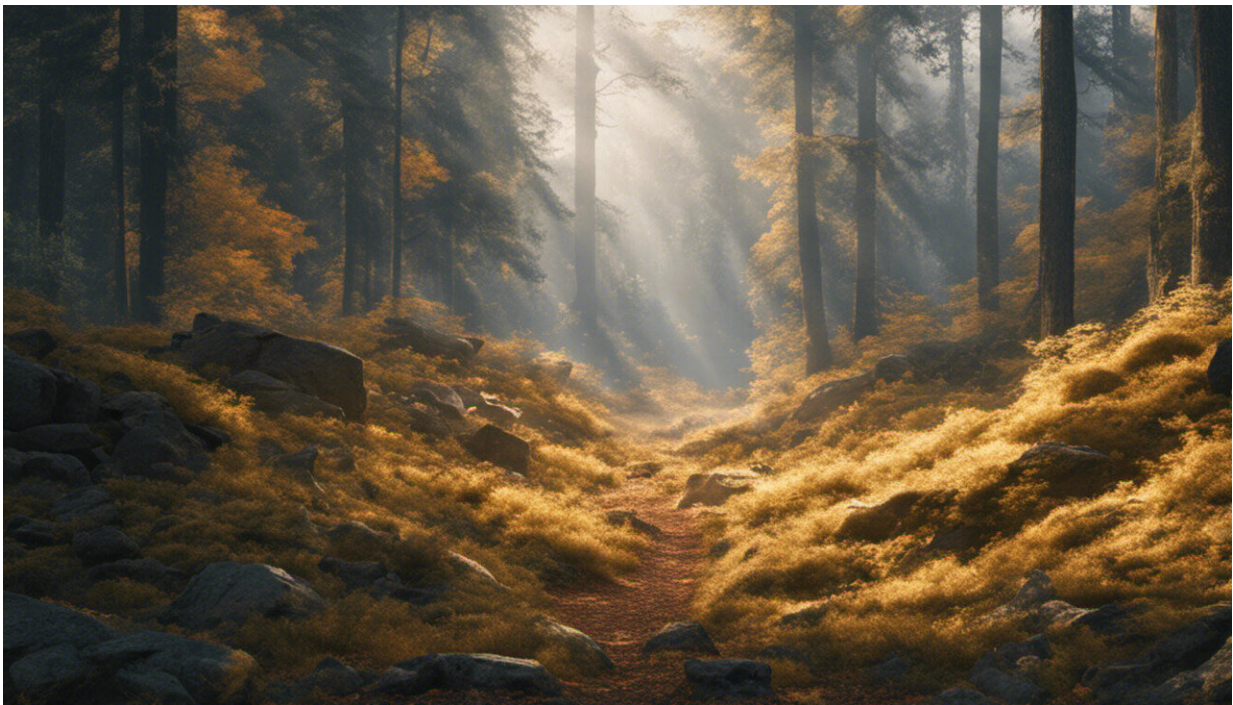


# Nostalgia for childhoods of the past overlooks children's experiences today

July 25 2022, by Lisa Farley, Debbie Sonu, Julie C. Garlen and Sandra Chang-Kredl

---



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Nostalgia made a comeback under COVID-19. In the context of enforced lockdowns, there was an increase in [nostalgic activities such as watching classic films, baking and reminiscing](#) with family and friends.

Nostalgia can be defined as a feeling of [longing for a better time in the past that no longer exists and may never have.](#)

When it isn't excessive, nostalgia can be a productive feeling that provides a sense of [continuity, purpose and optimism in difficult times.](#)

As writer Danielle Campoamor explains, "[nostalgia serves as a kind of emotional pacifier, helping us to become accustomed to a new reality that is jarring, stressful and traumatic.](#)"

But nostalgia can create an overly simplistic picture [of the past that hinders attention to the present and limits the imagination of a different future.](#)

## **What's the use of nostalgia?**

Since nostalgia often brings to mind memories of cherished [social bonds](#) and togetherness, it may also help people cope with feelings of loneliness.

Cultural theorist Svetlana Boym adds that nostalgia disrupts "[the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition](#)" and offers a way of using the past to rethink the present and future.

For these reasons, [nostalgia may be especially important for people made vulnerable by displacement, bereavement and mental health challenges.](#)

Some people may even experience an increased [longing for the early days of COVID-19, when lockdowns felt like a break from the rush of everyday life.](#) However, nostalgia reflects an overly positive view of this time, and centers the experiences of those more privileged or protected in society.

In the unfolding context of COVID-19, yearning to return to life as "normal" can also produce [unrealistic expectations and feelings of impatience, frustration and fear](#).

Longing for pre-pandemic times may defend against [the many losses of COVID-19](#) and the uneven effects of illness, online learning and access to resources for [children, young people](#) and [adults](#).

## **Childhood innocence and toys**

Historically, nostalgia can be linked to [childhood and a longing to return to a fantasied state of innocence](#).

Still today, in dominant popular western imagination, childhood is understood to be a [time before responsibility, before problems and violence and before knowledge about loss and death](#).

Play objects designed for children are, too, driven by nostalgia. As archaeologist Jane Eva Baxter suggests, [toys and playthings may say as much about adult longings for childhood](#) as they do about the children for whom they are intended.

## **Teachers remembering childhood**

Our research examines how childhood memories shape the ways prospective teachers and people seeking to work with children understand their roles as future educators.

As part of our work, we asked undergraduate students enrolled in teacher education and childhood studies programs [to select an object—a token, toy or tool—that they believed to represent childhood](#).

Participants were asked to discuss their objects in focus groups. A range of objects were shared, including stuffed toys, bikes and binoculars, games and puzzles, drawings and books.

At first glance, there may be nothing surprising about these choices. They might also be said to [represent normative ideas about child development and the tendency to view children as precursors to productive adulthoods.](#)

However, participants did not simply repeat the norms represented by their objects. They often used them to describe diverse and difficult childhood experiences such as the loss of significant others, questions about gender and sexuality, times of worry, bullying or failure and [how they exercised agency in the face of rigid educational aims.](#)

## **Pre-pandemic childhoods and tech-free toys**

While the respondents in our study described their own complicated experiences as children, they returned to nostalgic ideas about childhood when the topic of COVID-19 arose.

In these discussions, technology was a key theme. Specifically, participants emphasized the tech-free qualities of their own objects as more natural, more innocent and more joyful than the gadgets they understood to dominate children's experiences today.

On the one hand, there are important reasons to be concerned about [technologies designed for children, particularly in terms of privacy, security and consent.](#) Many youth themselves have expressed unease about the impacts of technology in their lives.

In the case of emergency [online education](#), [teacher education](#) scholar Sarah Barrett further points to the role of technology in [widening social](#)

[inequities and the loss of classroom communities.](#)

On the other hand, children's creative uses of technologies may not be so different from their uses of material objects and playthings. Even as they raise uncertainties, high-tech toys can be outlets for imagination, curiosity and emotional attachment.

## **What nostalgia forgets**

The problem is that nostalgia may obscure any such debate. Longing for pre-pandemic childhoods can reinforce [normative ideas about what counts as a "real" or "natural" childhood, even though these ideas have never included all children.](#)

Nostalgia may therefore overlook [the experiences of children themselves, experiences that have always been affected by historic shifts, social inequities and emotional conflicts,](#) much like the participants of our study recalled.

Nostalgia for pre-pandemic childhoods may also forget that [schools have never been safe spaces for everyone,](#) and particularly not for [racially minoritized, queer and trans children.](#)

Given such inequities, it is telling that a good number of minoritized children and [young people](#) have described the technological shift to online education during COVID-19 as a [reprieve from the racist, homophobic and transphobic violence of in-person schools situations.](#)

Because nostalgia creates an overly positive view of the past, it may also detract attention from [the need for structural changes in post-COVID recovery plans within education.](#)

## The good news

Nostalgia is a powerful emotion that can feel like sure evidence of an idealized time in the past to which we may aim to return.

However, as education theorist Janet Miller suggests, it is important "to take responsibility for any nostalgic tales we might spin in terms of simply longing for that often idealized time or place which no longer exists—or more likely, never fully did exist."

It might be strangely good news to recognize that nostalgia isn't proof of how things used to be. If we can hold in mind the impossibility of nostalgia's idealized promises, and if we can take responsibility for the nostalgic tales we do tell, then we might be able to imagine new and inclusive understandings of both childhood and education.

This article is republished from The Conversation under a Creative Commons license. Read the original article.

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Nostalgia for childhoods of the past overlooks children's experiences today (2022, July 25) retrieved 7 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-07-nostalgia-childhoods-overlooks-children-today.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--