

Negative externality

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [May 12, 1999](#) issue

Why shouldn't parents be treated as badly as smokers?" asked the writer rhetorically. After all, "children, just like cigarettes or mobile phones, clearly impose a negative externality on people who are near them." Recent events at Columbine High reminded me again of these comments, which appeared in an editorial in the *Economist*. At first I thought that it was written tongue in cheek by a person who had just suffered through a nine-hour flight with a screaming baby in the next seat. But half way through the article I stopped smiling.

"Smoking, driving and mobile phones all cause what economists call 'negative externalities,'" states the editorial. "That is, the costs of these activities to other people tend to exceed the costs to the individuals of their proclivities. The invisible hand of the market fumbles, leading resources astray. Thus, because a driver's private motoring costs do not reflect the costs he imposes on others in the form of pollution and congestion, he uses the car more than is socially desirable. Likewise, it is argued, smokers take too little care to ensure that their acrid fumes do not damage other people around them." Along with smoking, driving and mobile phones, children are "objects" which tend to impose high negative externalities on others.

The *Economist* applied the argument to air travel, and complained that "parents do not bear the full costs." The proposed solution? Create "child-free zones" and charge children more than adults. The argument begs to be extended to eating in restaurants, frequenting parks and beaches, using streets, indeed to playing in one's own backyard (at least in homes on lots smaller than six acres). Imagine the world as one large airplane on which we all ride from birth to death. The logic of the proposal would have us create large child-free zones and tax parents until their children reach adulthood. It may even nudge us to ensure that parents are properly reimbursed for the expense and remunerated for negative externalities they have suffered from their own children--provided the children don't object to having been set into the world.

Behind the proposal lies an elemental forgetfulness so typical of the liberal tradition. It seems to have escaped the editorial writer that, as Jeremy Bentham noted critically of John Locke, human beings do not come into the world as grown-ups. If you complain that children impose negative externalities on you, don't forget the negative externalities you yourself imposed on others. If you want to put a price tag on the nuisance of having children around, then pay the debts you yourself have incurred. Why should parents not be treated as badly as smokers? Because of the debts we all have accumulated in childhood.

Right around the time I read the *Economist* editorial, my wife was working on an article on children in the Gospels. Here are a few central sentences from her text. On Mark 9:33-37 she wrote: "Love for the least is the way to the new greatness that should characterize Jesus' disciples. . . . Rather than suffering neglect on account of their presumed insignificance, they are to be put in the very center of the community's life and ministry."

Mark 10:13-16 elicited this comment: "Far from being disqualified . . . little children epitomize how to enter the reign of God. They are model participants and recipients. . . . Adult believers are to understand their own identity and attainments as irrelevant to participation in the reign of God."

Matthew 18:1-5 suggests, she argued, that "high status (being the greatest) is gained through childlikeness (rather than love of children, as in Mark), and childlikeness is described as humbleness." The pinnacle of Mark 9:33-37, she maintained, is the claim that "the welcoming of a little child in Jesus' name is a test of one's openness to Jesus himself. For the little child functions as Jesus himself and God who sent him."

She summed up Jesus' treatment of the children by noting a radical challenge that it presents for the adult world: "The Gospels thus teach not merely how to make an adult world kinder and more just for children. The Gospels teach the arrival of the small world, the little child's world. They cast judgment on the adult world as such because it is not the child's world."

Justice demands that we not equate parents with smokers and children's noise with "acrid fumes." But more than justice is at stake here. As Jesus' comments about children and adult's relation to them imply, at stake is nothing less than the character of our social world. The *Economist* presupposes a world in which the one

who is least dependent and can acquire the most is the greatest. Jesus' ministry, of which the treatment of children is a paradigmatic case, presupposes that persons belong to a community of grace in which other's fragility and even "rowdiness" are opportunities of service; the greatest is the one who humbles him or herself and serves the little ones.

Those who know a bit about me might object: "A father of a one-year old is protesting here." My response is, "No, a parent of a future teenager is protesting here." There is nothing more important we can do to stem violence in our schools than to take Jesus seriously--to refuse to treat children as "negative externalities" and to work for the arrival of God's "small world."