



THE CUTENESS SYNDROME,
KITCHIE-KITCHIE-COO AND OTHER
PROBLEMS

By John Holt

HoltGWS

THE CUTENESS SYNDROME, KITCHIE-KITCHIE-COO AND OTHER PROBLEMS

By John Holt

© 2012 by HoltGWS LLC

This is an excerpt from John Holt's book *Escape From Childhood: The Needs and Rights of Children*. A new, complete electronic edition of *Escape From Childhood* is available for the Kindle at Amazon.com.

Years ago, a friend of mine used to tell a very funny Embarrassing Moment story. Once, while walking in a department store, she found herself just behind two small boys whose heads came up only a little above her waist. Feeling affectionate and mischievous, she put a fingertip on the top of each boy's head. In an instant, two furious adult faces looked up at her, and in a harsh, high, but adult voice, one of them said, "What the hell do you think you're doing?" They were midgets.

Only quite recently did I realize that behind her act and our laughter at hearing about it was this thought that if those midgets had really been children, it would have been perfectly all right to walk along with her fingertips on the tops of their heads. But what makes it such a good idea to touch strange children's heads? What gives us the right to do it? What makes us think that they like us to do it?

Almost all adults, men and women, use children as what we might call love objects. We think we have a right, or even a duty, to bestow on them "love," visible and tangible signs of affection, whenever we want, however we want, and whether they like it or not. In this way we exploit them, use them for our purposes.

This is why we adults find children worth owning and the institution of childhood worth preserving in spite of their great trouble and expense.

One reason we need and use children for this purpose is that many of us are starved for human contact and affection that may openly be expressed with words of endearment or physical contact. In this respect women may be better off than men. Perhaps because women are sex objects themselves—or perhaps because society considers them an inferior class and therefore allows them certain licenses—they are permitted to touch other people, both women and men. Men are really only supposed to touch the women to whom they are closely related, and they are not supposed to touch other men in any affectionate way at all.

For these reasons, anyone to whom we can give affection and love, openly and physically, any time and any place we feel like it, whenever the mood or need strikes us, without danger or shame, and indeed knowing we will gain general approval—such a person is immeasurably useful and valuable to us.

Many who have written about their childhood have described their fright and disgust at being embraced or kissed by an adult they did not like and whose appearance and manner revolted them. Some ask, “Suppose the older person really needs to hug the child?” But when the needs of a four-year-old and a sixty-year-old come into conflict, why must the child always give way?

Is the child entitled to no consideration simply because she or he is smaller and weaker? For that matter, any adult who is so insensitive to the feelings of a child is not embracing a real child, but only the idea of a child, a child object. If the child is a blood relative, we are permitted to embrace her or him. If we tried to pick up and hug some strange and resisting child on the street, we might get into trouble, particularly if we are grown men. For even though children are love objects, any one of us is only permitted to physically use certain children in this way.

All of this is not to say by any means that our desire to love children is bad, or all bad. We are naturally and rightly interested, charmed, and delighted by many qualities of children. And we are often and rightly

touched and saddened by their littleness and vulnerability. But we have no right to indulge these feelings, to wallow in them because they make us feel good, or to convey them to children by look, word, or deed unless they have given us good reason to believe that they will welcome them. When children are feeling friendly, frolicsome, and flirtatious, this is the time to beam and smile at them, to play secret eye and smile games with them. Perhaps, if they give us the signal, we may pick them up, tumble them about, hug and kiss them. But unless and until they give the signal, we have no right to do this.

We must learn to recognize and respect whatever distance the child has chosen to put between us. We do not have the right to move into her or his life space without permission. Children don't like being used as love objects, even by people they like. They want the right to refuse, to set the terms on which at any moment the relationship will proceed.

Most children learn early that they can be, and regularly are, commanded to give and receive tokens of "love"—words of endearment, simpering smiles, heavy-handed teasing, compliments and personal remarks, and hugs and kisses. This soon kills the meaning of these signs, even the hugs and kisses, and often leaves the children without any way to express what they often feel—an affection or delight too strong for words. In time, what they are no longer able to express they may find hard even to feel. In this way we may be destroying what we most want to save. "Being affectionate" to children, "loving" them, whether they like it or not, may not be the way to make them affectionate and loving. Quite the reverse. No one can truly say yes to something, be it an experience or another person's offer of love, if she or he cannot truly say no. No one can fully and freely give love if she or he does not have the unquestioned right to withhold it.

When a man uses women as sex objects, in fantasy or reality, he tells himself it is okay: he is doing them a favor, giving them what they really want. So, no need to hang back or be shy in any way—jump right in and help yourself—there can't be any such thing as too soon or too much.

Quite naturally we have an ideology very much like this to justify our using children as love objects.

Children need “love,” the story goes. They can’t have too much of it, can’t get enough of it, don’t care from whom or in what form it comes. Perhaps in the first year or so of life, there may be some truth in this. From my own and others’ experience I believe that babies like and need a lot of human contact and may suffer if they get too little of it. But even with babies we must use discretion and tact. Most babies certainly like to be held, cuddled, and played with. But not necessarily all the time, or with all people, or in the same ways. By the time they are six months old, or even younger, they have their own well-developed purposes, needs, and preferences. There may be times when they are busy with something and don’t want to be interrupted. There may be people they like and others they like much less or not at all. Or they may like to be played with but not picked up. And there may be certain kinds of games or ways of showing affection that they don’t like from anyone. Even with babies we must take care to learn to read their signals and to respect them.

Another way of saying this is that we should try to get of the habit of seeing little children as cute. In responding to children as cute, we are in part responding to many qualities that rightly appeal to us. Children tend to be, among other things, healthy, energetic, quick, vital; vivacious, enthusiastic, resourceful, intelligent, intense, passionate, hopeful, trustful, and forgiving—they get very angry but do not, as we do, bear grudges for long. Above all, they have a great capacity for delight, joy, and sorrow. But we should not think of these qualities or virtues as “childish,” the exclusive property of children. They are human qualities. We are wise to value them in people of all ages. When we think of these qualities as childish, belonging only to children, we invalidate them; we make them into things we should “outgrow” as we grow older. Thus we excuse ourselves for carelessly losing what we should have done our best to keep. Worse yet, we teach the children this lesson: only “little kids” go around all the time looking enthusiastic and asking silly questions; to be grown-up is to be cool, impassive, untouched, invulnerable.

But though we may respond authentically to many qualities of children, we too often respond either con-

descendingly or sentimentally to many others—condescendingly to their littleness, weakness, clumsiness, ignorance, inexperience, incompetence, helplessness, dependency, immoderation, and lack of any sense of time or proportion; and sentimentally to made-up notions about their happiness, carefreeness, innocence, purity, nonsexuality, goodness, spirituality, and wisdom. These notions are mostly nonsense. Children are not particularly happy or carefree; they have as many worries and fears as many adults, often the same ones.

What makes them seem happy is their energy and curiosity, their involvement with life; they do not waste much time in brooding. Children are the farthest thing in the world from spiritual. They are not abstract, but concrete. They are animals and sensualists; to them, what *feels* good *is* good. They are self-absorbed and selfish. They have very little ability to put themselves in another person's shoes, to imagine how someone else feels. This often makes them inconsiderate and sometimes cruel. But whether they are kind or cruel, generous or greedy, they are always so on impulse rather than by plan or principle. Some of the things (which are not school subjects and can't be "taught") that children don't know, but only learn in time and in living, are things they will be better for knowing. Some of the understanding and wisdom that can come with time real—which is why children are strongly attracted by the natural authority of any adults who do respond authentically and respectfully to them.

Some might ask, what is wrong with responding sentimentally to children, with thinking them better than they really are? The point is that this sentimental and therefore abstract and unreal way of dealing with children as "cute" is dangerously near to callousness and cruelty.

One afternoon I was with several hundred people in an auditorium of a junior college when we heard outside the building the passionate wail of a small child. Almost everyone smiled, chuckled, or laughed. Perhaps there was something legitimately comic in the fact that one child should, and without even trying, be able to interrupt the supposedly important thoughts and words of all these adults. But beyond this was

some thing else: the belief that the feelings, pains, and passions of children were not real, not to be taken seriously. If we had heard outside the building the voice of an adult crying in pain, anger, or sorrow, we would not have smiled or laughed but would have been frozen in wonder and terror. But there is nothing funny about children's crying. Until a small child has learned from adults to exploit childishness and cuteness, she or he cries not for trivial reasons but out of need, fear, or pain.

Once, coming into an airport, I saw just ahead of me a girl of about seven or eight. Hurrying up the carpeted ramp, she tripped and fell down. She did not hurt herself but quickly picked herself up and walked on. But looking around at everyone's face, I saw indulgent smiles, expressions of "Isn't that cute?" If an adult had fallen down, they would have worried about her or his embarrassment and pain.

We look at the lives and concerns and troubles of children as we might look at actors on a stage—a comedy as long as it does not become a nuisance. And so, since their feelings and their pain are neither serious nor real, any pain we may cause them is not real either. In any conflict of interest with us, they must give way; only our needs are real.

Much of what we respond to in children as cute is not strength or virtue, real or imagined, but weakness, a quality which gives us power over them or helps us to feel superior. Thus we think they are cute partly because they are little. But what is cute about being little? Are midgets cute? Not at all. We recognize that the littleness of a midget is an affliction and a burden. Children understand this very well. They are not at all sentimental about their own littleness. They would rather be big than little, and they want to get big as soon as they can.

How would we feel about children, react to them, deal with them, if they reached their full size in the first two or three years of their lives? We would not be able to go on using them as love objects or slaves or property. We would have no interest in keeping them helpless, dependent, babyish. Since they were grown up physically, we would want them to grow up in other ways. On their part, they would want to become free,

active, independent, and responsible as fast as they could, and since they were full-size and could not be used any longer as living dolls or superpets, we would do all we could do to help.

Another quality that makes us think children are cute, makes us smile or get misty-eyed, is their “innocence.” In part we mean only that they are ignorant and inexperienced. But ignorance is not a blessing, it’s a misfortune. Children are no more sentimental about their ignorance than they are about their size. They want to know what’s going on, and we should be glad to help them, if they ask us and if we can. But by the innocence of children we mean something more—their hopefulness, trustfulness, confidence, their feeling that the world is open to them, that life has many possibilities, that what they don’t know they can find out, what they can’t do they can learn to do. These are qualities valuable in everyone. When we call them “innocence” and ascribe them only to children, as if they are too dumb to know any better, we are only trying to excuse our own hopelessness and despair.

I used to think that the clumsiness of infants learning to walk was cute. Now I watch in a different spirit. Although there is nothing cute about clumsiness—any more than littleness—there is something very appealing and exciting about watching children just learning to walk. They do it so badly, it is so clearly difficult, and in the child’s terms may even be dangerous. Most adults, even many older children, would instantly stop trying to do anything that they did as badly as new walkers do their walking. But infants just keep on. They are so determined, they’re working so hard and they’re so excited that learning to walk is not just an effort and struggle but a joyous adventure.

I try to respond to the infants’ determination, courage, and pleasure, not their littleness, feebleness, and incompetence. They don’t know or care whether I like it or not; they’re walking not for the approval or happiness of me or their parents but for themselves. It is their show. We should not try to turn them into actors in our show, but leave them alone to get on with their work.

We often think children are cutest when they are most intent and serious about what they are doing.

Patting a mud pie, for example. They act as if it were important. How satisfying for us to feel we know better.

We also tend to think that children are cutest when they are openly displaying their ignorance and incompetence. We value their dependency and helplessness. Children acting really competently and intelligently do not usually strike us as cute. They are as likely to puzzle and threaten us. We don't like to see children acting in a way that makes it impossible for us to look down on them or to suppose that they dependent on our help. We need them as help objects as much as we need them as love objects. This is of course very true in school. We know that many first-grade teachers hate to have children come to school already knowing how to read. How then are we going to teach them?

Children do not like being incompetent any more than they like being ignorant. But many of the defenders of childhood, in or out of school, seem to have this vested interest in the children's incompetence, which they call "letting the child be a child."

Having turned the child into an ideal abstraction, many parents and teachers tend to look at her or him much as Rocket Control in Houston looks at a moon shot. They have a trajectory (life) all mapped out for this child, and they are constantly monitoring to see whether she or he is on course. Unfortunately many defenders of childhood have their own precise notions of what a child should be. They very often like to tell us that children are more wise, beautiful, "human" (a favorite word), happy, virtuous, pure, and sane than adults. Such talk is very discouraging or damaging to the young. Those who are small, powerless, ignorant, anxious, and confused don't want to be told that this is the best time of their life.

When we have preconceived ideas about the young, whether we see them as potential successful adults or as Innocent Spirits, we inevitably begin to judge them by how well they fit into these ideas. It is easy to condemn this when it is done by people who are ambitious for their children, who want to push them into success so that they may take credit for it and so justify their own lives. But this judging of children

against an abstract ideal is done just as much, though in a different way, by the people who think children are cute.

When we think that children are cute we tend to use their cuteness to arouse in ourselves feelings which give us pleasure and which make us feel proud for having them. This alone would be bad enough. But this exploitation of children becomes mutual. As we exploit them, we teach them to exploit us. We exploit their cuteness; they exploit our need to have them behave cutely. Some of us want from children the kind of uncritical, unconditional, total love a baby wants from her or his mother. We may want to reverse our roles, make ourselves the child and the children our parents, and have them give us what no one else has ever given us. We may seek in children the ideal lovers of our dreams.

A subtle power struggle may then begin. As they figure out what adults want, children may decide to give it to us then and there and get their reward. Or they may decide to hold out, in order to see what happens next. They begin to tease and coquette. If our need to use the cute child as love object is great, we will begin to plead, cajole, tempt, bargain, and even threaten. Children soon learn that the longer they hold out, the greater their rewards will be, at least up to the point where the now disappointed and angry adult refuses to play any longer. Much of this calculating and game playing is unconscious, going on at various emotional or gut levels. But if it goes on very long, if children cannot escape these games, these mutual exploitations will surely destroy their character.

A cute child soon learns to do almost everything she or he does, at least around adults, to get an effect. Such children become self-conscious, artful, calculating, manipulative. They pay more and more attention to how they appear in the eyes of others. I often see such simpering, mincing, cutesy-smiling, fake-laughing children with adults in public places. They become specialists in human relations, which they see more and more as a kind of contest to see who can get the most out of others.

What kind of adults will such children become? What kind of society will they make? What will they do

to satisfy their insatiable craving for the approval of other people?

Many people call such artful, affected, seductive behavior “babyish.” This is a terrible libel on babies. Babies are not “babyish.” Up to the age of a year, at least, they are intensely serious. They like to laugh but when not laughing they are on the whole solemn, frank, and direct. They are not connivers, seducers, tricksters. We might well say that, in spite of their littleness and helplessness, babies act more grown-up, in the best sense, than they will a few years later. They have to learn to act “babyish.” Some learn it at home, some in school. A mother discussing this with me said, as many others have, that her child never picked up this sort of artificial, affected, silly behavior until she went to school. She saw the other children do it, saw that it worked with most teachers, and was often anxious enough to feel she needed to do it herself. A few children have the integrity and courage not to give in. They are often labeled stubborn, defiant, troublemakers. Most soon fall in line.

The class of first-graders that I taught had all, girls and boys, learned to use this “babyish” behavior as a way of dealing with and fooling the adults, getting out of trouble, getting what they wanted. Whenever they felt under some sort of pressure from me, when they hadn’t done some work, or didn’t know what I wanted, or didn’t think they could do what I wanted, they would begin to walk with little mincing steps, their voices would go high and whiny, they would talk a kind of semi-baby talk. Fortunately, it didn’t take them long to learn that there was nothing I liked less, that this was the worst possible tactic to use with me. They quickly gave it up—except, now and then, to tease me.

To sum up: when we think of children as cute we abstract and idealize them, judge them, exploit them, and, worst of all, teach them to exploit us and each other, to sell themselves for smiles and rewards. This is in every way bad for them and for their relations with us.

HoltGWS



Read Pat Farenga's blog: www.johnholtgws.com (www.patfarenga.com is the same).

Follow Pat on:
[Twitter](#)

Like [Holt/Growing Without Schooling on Facebook](#).

Check out all the rich resources about John Holt and learning outside of school at www.johnholtgws.com

Sign up for the free Learning All the Time newsletter.

- Stay up-to-date with the latest free downloads, content additions, discussions, comments, and events related to the HoltGWS site.
- Learn creative ways for helping schoolage children learn and grow.
- Use ideas and strategies that help thousands of children learn successfully at home and in their communities.

I will never spam or sell your address.—Pat Farenga, HoltGWS

[Click here to subscribe.](#)