

Johann Christoph Arnold



Their Name Is

Today

Reclaiming Childhood in a Hostile World

FOREWORD BY MARK K. SHRIVER

Acclaim

Betty Williams, Nobel Laureate

A beautifully gentle book with a powerful punch and a clear message. Listen to your children; they have a lot to say.

Timothy Cardinal Dolan, Archbishop of New York

This book fills me with hope for the future of our children and our society. Like Pope Francis, Arnold counters the “child-free” mentality with refreshing glimpses of the joy and rewards that children bring.

Jonathan Kozol, author, *Amazing Grace*

Beautiful . . . it is Arnold’s reverence for children that I love.

W. Bradford Wilcox, Institute for Family Studies

In a world where children’s time is dominated by standardized education and screen time, and where too many parents seem to be consumed by the race for upward mobility, both for themselves and their kids, *Their Name Is Today* provides a bracing alternative vision of children, parenthood, and family life. Johann Christoph Arnold reminds us of the importance of unfettered play, time spent in the natural world, and providing our children with a way of life that aligns our ideals with our actions.

Joan Almon, co-founder, Alliance for Childhood

Arnold writes with deep insight, reminding us of the meaning of childhood and the need to protect it for the sake of the children and all of humanity. His tone is beautiful, warm, and supportive. The passages from parents and teachers add a great deal.

Diane M. Komp, MD, Professor Emeritus of Pediatrics,
Yale University

Who would have thought that there was anything new to say about childhood? Brushing aside the polarizing arguments, Arnold surprises us at every turn. A stunning tribute to family life.

John M. Perkins, author, *Let Justice Roll Down*

This book could well be a spark to ignite a new passion, a new commitment to children.

Timothy Jones, author, *Nurturing Your Child's Soul*;
Dean, Trinity Episcopal Cathedral

In our hard-charging culture, children often get pushed to the edges of our crowded schedules. Arnold understands the pressures, but points to another way. His book is practical and compelling. With its engaging stories and commentary, it inspires us to welcome children with compassion and grace.

Sandy Miller, Assistant Superintendent for Student Services,
Kingston City Schools, New York

Rich in wisdom, *Their Name Is Today* is a compelling, powerful, and clear call for action to address the many challenges that children face on a daily basis. A must-have resource for parents and teachers dedicated to understanding the needs of children in today's society.

Their Name Is Today

Other books by Johann Christoph Arnold

Why Forgive?

Why Children Matter

Sex, God, and Marriage

Be Not Afraid

Seeking Peace

Rich in Years

Cries from the Heart

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Their Name Is Today

*Reclaiming Childhood
in a Hostile World*

Johann Christoph Arnold

Foreword by Mark K. Shriver

 Plough Publishing House

This is a preview. Get entire book here.

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Their Name Is Today is based on Arnold's acclaimed book *Endangered: Your Child in a Hostile World* (Plough, 2000). The author has extensively revised, expanded, and updated the text with new stories and topics to address the sweeping changes that have taken place since then.

In several instances, names have been changed to protect the contributors' privacy.

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This is a preview. Get entire book here.

We are guilty of many errors and many faults,
but our worst crime is abandoning the children,
neglecting the fountain of life.
Many things can wait. Children cannot.
Right now their bones are being formed,
their blood is being made,
and their senses are being developed.
To them we cannot answer, "Tomorrow."
Their name is today.

Gabriela Mistral

NOBEL LAUREATE

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Foreword

I bet this is the shortest foreword you will ever read!

Why?

Because I do not want to delay you more than a minute or two from reading my good friend Johann Christoph Arnold's book.

It really is that good.

Like Christoph, I have had the honor of working with children of all ages throughout my career. During college summer breaks I tutored troubled inner-city high school students. After college, I created a program that works with juvenile delinquents in Baltimore. In the Maryland Legislature, as the first chair of the Joint Committee on Children, Youth and Families, I collaborated with national and international experts on child development and passed legislation designed to help young children enter kindergarten ready to learn. For the last twelve years, I have had the privilege of working at Save the Children, giving kids in the United States and around the world a healthy start,

opportunities to learn, and protection from harm, because children deserve a childhood.

On the home front, my wife, Jeanne, and I have been married for twenty-two years and have been blessed with three children: Molly, 16, Tommy, 14, and Emma, 9.

Like you, we have struggled with many of the issues that Christoph addresses in this marvelous book, from the impact of electronics, to academic pressures, to the lack of unstructured play time, to the violence and poverty that children face daily.

Jeanne and I often find ourselves discussing how to deal with these very issues as we raise our own children. Things are coming at us so fast and furiously, it's overwhelming. We have tried to do the right thing, making numerous changes as our kids grow.

I only wish that Christoph had written this book seventeen years ago, before Jeanne and I became parents! He could have helped us on the child-rearing front, in the political arena, and on the job.

The stories Christoph shares have helped Jeanne and me as we interact with our children and their friends, and I am confident that they will help you in your home, in your classroom, and in your neighborhood.

If you want to glean insights into how to raise and influence children to be more compassionate and considerate, more courageous and confident, more independent, secure, and unselfish; if you want your children to be more loving and joy-filled, then get reading!

And share this book. I've already shared my dog-eared manuscript with several friends. They responded as I did. One replied: "It makes me want to go back and do a few things differently for my own children. . . ."

I have written too much. Read on and learn from a wise friend who loves and reveres children, whose words can help us all, whatever our age, to give and receive joy.

Mark K. Shriver

President, Save the Children Action Network

Author, A Good Man: Rediscovering My Father, Sargent Shriver

Preface

It's high time for a hopeful book about childhood. We live in difficult times and many people have lost their joy in life. But whenever we feel discouraged, all we need to do is look at children. They are among the most vulnerable in today's fast-paced culture, yet their trust in us and their irrepressible enthusiasm should always inspire us to keep going.

There are more than enough books about education and parenting – books with gloomy statistics and dire warnings for the future of our society and its children.

Yet there are many reasons for hope. Across America and around the world, there are people who care passionately about children. But they often feel overwhelmed, fighting lonely battles for what they know to be right and true. In this book, I want to bring their voices together so their valuable insights and courageous examples can be shared.

This book is dedicated first and foremost to all children, wherever they live. It is also dedicated to the parents and teachers who care for them day and night. To me, these people are the true heroes, on the front lines every day, facing difficult odds.

We all need to become advocates for children, parents, and teachers, encouraging them whenever we can, and finding ways to make their lives a little easier.

A book can't change the world. But parents and teachers can – by loving each child entrusted to them. That's why this book is in your hands. I hope it will encourage and invigorate you to hear from others who have children of their own or work with them every day, and who share your passion and commitment.

The wisdom collected in these pages is rooted in the realities of daily life. That's what gives me hope. Because no matter how dark the horizon seems, we must never forget that for us, as for children, the chance for a new beginning starts every morning.

*Johann Christoph Arnold
Rifton, New York*

Chapter 1

The World Needs Children

If we do not keep on speaking terms with children, we become merely machines for eating and earning money.

J O H N U P D I K E

The cry of a newborn baby catches at the heart. It says, “Love me. Help me. Protect me.” As adults, we consider ourselves the helpers and protectors. But the more I think about it, the more I’m convinced that we need children more than they need us.

Experts inform us that overpopulation is destroying the earth. I disagree: greed and selfishness are ruining the planet, not children. They are born givers, not takers. They are also born teachers, if we are wise enough to hear the truths they bring. In the midst of our complex adult lives, we must make time to take in the lessons that only children can teach.

Children demand honesty and simplicity. They expect words to line up with deeds. Though children can quickly get angry, they forgive just as fast, giving others the great gift of a second chance. They have a strong sense of justice and fair play. They look at everything with new eyes, and point out to us the incredible beauty of the world around us.

Imagine what would happen if we applied these values to our government, foreign policy, corporate business models, environmental decisions, and educational theory.

A society that doesn't welcome children is doomed. Yet the odds don't appear to be stacked in favor of children or their caregivers, whether parents or teachers. As the gap between rich and poor steadily widens, more and more families can hardly afford basics like housing and insurance. In many cities, desperate family conditions have necessitated the rise of twenty-four-hour childcare. Parents who work long hours have no choice but to yield their children to caregivers who must take over many traditional parenting tasks such as dressing the children, providing breakfast, caring for them through sickness, and tucking them in at night.

Meanwhile, new and untested political mandates that threaten children's originality and abilities are handed down to teachers and students. Voices of opposition rarely reach the ears of those who drive these decisions.

Beverly Braxton, a retired teacher and administrator, has worked on behalf of children for decades. She sums up our current dilemma:

I ask people in my community what concerns them most about children growing up in today's world. Most people list similar concerns: the amount of time spent on media and technology, children's exposure to sexual content and violence, lack of family time and eating on the run, the stress related to academic excellence, and children becoming less interested in spending time exploring the outdoors. Yet, when asked if they have any ideas regarding how these issues might be addressed, everyone I speak to seems to shrug their shoulders in exasperation.

Resignation may be an understandable response to this tangle of evils. But it is not the only response. If all of these concerns seem too great to tackle at once, at least each of us can start with the children we encounter every day.

My wife, Verena, and I both grew up in large families and were blessed with eight children of our own. God gave us forty-four grandchildren and, so far, one great-grandchild. We are thankful for each one of them.

During our marriage of almost fifty years, we have traveled together all over the globe. We have spent time in many developing countries as well as in war zones such as Rwanda, Iraq, Gaza, and Northern Ireland during “The Troubles.” On each of these journeys, we met hundreds of children. In their schools, we saw great determination despite very little funding. With eyes full of eagerness, these students showed us what they were learning, sang songs, and made us feel welcome. Some had walked miles for the privilege of an education. The hunger and hardship that many had endured was not yet written in their faces.

We saw that in some of the most impoverished nations, children are considered a national treasure. They represent the future of an entire civilization, not only the inheritors of a family name. Even some of the most destitute villages had a school in a central location, raised by community effort and whatever meager materials could be scraped together.

Every time we returned to America, we experienced a culture shock. Western society is fueled by money, but relatively little finds its way into childcare centers and schools. Are places of learning the center of community life? Are children considered a national treasure? In terms of future income earners with buying power, yes. But as unique individuals who offer hope for the renewal of civilization? Not so much. In fact, often the discussion centers on the pros and cons of having children at all: the financial risks, the unaffordable health costs, and the burden of education.

When I spoke with my neighbors Steve and Shannon, who have four children, about this tendency to view children in economic terms, Shannon answered decisively:

Unfortunately when the media and the surrounding world tells us, “A child costs this much money,” that puts a lot of stress on people. You have to say, “How much love can I give?” not, “How much money do I have?”

Most parents, when they see their baby for the first time, can't say, “Take him back,” or “I don't want her.” I would be hard-pressed to find a parent who doesn't look into the eyes of a child and feel an instant love, an overwhelming sense of joy.

What good is it to be happy if you don't have someone to share it with? Is it possible to have joy by yourself – selfish joy? It's meant to be given away; the more kids you have, the more joy there is to spread around and amplify it.

Despite what the “child-free” movement would have us believe, having children today is normal, good, and natural. Parenting should not be viewed as an insurmountable financial risk or a great emotional and psychological burden. It is not something for experts only. But it *does* need a heart of love for children and a willingness to sacrifice for them. Without the readiness for sacrifice, how can we experience what life is all about?

Of course, there are many people who are all too familiar with sacrifice, working in difficult circumstances or dangerous jobs with little reward. You might expect them to argue that in a hazardous, frightening world it is simply too hard to protect someone as helpless as a child. But a recent conversation I had with a young police officer challenges that assumption, too.

Among my various pastoral duties, I serve as chaplain for several state and local law enforcement

agencies. This gives me the chance to join them in serving those in need around my county and state. Mark, one of the officers I counsel, was involved in a serious altercation with a troubled young man who had outstanding warrants for his arrest. While attempting to bring him into custody, the situation became violent.

During post-incident counseling, Mark shared with me how profoundly this experience had affected him. He and his fiancée, Rita, reevaluated their priorities and decided to marry a year earlier than planned. In fact, I was honored to offer a prayer of blessing at their marriage, and later to bless the arrival of their son. Mark shared his thoughts about parenting:

We always thought about having kids. Our main fear was for their future. Will they live in a world of chaos, unable to enjoy growing up, always in fear for their lives? What will the survival rate be in the future? We realized that we need to raise kids with the right morals and attitude – “soldiers of tomorrow.” It’s up to us to raise our kids to be what we want the world to be. My contribution to tomorrow is to teach my son values like the difference between right and wrong. As scary as it is with the world going to hell, at least I can do something for one person.

We're not going to be here forever. We have to pass on what we can, because otherwise it stops here. I learned a lot from my grandfather. He would be upset if all the knowledge and life lessons that he shared ended with me. So I feel relieved that I get to pass it on to another generation. My son can take it on and hopefully pass it on to his kids.

Parenting is a roller-coaster ride. It's not always easy, but it's not always going to be tough either. The rewards compensate for the costs that you pay. The things that are given back to you far outweigh the "burden" of not being able to go out to the bar for a drink, or whatever you want to do. Nothing beats the feeling of their arms around you. Just to look a child in the eye and know that you're the reason they're here, to see them explore the world – you can't put that kind of feeling into words. Part of me that was locked away for many years is coming back out and I'm learning how to play like a child again.

I deal with harsh realities every day. To come home at night and just sit there and watch my son sleep – it makes the world okay.

Sceptics will say that it's one thing for a family with two parents and two jobs to talk about welcoming children. But I heard the same message from someone with none of these benefits. Lisa, a home-care nurse, raised her daughter alone.

My friends keep asking me how I did it. I'm still not sure how to answer. I could say it was tough. I could tell you that we ate whenever we had something to eat, and it was sometimes once a day. I could tell about sharing a mattress in front of the faulty heating element. But my daughter, who is nineteen now, will tell a different story: how we laughed till we knocked the heater over, how we cried onto each other's shoulders. Of course she would have liked a dad. Of course I kept praying for him, and he didn't come back. But where would I be without her? I don't think I would have made it alone. And I hate to think of the world without her in it.

Not every child is as fortunate as Lisa's daughter, raised by a brave and resourceful mother, or Mark's son, with two strong and determined parents in a secure home. But I've found that children remain children at heart, even those who have been deprived of a childhood. They may be victims of abuse, addictions, or broken families. Though emotionally scarred, they look at you with so much hope. You can see the questions in their eyes: "What can you do for me? Where do I fit into this world?" Over the years I have learned that every child has a story to tell. Each of their stories needs to be told to someone who has time to listen – a parent, a trusted teacher, a guidance counselor.

My wife and I are co-founders of a program called Breaking the Cycle, which seeks to bring the positive answer of nonviolent conflict resolution and forgiveness to schools, where the fear of school shootings, as well as gang violence and bullying, affects children, teachers, and parents. At some assemblies, we address several thousand students at once. Looking out over such a sea of children's faces is inspiring, but also sobering. Every assembly reminds me of the Hasidic saying, "If you save one child, you save the world." It is vital to tell children that they are important; that we are here for them and love them.

Hashim Garrett has become a keynote speaker in this program. At age fifteen, he was shot six times in a gang-related attack that left him partially paralyzed from the waist down. At first, he was filled with anger and a desire for revenge. But in time, he realized that forgiving the perpetrator would liberate him from the trap of hate, and give him the opportunity to help others.

A devout Muslim, Hashim says his faith has guided him toward forgiveness. It has also helped him and his wife make critical choices on the home front as they wrestle with the difficulties of raising a family responsibly:

I am blessed to have a beautiful wife, Mia, and two wonderful children. Being a husband with a disability is a test. There are things that I cannot do with my wife and children. I cannot play in the ocean with my children on vacation. I cannot teach them how to ride a bike. But my children know that their father loves them very much. I have learned that the quantity of our possessions is not what's truly important; it's the quality of time we spend together. When I am home, I play with them, hug them, bathe them, feed them, read with them, and most importantly, we pray together.

When we enrolled our two-year-old daughter in daycare, it was with an overwhelming sense of vulnerability; for the first time, we would leave our only child in the care of strangers. It seemed totally unavoidable. Harmony attended daycare nine hours a day while I worked and Mia went to school. After a time, we began to notice behavior and personality changes in Harmony. She would cry, throw tantrums, and not want to go to school in the morning. This was not the daughter we knew.

My wife seriously considered quitting her training to stay home with Harmony. At first, I was very concerned about Harmony's social development and our lack of teaching experience. I could just imagine our relatives and friends asking, "Why would you

