

Raising Children in a Socially Toxic Environment



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When I was in high school [in the United States] I used to write an opinion column for the school newspaper. One month in 1963 I wrote an article in which I criticised the fraternities at my school, an act which led many of my peers to become angry with me. As a result, late one night a car pulled up and dumped garbage on the lawn of our house. I was the victim of a drive-by littering.

I often think about that incident today when I visit schools and communities in the United States. I think about how that incident would play itself out if I were an adolescent today. What might well happen is that I would become the victim of a drive-by shooting. Things have changed.

Some of this difference between now and then simply reflects today's greater awareness of problems. When I was in high school there certainly were kids using drugs and alcohol. Girls did get pregnant. Child abuse did exist. But for the most part, we didn't know about it. Looking back with the benefit of hindsight, I realise that, as kids, we were shielded from knowing some of these things by adults who thought we would be better off not knowing. Some of the change is therefore a change in awareness all around.

But the change we are observing is more complex than a simple combination of greater awareness and better reporting. For instance, Fordham University's Institute for Social Policy produces an Index of Social Health for the United States, based upon 16 measures including infant mortality, teenage suicide, drop-out rates, drug abuse, homicide, food stamp use, unemployment, traffic deaths, and poverty among the elderly. The Index ranges between 0 and 100 (with 100 being the best). From 1970 to 1992 the Index showed a decline from 74 to 41 (Miringoff 1994). This



While in Australia recently, Professor James Garbarino, Director of the Family Life Development Center at Cornell University in the United States, visited the Australian Institute of Family Studies to present a seminar paper, which we are pleased to publish here.

This paper provides a perspective on social exchanges and institutional reshaping by calling for governments to take a stronger role in the 'detoxifying' of the social environment which is currently 'polluting' our children.

means that the overall wellbeing of our society decreased significantly.

Kids today *are* in trouble, more trouble than they were when I was growing up. Evidence of this is found in research on emotional and behavioural problems among American children.

The most compelling study of this change (Achenbach 1993) used a tool called The Child Behaviour Checklist – an assessment instrument widely used in research in the United States and in other countries. Parents (or other adults who know the child well) indicate the presence (or absence) and intensity of each of the 118 specific behaviours or feelings in words such as 'can't sit still, restless, or hyperactive', 'lying or cheating', 'feels worthless or inferior', 'cruelty, bullying or meanness to others', and 'nervous, high-strung, or tense'.

In 1976, 10 per cent of all children studied were judged to be doing so poorly that they could be candidates for therapy (even though only a third of these kids actually received such therapy). By 1989, 18 per cent of the children

were doing badly enough in their behaviour and development to warrant needing therapy (and about half were getting it).

Achenbach's data certainly conform to the observations of teachers and other professionals who work with children. On many occasions in the last few years, I have had occasion to ask those who have worked with children professionally for 30 years or more what they have observed. They overwhelmingly see what Achenbach has observed in his data: more and more children are in greater and greater trouble.

This is one indicator of how difficult it is to grow up these days. As greater numbers of our children display signs of experiencing serious problems we have to ask, 'Why?' My

answer to this question is that children are most vulnerable to the negative influence of an increasingly socially toxic environment, and that unless we do something about it now, the situation for children will only continue to deteriorate.



What I mean by the term 'socially toxic environment' is that the social world of children, the social context in which they grow up, has become poisonous to their development.

I offer this term as a parallel to the environmental movement's analysis regarding physical toxicity as a threat to human wellbeing and survival. The nature of physical toxicity is now well known and is a matter for public policy

and private concern. For example, we now know that the increasing rates of cancer throughout the 20th century result at least in part from the build-up of toxic substances in the physical environment – in the air, the water, the soil. And we know that air quality is a major problem in many places, so much so that in some cities just breathing 'normally' is a threat to your health.

What are the social equivalents to lead and smoke in the air, PCBs in the water, and pesticides in the food chain?

I think some social equivalents include violence, poverty and other economic pressures on parents and their children. They include disruption of family relationships and other trauma, despair, depression, paranoia, nastiness and alienation – all contaminants which demoralise families and communities. These are the forces in the land that contaminate the environment of children and youth. These are the elements of social toxicity.

Social life is more risky now than it was just 40 years ago; the level of social and cultural poison is higher. How is the environment for kids more socially toxic now than it was when I was a child? For one thing, no kid ever died from a drive-by fist fight, but the proliferation of guns among growing numbers of adolescent peer groups means that conflict and confrontation that once were settled with fists now can lead to shooting. The drive-by littering I experienced in 1963 was radically different from the threat faced today by a teen who angers his or her peers.

Kids today are bombarded with messages about the potentially lethal consequences of sex. There is no comparison between the threat of AIDS today and the threat of VD during my youth, and it is striking to hear teenagers routinely asking potential partners to take an AIDS test before initiating sexual intimacy.

More generally, children and youth today must contend with a constant stream of messages that undermine their sense of security. If it isn't the threat of kidnapping, it's the high probability of parental divorce. If it isn't weapons at school, it's contemplating a future with dim employment opportunities.

But beyond these dramatic issues there are more, many more, issues that are subtle yet equally serious. High on the list is the departure of adults from the lives of kids – and some studies report a 50 per cent decrease in the amount of time parents are spending with kids in constructive activities over the last 30 years. The lack of adult supervision and time spent doing constructive, cooperative activities are important toxic aspects of the social environment today, and compound the effects of other negative influences in the social environment for kids. Kids 'home alone' are more vulnerable to every cultural poison they encounter than are children backed up by adults.

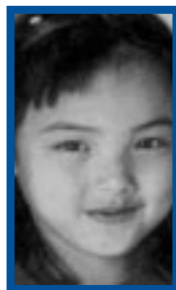
Although everyone is vulnerable to toxicity in the social environment, children (like the elderly) are the most vulnerable, just as they are among the most vulnerable to physical toxicity in the environment. When airborne pollution gets really bad, who suffers first and most? Who is most vulnerable? It is the children (and our elders) with asthma or other

respiratory conditions who show the effects soonest and with greatest intensity. When a house is contaminated with lead or asbestos, who is at greatest risk? Young children.

This analogy leads to one of the central elements of my message: as the social environment becomes more socially toxic, it is the children, particularly the most vulnerable among them, who show the effects first and worst. And who are the children who will show the effects of social toxicity first and most dramatically? They are the children who already have accumulated the most developmental risk factors.

I can acknowledge and celebrate progress in some aspects of American life (for example, the decline of the most blatant forms of racism and sexism) and yet still maintain that the concept of social toxicity explains a great deal of what troubles us about children and youth growing up in the 1990s. At stake is the essence of childhood as a protected time and place in the human life cycle.

Imagine living in a city plagued by cholera – in this city, the challenge to parents to keep kids healthy would be overwhelming. Yes, the most competent parents and those with the most resources would have more success delivering drinkable water to their children than would other parents. But even these 'successful' parents would sometimes fail. Would we blame the parents, or would we point the finger at the community's failed water purification system? In a socially toxic environment the same principle holds.



In order to understand fully what is happening to our children in a socially toxic environment we need a view of what childhood ought to be. What does it mean to be a child?

There are signs of an emerging global consensus about the meaning of childhood. I see this in the international discussion and validation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The UN Convention is an effort to express a universal definition of what it should mean to be a child, a universal definition upon what middle class societies have learned about children and child development. (I say what it *should* mean because words in documents don't necessarily stand for facts in reality.) I believe that this definition can supply a large part of the perspective on childhood that we need if we are to be better parents to our own children and better advocates for all children. It can suggest what we would like to achieve for our children and what kind of childhood we want them to enjoy.

The UN Convention on the rights of the child is a long and complicated document, but, at its heart, it proposes that to be a child is to be shielded from the direct demands of adult economic, political, and sexual forces. It proclaims that childhood is a protected niche in the social environment, a special time and place in the human life cycle, having a special claim on the community. Regardless of their economic value, children have a right to receive support from their families and communities. They have a right to be shielded from war and violence, to lead a life free from adult sexuality, and to have a positive identity both as individuals and as part of a group.

The UN Convention embodies one of the basic principles of healthy family life: it tells us that children need not pay their own way and earn their keep. They have a human right to be cared for.

Typically, families want to provide this support, and as a rule, they will do so if possible. But when families cannot provide for their children, the UN Convention tells us that society should pick up the tab. This deeply held principle gives moral force to ongoing efforts to eliminate exploitive labor and poverty from the lives of children. And specific articles in the UN Convention testify to this impetus to offer every child what middle class families offer to

their children. We should bear this in mind in our own society, where we see a high and growing rate of poverty among children.

At present, about one in five American children overall, and two in five among children aged six and under, live below the officially defined poverty line. By historical and global standards this may seem a relatively small number – in many countries the figure is more like 65 per cent. But when contrasted with the affluence of our society and the success of other modern societies in protecting children from poverty, the American data represent a telling statistical accusation, particularly if we factor in the finding that among modern societies the United States has the biggest gap between rich and poor. Whereas in Sweden the top 10 per cent of families make two times what the bottom 10 per cent earn, for the United States the difference is a factor of six times (and for Canada four times).

But the economic foundations of childhood go beyond just protection from poverty. The idea of childhood as a protected niche implies that children are not direct participants in the cash economy. If they work, it is guided, under the protection of their parents and, it is to be hoped, serves educational and developmental purposes. We can celebrate the strides that have been made here and elsewhere in protecting children from workforce participation. Dramatically reducing child labor was an important accomplishment in creating childhood in the United States, and around the world it remains a hot issue. But the economic rights of children go beyond being protected from adult work.

The child also has a right to be protected from the excesses of the consumer economy. In this view, the child's consumer purchases are to be kept separate and sheltered from commercial advertising that exploits the cognitive, emotional, and social limitations of children. The fact that children are often not so shielded is a violation of their rights. Turn on a television set during the children's hours before and after school, on weekends, and in the early evening, and you can see for yourself where our society stands on this matter. Children are commercial targets. Walk around any shopping mall, and you can see today's parents trying to cope with the fruits of this commercial exploitation of childhood.

In addition to the economic protections afforded children in the UN Convention, there are political rights as well. The most important of these is to stand in a privileged position with respect to government. Children cannot vote, are not legally accountable (except in special circumstances when they can be tried in adult courts for especially violent offences), and are not expected to be used by competing political forces in society. And yet government has obligations toward children. They are to receive special protection in case of war and community violence. They are entitled to special treatment if they are harmed as 'collateral damage' in an armed conflict.

Articles 38 and 39 of the UN Convention address these issues explicitly and directly: children are off-limits during times of war and entitled to special rehabilitation if they are affected adversely.

Beyond war, children are to be protected from violence in general. The UN Convention prohibits the execution of minors. It urges that parents and teachers adapt a non-violent approach to discipline. This is very much in keeping with the evolution of professional understanding of child development. More and more middle class adults around the world have come to see the validity of this knowledge and thus to acknowledge that 'children are not for hitting'. As a result of this growing awareness, schools ban corporal punishment, and parents seek alternatives to spanking and beating children. Child development research and human rights go hand in hand here.

Imagine telling children they must earn their dinner or their parents' interest on the basis of their accomplishments (what they do). No, children are to eat and have the

regard of their parents because of the fact of their relationship (who they are). More broadly, children need to relate to adults on a person-to-person basis, as individuals not categories. Some years ago, sociologist Jacob Getzels (1974) referred to this difference as being between 'particularistic' (who you are) versus a 'universalistic' (what you do) orientation. We ought to view childhood as a time to maximise the particularistic and minimise the universalistic.

Besides being economically privileged and politically protected, children are supposed to be off-limits to adult sexuality. In modern western societies this principle used to be reinforced by the distinctly different clothing worn by children. Little more than 50 years ago, boys wore short pants until adolescence as a symbol of their childhood status. For girls, accoutrements of fashion such as make-up and stockings were part of the adolescent rite of passage. Clothing once differentiated children from adolescents and adults, and symbolised their being off-limits sexually (which is not to say that this principle and children themselves were not violated).

Today, even young children wear clothing undifferentiated from that worn by teenagers and grown-ups. Visiting the 'children's section' of a department store recently reminded me of this change. The only difference between the styles for boys and girls on the one hand, and adults, on the other, is size. Children were certainly subjected to sexual abuse before the change in clothing took place. But I suggest that the change shows how we are failing to recognise childhood as a special time that is very different from adulthood. Dressing children like adults sends a message.

To be sure, children are physical, even sensual creatures. But they are not sexual unless corrupted by adults (or adolescents). Although some kids are more physical than others, children generally respond well to physical affection. It's more than that, really. Children *need* physical affection to thrive emotionally, so much so that kids who are deprived of this affection are put in jeopardy. Ironically, it is these children who may be at greater risk of being sexually abused by predatory adults.



The key to detoxifying the social environment and to strengthening children to resist it lies in a human rights perspective on child development. We need to focus positively on what children need to thrive, and to channel our efforts into realising that vision.

This is the fundamental purpose for government as laid out in the Declaration of Independence. Recall that after listing the fundamental, unalienable rights of Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness, the Declaration states that '*to secure these rights governments are instituted*'. That is the foundation for educating children in a socially toxic environment.

References

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