# Kids on Earth

## A unique learning tool for the 21st century

Howard Blumenthal
*The University of Pennsylvania*
*Founder, Kids on Earth*

*Kids on Earth is a free online collection of interviews with children and teenagers, 8 years old to 15 years old, living around the world and sharing details about their lives, hopes, dreams, and interests. It is a unique tool for learning about the world and the young people who live in it.*

Every story starts somewhere, and I guess this story begins in a small upstairs apartment above an old corner candy store in a struggling middle class neighborhood outside Newark, New Jersey. My uncle George, who would later teach college, gave me a book called *Faces Looking Up*. Already a stamp collector at 9 years old, I knew a few things about other countries. Uncle George's book told me more—stories about kids my age who lived in impossibly faraway places. One boy lived in the Philippines and planted trees to replaces the ones Americans destroyed during World War II. I read about children from the "U.A.R." (United Arab Republic—it had not yet regained the name Egypt), and also from France, Japan, Canada, India, Denmark, Nigeria, Greece, and England. I wanted to visit every one of them.

On the day after Labor Day, 1990, I spent the day studying an atlas. I wondered how much, or how little, students in the United States knew about, or cared about, geography. There had been surveys. One claimed a high percentage of children in the United States could not name the country across our southern border. That factoid, which turns out to be exceedingly difficult to fact-check, set the wheels in motion. After PBS, WGBH, WQED, and Brøderbund agreed to bring *Where in the World Is Carmen Sandiego?* to public television, they asked me to create and produce the program, and teach American children about geography and world cultures.

By connecting learning with fun, our team of 150 creative and technical professionals built and ran the very popular television series, which won multiple Emmy Awards and the Peabody Award (television's equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize). Suddenly, it was cool for kids to know the name and location of every country in Africa—and to run to each location on our *upside down* 35-foot map while 200 other kids screamed so loud, you couldn't hear yourself think.

Next stop: Uganda. It is the second week of August 2017 and we are driving red dirt roads to several local schools. I was going to interview 10-, 11-, 12-, 13- and 14-year-olds to find out what they knew about the world. Although I was in Africa, with a local producer, a videographer, and an audio engineer, the new project has no name and no clear purpose. When I produced *Carmen*, the 10-year-old boy living inside my head showed me the way. I was hoping he would show up again. (He didn't.) Instead, these students spoke for themselves.

The Ugandan students talked to me about the American presidential elections. I asked them whether Uganda had a king. (I embarrassed myself by knowing very little about Uganda, but they taught me.) One young man planned to become a member of Uganda's Parliament. Another would learn to become a doctor and a hospital administrator in England so he could take care of people and run a hospital free from corruption when he returned home. They knew all about Ariana Grande, Harry Potter, Nickelodeon, Disney, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory,* and American and British rappers. They told me about their favorite Ugandan musicians, too. After visiting four very different schools in and around Kampala, I wondered about my distorted (American) view of global citizenship in the 21st century. My youthful teachers were helping me to make sense of the world.

## Assumptions

I learned not to make assumptions, even about the simple things. Why, for example, did every boy and every girl wear their hair so short? Was this the local style? I didn't ask the question, but I happened to notice a girl lugging a five-gallon tank up a hill. Then I saw another girl doing it and then a large group of girls, each with her own tank. Why only girls? And what were they carrying in those tanks? And why so many at this particular time of day? The answer was simple: the school day was over, and they were ready to shower. Each girl carried up to five gallons of water—although maybe the tanks weren't completely full because five gallons is a lot to carry from the school's well to the shower facility at the top of the hill. Longer hair requires shampoo, and tends to clog drains. Short, close-cropped hair requires less carried water and doesn't mess with the plumbing, and so does become the style when a thousand students wear their hair that way and see each other every day. Also, as several of the girls later explained, time spent on hair care is time poorly spent; they were in school to learn and improve their lives, not for a fashion show.

Another assumption: children in lower income areas are unfamiliar with modern ways. After I talked to 12-year-old Danika in a "Gypsy" village in Bulgaria about her brand-new Samsung cell phone, I asked what she had eaten for breakfast that morning. Same as every day, she explained—she and her best friend stopped by a local bakery and bought croissants on the way to school. She smiled when I told her that I had eaten a croissant for breakfast that morning, too. Her neighbor, Tanya, age 8, pointed out that she was born in Bulgaria, lives in Bulgaria, and speaks Bulgarian, so she

is Bulgarian. For Danika and Tanya, the terms "gypsy" and "Roma" suggest an older generation, some people who make others upset, and a rich tradition involving long and colorful weddings. To say that they are Bulgarian, and modern in their outlook, is reasonable, but to deny their heritage is not. Like all humans, kids are complicated. Tanya plans to become a pediatrician, probably studying in England, not Bulgaria, because the medical schools are better (remember: she's 8 years old). She decided to do this because when receiving treatment for a medical condition when she was younger, she was impressed by the miracle of a sonogram showing her own insides and that experience shaped her vision of the future.

Meeting one 16-year-old who lives in Kosovo, who speaks about her life, her father's life during the war, and the fact that she cannot visit her own sister in Paris because Kosovo is not yet recognized as a nation, does not provide the story of growing up in Kosovo. Even visiting one classroom filled with two dozen kids from the same village in Kosovo provides a very limited view. What we need is more authentic, informal conversations with peers around the world as a routine means to learn about the world. Kids on Earth is a step in that direction.

On to South Charleston, West Virginia, where the opioid epidemic has hit hard, and I meet several middle school students who are making plans to leave the area when they turn 18. The mountains, the wildlife, the open air are spectacular—but this area has been a dumping ground for chemical companies for a long time. Economic opportunities are few. This is not a place to build a future. A teacher's strike in early 2018 sought improvements for not only salaries but also overall conditions for education in the state. Kaia, age 12, was one of the marches and was featured on CNN—a smart student getting her first taste of social and political causes and activism. Kaia (who is named for a barbecue place outside Pittsburgh) believes she could help run the U.S. government by working in the White House. I hope she does just that. Her understanding of immigration and the use of advanced technologies in public schools would be a national asset.

If Kaia seems extraordinary, that's because we're not paying attention. When I met Teo, in Piran, Slovenia, who showed up for his interview in a T-shirt depicting Einstein playing electric guitar, we spent more than a half hour discussing theoretical physics and quantum theory. Sure, he's 14, and smarter than most, but he learned about advanced sciences by watching every video YouTube offered on the subject. Books are secondary and his teachers don't know much about his areas of interest. Teo learns everything he can on his own.

## A Learning Machine for Everyone

During the 1960s, a product of the hippie culture in the San Francisco Bay area was *The Whole Earth Catalog*, which had an editorial focus on alternative education. There was talk of a "learning machine" that would someday make it possible for people to learn based upon their own curiosity—power to the people! Well, that's precisely what has happened. Billions of people have internet connection, mobile computing devices, and smart phones, which provide access to vast stores of information in text, image, and, most important, video form. Nearly all of it is available for free, or at a very low cost.

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Kids just want to have fun, but they are endlessly curious, too. While they may or may not decide to become interested in the curriculum of the morning's class session, they do study anything that interests them—at their own pace, with their own determination of breadth, depth, and appropriate time to learn. They pursue this knowledge alone or in cahoots with others—some younger, some peers, some older—who live just about anywhere in the world. What began as multi-player gaming is now an effortless way of thinking about all that the world offers. It simply does not matter whether the information comes from India, Sweden, or Argentina. And if the material is in an unfamiliar language, Google Translate can often solve that problem in nearly real time. Many YouTube videos are auto-translated, if not perfectly, certainly with adequate clarity for basic comprehension. And when something is learned, it can be shared, quickly, efficiently, and nearly privately; the favor is often returned by those with similar curiosities and interests. This is the new normal, or one aspect of the new global citizen.

## The Kids on Earth Interviews

Nearly all of the Kids on Earth interviews have been conducted in the quiet of a school library. We turn off the overhead lights, relying instead upon natural light from a nearby window. The quiet space allows each child, each teenager a safe place for thoughtful conversation. They speak from the heart to a someone (usually me) who honestly wants to know what they think, what they believe, who they are, and who and what they want to be someday. There is no agenda, no curriculum, no preconceived notion, no evaluation. We begin with a very simple opening question: "What is your name, and where in the world are we?" Immediately, the young interviewee understands that he or she has a meaningful role in the global conversation. He is there to explain why Uganda is called "the Pearl of Africa" and why that makes him happy. She is there to explain how she will write and illustrate children's books someday. He explains the path to medical school and what he will do when he becomes a surgeon. She wishes she could take a vacation in Hawaii because she craves quiet and solitude; much as she loves her foster brothers and sisters, her house is always filled with sound.

In short, young people teach one another, on their own terms, by telling stories that will be seen and heard by people who live nearby, or far away. They talk about climate change and social action, but they also talk about hunting and fried chicken (real fried chicken, made delicious in Kentucky, not really similar to the fast food with a similar name). They talk about YouTubers and video games, but not obsessively. Mostly, they talk about what interests them—and the variety is vast. Some items of interest are deeply local, but friends, music, social media, becoming a teacher, "sausage dogs" (a surprisingly high number of interviewees own pet dachshunds), and a passion for books and reading, and basketball, more often dominate the conversation. They like to think about faith, the connection between mind and brain, specific ethical questions ("If it's okay for humans to eat animals, is it okay for animals to eat humans?"), and the collision between beliefs and knowledge ("So you want to be a commercial airline pilot—and you attend a religious school—can

you see heaven up there?") Thinking can be fun. Conversations can be funny. And funny is good—it means ideas are crashing into one another in an unexpected way, manifesting as a human connection.

## School, and a Better Way to Learn

Most kids like school, but many are quick to point out inadequacies. Much of the class work fails to provoke or nurture curiosity because the old-fashioned idea of school is based upon everybody learning the same things. On the internet, everybody learns *different* things, and that seems like a much better way to learn. Teachers rarely know as much as YouTube, and you can't just swipe from one teacher to another. In short, they are asking for personal learning on a massive scale, but they recognize that school is the wrong tool to solve that problem. Some wonder whether school is sustainable. None wonder whether YouTube is sustainable (it just seems to grow and grow).

There are common themes among children and teenagers in a tiny Bulgarian village, an old coal mining town in eastern Kentucky, ethnically diverse students in a Philadelphia suburb, young musical theater hopefuls in Hong Kong, and their peers in a dozen other places. A profound theme is their ability to not only imagine a productive future, but also envision specifics steps, including the timeline, required to achieve the dreams. This is beyond hope. It's practical and tangible, powered by

access to vast collections of videos, podcasts, reports, websites, and organizations to provide abundant guidance to anybody who asks. Equally profound is their strong, unwavering connection to family, friends, and community, and, in certain locations, religious faith.

The over-arching theme is the powerful connection between curiosity and learning. They are learning just for fun, or for more practical reasons. Now, for a few minutes, or tonight, way past bedtime, or for the next month or year or more. At their own pace. On their own terms, with their friends or all alone. Just because they want to, or feel the need. They call it learning, but they tend to distinguish the activity from the work they do at school, probably because it is intrinsically driven—and because the only test will be life itself.

Happily, all of the Kids on Earth video are available for use by any curious child, teacher, parent, or organization, anywhere in the world. Some teachers use individual videos to prompt discussion about life in other countries, immigration, history, geography, science, creative expression, population growth, demographics, or friendship. Others promote the idea of asking questions as a way learn through conversation and active listening. Kids watch videos on their own because they are curious about peers with similar interests, or just because it's fun to learn about other people who live in different places around the world.

## Kids on Earth Makes Progress

In less than two years, Kids on Earth has built a library of nearly 500 short videos. We will travel to São Paulo, Brazil; Valparaíso, Chile; East Harlem in New York City; special needs schools in upstate New York and Baltimore; and, if all goes as planned, several locations in northern, western, southern, and eastern India; southern Israel; northern Iran; and various Native American schools in their sovereign nations. We anticipate having over 1,000 videos available at the start of the year 2020.

Along the way, there will be more opportunities to visit more places; interview more of earth's first connected, literate generation; write articles; and deliver speeches to adults who may be too busy to see the big story. We have begun a great era of human progress, more powerful and far-reaching than the Industrial Revolution and the Renaissance. It is a thrill and a privilege to spend time with the remarkable young people whose lives will define, and will be defined by, our 21st century.

**Kids on Earth**
**www.kidsonearth.org (web site)**
**www.vimeo.com/kidsonearth (video library)**

Howard Blumenthal (www.hblumenthal.com) is a Visiting Scholar at the University of Pennsylvania. He is the founder of Kids on Earth, a global citizenship project for the world's first generation of connected, literate (often, bilingual), healthy, wealthy children and teenagers. Howard writes and speaks about the human side of globalization, media/technology and social progress. His television work includes projects for History, MTV, Nickelodeon, HBO, PBS, and Disney. *On the Other Side of the Fence,* a documentary about friendship across cultures, won the Gold Award for Documentary and a UN Public Service Award at the NY International Film Festivals. The TV series about world cultures, *Where in the World Is Carmen Sandiego?*, which he created and produced, won a Peabody and multiple Emmy Awards. The author of 20 books about music, popular culture, creativity, and business, Howard wrote a popular weekly column for The New York Times Syndicate for 100 newspapers.