-3.

Reviewed by Agnes Haigh Widder (Michigan State University)
Published on H-Childhood (August, 2004)



Early Childhood Education in Twentieth-Century England

Stephens is the author of a longer work, *Civility in an English Village*, published in 2000 by Severn Books. *The Gentle World of Childhood* seems to be a sort of spin-off from the former, looking at how civility plays itself out in the English primary school setting in the post-World War II period. The author does not specify his scope or purpose directly; the reader must surmise this on his or her own. From the short introduction and acknowledgments the reviewer gathers that the purpose is to show how a more unhurried, gentle, loving, kindly, time-consuming approach to the raising and educating of infants and primary-school-age children in England is necessary to maintain a more civil society overall, as well as to raise better-mannered children, both in and out of school. The implementation of the English National Curriculum in 1989, with its multitudes of required reports and its prescribed curriculum, keeps teachers and principals very busy, so much so that there is less time for the unhurried, gentle, individually paced, and time-consuming approaches to children in the early school years.

The author deals only with the school environment, using an interview format, to reveal how one infant and primary school, Mossford Green Primary School, operated. His chief subject is Edna Ward, the principal, from 1964-1977. Via extensive interviews, Ward discusses the ideal start to infant school used there, the organization of the school's day, the subjects taught, the self-paced work, lunch hours, ability groupings, the use of parent helpers, integration of slow learners, and discipline. She also explains how children from a local Barnardo's home

(similar to an orphanage) were included in the school and the problems teachers and administration had with these children. The author presents extensive information on the moral development of the children, describing how children learn moral principles and consideration for others.

In addition to the retired principal, Stephens interviewed twenty-two other individuals, including former pupils and their parents, and seven former Mossford Green teachers. Some of those interviewed disagreed with the very rosy picture painted by Ward, especially in regard to school discipline and children's behavior, yet the book devotes very little space to their comments. Others interviewed noted that, over the thirteen years that she was principal, things changed. In spite of their disagreements with Ward's information, most of the twenty-two interviewees did believe that she was remarkable with both children and parents. Edna attracted teachers who held views similar to her own regarding education and child rearing. Moreover, the staff worked very hard and supported each other.

This is not the typical academic book, having few footnotes and no bibliography. Small publishers very often put out histories or recollections of particular schools, which college and university libraries frequently do not collect. The author makes several observations about moral development and about the need to take time with children, both in and out of school, in order to give them the good grounding which prevents personality and character problems from developing as a result of

fear and insecurity. These observations, along with those on the disadvantages of the English National Curriculum, make this more than just another history of a school in the late-twentieth century.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-childhood>

Citation: Agnes Haigh Widder. Review of Stephens, William, *The Gentle World of Childhood: Starting School in England*. H-Childhood, H-Net Reviews. August, 2004.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9713>

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.