INTRODUCTION

Massive social, economic, and cultural changes, whenever they occur, are bound to affect the lives of children. Those changes might well affect children directly as in the case of war, migration, or rapid urbanization, or indirectly as their parents cope with new economic realities.

Although globalization today seems quantitatively different in scope from changing relationships between communities and countries in the past, the phenomenon of waves of settlement, conquest, or trade opening up a culture to other cultures is as old as the history of human settlements.¹ The contemporary patterns of interaction between countries are called globalization, partly because some phenomena affect so many countries and partly as a convenient short hand. There are many definitions of globalization because of the huge variety of types of contacts between societies.

The root “global” suggests change promoted by forces outside a particular society. For some observers, the growing influence of outside forces is the key

¹ Massively changing relationships between societies in the past were probably experienced as being as dramatic for the participants as any changes occurring today. Conquest, being sold into slavery, or emigrating to a new continent, affected the individuals involved as much as contemporary changes.
to the phenomenon. National governments and non-governmental local elites have less power or ability to exercise control over a full range of activities within nation states—economic activity, the flow of information, group formation and action, values transmission, and even the use of force. Rosenau (1997) has proposed that globalization includes “any development that facilitates the expansion of authority, policies and interests beyond existing socially constructed territorial boundaries” (pp. 360–361).

The effects of globalization can, of course, be as varied as are its constituent characteristics. Rapid industrialization may steadily increase living standards for many or few. In some countries rising gross domestic product (GDP) has brought better health care and education for children. Mortality rates have increased in some countries. New demands for increased job skills have made it harder for youth to connect to job markets (Sen, 1999). Speedy international communications via the Internet have mushroomed and can expose children with access to a computer literally to the world. This exposure brings new information and opportunities. At the same time these new influences might well undermine traditional values and ways of life. The transparency of a world covered by CNN can spotlight harms inflicted locally on children that might earlier have escaped attention. It can change the course of major events for good or ill.

Despite many legitimately different definitions of globalization we can construct a working definition that allows us to focus on some major impacts of global change on children. Globalization is a process that opens nation states to many influences that originate beyond their borders. These changes are likely to decrease the primacy of national economic, political, and social institutions, thereby affecting the everyday context in which children grow up and interact with the rest of society. Some of the impacts of globalization on children are therefore normative. Efforts to assess the effects on groups of children must be culturally sensitive. Research about the effects on children (and children’s active and passive responses) is urgently needed if policies and programs that respond to children’s needs locally, nationally, and internationally, are to be designed and implemented in a manner most likely to foster children’s well being. Such policies are likely to be more effective if children participate in the debate about the nature of the challenges and opportunities facing them.

It should be apparent from the preceding paragraphs that global change can have positive or negative effects on children. But there is a concern that globalization has created significant inequalities. While the expansion of world trade has raised GDP in many countries and the absolute number of children living below the poverty line may have decreased, there is growing income inequality both within many countries and between northern and southern tier countries. The price of entry into some internationally competitive industries is beyond many countries. When young people are not able to enter competitive industries, there are enormous consequences for the work and wage opportunities. The development of global communications gives a competitive cultural