

## When Does a Child Become a Non-Initiate?

*by Jaq D. Hawkins*

Before I was initiated into the Craft, much was made about the necessity for secrecy about the details of Wiccan practices and the restrictions about discussing even things which had been printed in books. Naturally, I respected this requirement. As time has passed, I've noticed something which I think may have escaped the attention of many initiates, both new and older witches. This is the freedom with which we discuss our practices in the company of non-initiated children.

It is generally accepted among Gardnerians and Alexandrians that a child must reach the age of eighteen before participating in a first degree initiation. It is also accepted that certain topics are not discussed in the company of non-initiates. Yet I have been present when these same topics have been discussed in the same room with children, ranging from babies and toddlers who one wouldn't think would understand the conversation, to children as old as twelve who are well able to understand much of the discussion.

This is of course not an issue among Hereditary or Traditional Witches who raise their children naturally within the Craft, and I must say that my personal sentiments agree entirely with this practice. My point is that theoretically, Gardnerians and Alexandrians believe that magic should not be discussed beyond certain parameters among non-initiates, and our children are not eligible for initiation until they reach eighteen years of age. However, in actual practice, most Craft families speak much more freely about their magical practices in front of their children than they would ever think about doing in front of other non-initiates.

The question to ask ourselves is whether we should re-examine some of our accepted attitudes or whether we think it is acceptable to have different rules for 'ours' and 'theirs'. After all, would you discuss magic in front of a child's school friends as freely as your own child? In most cases, the answer is no.

There are some reasons for all of this of course. Most of it lies in security. If we discuss Paganism with the children of Christians, we run the risk of encountering prejudice in various degrees when the children inevitably repeat what they hear to their parents, not to mention the potential effects to our own child's social life when they become separated out as the child of a witch. There is also the concern about legal repercussions if we should initiate someone who comes from a non-Pagan family who is under the age of eighteen, should their parents object.

These differences in rules for our own children and those of non-Pagans may be quite practical and acceptable, but I think it is something we should be consciously aware of. Apart from anything else, Pagan parents often forget that there is always the possibility that any one of our children may choose a different path than ours when they are older, or even repeat things that should not be spoken about openly when they become attention-seeking teenagers.

Children are all individuals, and some are better than others at keeping things to themselves. Some are wiser than others at knowing which things to keep private. Parents often forget that their children may not be as well-disciplined when they are out of sight, such as when they are in school, as when they are in our company.

If we are to keep aspects of our beliefs as 'secrets' among our own kind, perhaps it would be wise to think very carefully when we have children about what it is appropriate to teach them, and what should be kept out of their hearing until they are properly initiated, if it should someday become appropriate to do so.

On the other hand, if we are to respect our own beliefs and bring up our children within our chosen paths, is it entirely appropriate to adhere blindly to an accepted practice of excluding anyone who wasn't born within a Pagan family from conversation about magic or Paganism, even if they ask? One has to decide for oneself where the line is drawn between caution and exclusion.

Parents have always spoken over the heads of their children without stopping to think about how much of the conversation the child may actually absorb. In the past couple of decades, a lot of attention has been given to this by psychologists who feel that children are able to absorb much more than their parents would have assumed. So, it is down to individual parents to realize that a comment about something like the use of the scourge said over the head of an innocent nine year old child will likely result in questions being asked by a very aware twelve year old non-initiate in time. The questions to ask ourselves are; Should this be explained to a twelve year old? If "no", then should it have ever been mentioned in the child's presence? Or should the age of initiation be different for 'our' children than for those from non-Pagan families?

Are there cases where a very mature teenager with parents who are not Pagan but have no objections might be deemed suitable for initiation? If we say "no" to this, by what criteria do we make exceptions for our own children? And if we do not make exceptions for our own children, where do we draw the line on conversations they might overhear? At what age does a seemingly innocent child, quietly packing away information that flies overhead between adults, become a non-initiate who knows more than we would ever tell a non-initiate who was not our child?

I've raised the questions, the answers are for each of us to answer for ourselves. Now where did I put the headache tablets....