

ENDANGERED CHILDHOOD

BY JOAN ALMON

We look at children today and although we see many positive qualities and wonderful children, we all see changes which raise serious concerns about the plight of children today. In comparison to children of 25 years ago, preschoolers today tend to be thinner, paler and far more nervous. They are much more likely to have asthma or allergies, sleeping or eating disorders. They are more likely to be diagnosed as hyperactive or to show signs of nervousness or stress. They are much less likely to be able to play than children in the past. On the other hand they are extremely bright, many are very skilled at the computer at a young age, while others are reading fluently by age four or five. It is perplexing to understand what is happening and to know how best to help the children.

These and other questions were explored at a research consultancy held at Sunbridge College in February 1998. It was organized by Douglas Sloan and cosponsored by his institute, the Center for the Study of the Spiritual Foundations of Education at Columbia University, and Sunbridge College.

As one listened to the Waldorf educators and the university researchers, the feeling grew that children are being stripped bare and left naked in the world. There is so little left in the home, the school or the community that protects them. The modern home tends to be hectic and so filled with the buzz of media and technology that the extra skin normally woven by the family is lacking in warmth and substance. Many aspects of this problem were explored in the consultancy, but one was the absence of story telling and the oral tradition in general from the lives of children today. Cynthia Dillard of Ohio State University told of how she brings her college students back to story telling by having them tell the stories of their lives in her classroom.

Barry Sanders, author of *A is for Ox*,¹ which details the necessity of children having a rich oral experience before reading and writing, described changes in consciousness from the medieval times when few people could read to modern times when so much of life's knowledge is conveyed through the printed word. He went on to describe changes in the past 50 years as television has dominated communication and he speculated about the next decades when computer communication becomes a determining factor in communication. Language moves away from warmth and family-based oral traditions to precision, information and knowledge. One wonders how Einstein, who said that imaginations is more important than knowledge, would have viewed these developments.

I was reminded of these remarks about orality and story telling when I read Mary Pipher's excellent book, *The Shelter of Each Other*.² Mary Pipher is a family therapist who writes eloquently about the problems which face families today. She places much value on stories -especially family stories which help the family members know who they are, how they are connected to one another, and where they belong on this earth. She tells of a friend who traveled to Singapore and was speaking with a local woman. She told the woman that in the United States each family lives separately. It is not the same as in Singapore where several generations of family live together.

The woman was amazed and asked, "Where do the children get their stories?"

The intensity of the research consultancy increased on the second evening when Joseph Chilton Pearce gave a public lecture at Rockland Community College. Again and again he showed how in the contemporary world, the patterns of parenting, media viewing and educating young children have a negative impact on brain development and on the overall growth of the child.

He begins with birth and infancy and the vital importance of the relationship between child and mother at the beginning of life. If the beginning relationship is disturbed, so much else in life is disturbed. He stresses the importance of breast feeding from a developmental point of view and points out that being so close to the mother's heart and her face while breast feeding has been found to be optimal to stimulate the child's development. Pearce's talk was long and hard-hitting, full of very important ideas but too compact to absorb many details.

Fortunately he has put some of his current thinking into an introduction to Keith Buzzell's excellent upcoming book, *The Children of Cyclops - The Human Brain and the Influences of Television Viewing* (soon to be published by the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America).³ In his introduction, Pearce describes the importance of breast feeding for the child's development:

"Mammalian nurturing rests primarily on breast feeding, and in humans the breast-heart-face and voice area is the indispensable matrix for new life, the safe space in which the new mind can open to embrace its world, the primary source of not just physical nurturing of body, but the foundation of communication and play, the nurturing of the mind.

In the past century, however, medical interventions in the human birth process seriously disrupted the 'species survival instincts' MacLean⁴ dearly noted, the "hardwired" drives that compel a mother to provide this triad of nurturing, communication, and play, at all costs. While this nurturing drive is far more powerful in humans, it is still susceptible to disruption and dysfunction as all higher intelligences are. Most serious of the broad range of disruptions wrought by technological birth was the elimination of breast feeding in 97% of the populace by mid-twentieth century, with overwhelming, globally catastrophic results.

A critical part of breast-feeding is the corresponding 'in-arms period,' the infant carrying or 'baby-wearing' found throughout human history (until recently). This in-arms matrix assures, and facilitates a cascade of critical developmental needs in the first post-natal year. Baby-wearing automatically provides the emotional, verbal and pre-verbal communications around which a new world-self view is built in the infant. A mother's face at a distance of 6 to 12 inches as Fantz showed years ago, and her richly changing environment, provides the needed stimuli for building the visual world in the first year of life. As importantly, the in-arms matrix provides a prolonged and immediate proximity to stabilize the infant's own heart function, which the new medical branch of Neurocardiology (literally the brain-in-the-heart) finds is far more than just pumping blood. Heart-brain interaction is profoundly important to neural growth, DNA, a stable immune system, and a raft of related growth issues. (Following our disruptive birth practices, both visual and heart dysfunctions have expanded exponentially in our populace, as well as breast cancer in non-nursing mothers, as Israeli doctors have pointed out. Meanwhile, our critical and unmet need for the breast then makes us equally susceptible to the constant use of breasts in advertising.)⁵

Pearce goes on to describe how children might have recovered from the absence of breast feeding were it not coupled with another major change in their upbringing - their steady exposure to the media.

"So the disruptions at birth seriously undermine physical nurturing and the communication and play supposed to be established during that crucial in-arms period. Perhaps nature could have compensated for this violation of our ancient and foundational survival intelligences and the subsequent development hinging on them, but compensation itself began to break down when, within a decade of eliminating breast feeding, television viewing arrived, and literally possessed virtually 100% of the populace. The average American child spends some six thousand hours of TV viewing before age five, and Keith Buzzell has brilliantly explored the neurophysiological implications in this. He gives strong evidence that the act of viewing the device itself is the cause of trouble, not just the programming, a study that has not been done before. Above all, Buzzell asks the right questions for future research into the issue.

I would like to add that a critical developmental damage TV has brought about is in what it has taken the place of, substituted for, and/or prevented from taking place. First, TV disrupted or replaced verbal and non-verbal, emotional forms of communication between parent-child, already weakened by childbirth interventions and the lost intimacies of breast-feeding. Secondly, it replaced story-telling, 'grandmother tales', father's workplace accounts, and all the verbal chatter of the dinner table or fireside. It replaced bedtime tales and turned radio from story-teller to music box. Thirdly, TV replaced play, and play is the overarching intelligence of childhood and all learning (lifelong).

The drive for play is hardwired; play as a capacity is pure software. Play is the primary way all learning takes place in the first decade of life (secondarily, lifelong) and intimately involves story-telling and/or family-talk, and the corresponding development of internal imaging which such word-flow fosters. Of all the damages wrought by TV impairment of internal imagery may be the most serious. All higher forms of intelligence on which a society depends, such as empathy, compassion, love, as well as the later stages of intellectual development, science, philosophy, religion, are based on capacities for abstract thought and the metaphoric-symbolic structures of mind developed through internal image-making, which begins formation in the first year of life. The foundations of the inner image reside in the ancient mammalian, or 'emotional-cognitive' brain and its interactions with the highest cortical, or 'human' system, and should be well entrenched by the end of the first three years. Story telling and family talk is the cornerstone of this growth, and disappeared in a majority of our populace when television appeared."⁶

Given the research he describes and the strong feelings he holds about television, it is no wonder that Pearce ends his foreword by saying that every parent must "find the moral courage to throw their diabolical TV device out the window. Now! Today is the day and this is the hour!"⁷

My own contribution to the consultancy was in the form of a call to arms, as it were, to form an international alliance to protect the right to childhood. Already several meetings have been held in Europe among Waldorf educators and representatives of Anthroposophical organizations towards this aim. The hope there and here is to create a broad based organization linking many individuals and groups in the wider society who are concerned about childhood and family life with each other and with like minded souls in Anthroposophical circles. Interestingly, a similar call to action has been sounded by Cornel West and Sylvia Ann Hewlett in their recently published book, *The War Against Parents – What We Can Do For America's Beleaguered Moms and Dads*.⁸ They urge parents to unite to obtain better social programs such as longer paid family leave which would lead to healthier family life.

At the consultancy some of the researchers expressed interest in such an alliance for the protection of childhood, but they also expressed strong reservations because of the strength of the opposition. They immediately pointed out the huge sums being spent on children's television programs and advertisements aimed at children. They asked if we were aware of the power of these sectors of the economy and did we realize how hard they would hit back if seriously threatened by such an alliance? In Pearce's introduction to Buzzell's book he points to this growing influence of consumerism in the life of children.

"A Forbes magazine article elaborated on how, with the appropriate programming, a child's buying habits could be set for life by the age of six, allowing management to set up long-range marketing strategies and production plans, making it well worth a multi-billion dollar corporate investment in the needed psychological research. The programming, of course, is through television, and the result is straight 'pavlovist' conditioning. [Ralph] Nader quotes a major figure in the robustly lucrative MTV saying, 'We don't influence fourteen-year-olds, we own them.' Ownership of the very early child-mind logically becomes the issue."⁹

Regarding how to mount a successful campaign against such adversaries, we spoke of a flotilla of a thousand small boats rather than a single large warship. The latter is powerful but can be blown out of the

water by a strong enough enemy. A thousand boats aimed at different targets but unified by a common commitment to save childhood has tremendous mobility.

It was interesting to note that one of the more controversial points among the researchers was whether or not more research was needed to make the point that childhood is endangered and needs to be protected. Some argued that there was more than enough research already. The problem was not lack of research but lack of commitment to change education and family patterns. Others argued that although much research exists, there are missing pieces which need to be filled in. Keith Buzzell would agree with the latter.

In the opening of his book, he writes:

“This short book is an effort to begin to address a number of questions, in particular as they relate to the human brain. It is short in large part because the enquiries into these questions have been few in number and they barely scratch the surface of the biological processes that are effected by our headlong rush. into the quantum-relativity world. Hopefully there will be many more books and research reports written in the immediate future by a spectrum of well-trained scientists.”¹⁰

Buzzell’s book provides a strong foundation for understanding how television affects neurological development in children. It is compact and challenging to the casual reader, but a popular version is scheduled to appear soon by a major publisher. For one who is seriously interested in the question of media and child development, or the attacks on childhood in general, this book promises to be a very rich resource.

Notes:

¹ Sanders, Barry. *A is for Ox*, Vintage Books, New York: 1994.

² Pipher, Mary. *The Shelter of Each Other - Rebuilding our Families*. Ballantine Books, New York: 1996. p. 150.

³ To order Buzzell’s books and others, write to AWSNA, 3911 Bannister Rd., Fair Oaks, CA 95628

⁴ Dr. Paul MacLean, Senior Research Scientist, Clinical Brain Disorders Branch, National Institute of Mental Health. Author of *The Triune Brain in Evolution*, Plenum Press, New York: 1990.

⁵ Buzzell, Keith. *The Children of Cyclops*, AWSNA Publications, Fair Oaks: To be published in 1998. pp. 7-9

⁶ Ibid., pp. 9-11

⁷ Ibid., p. 21

⁸ Hewlett, Sylvia Ann and Cornel West. *The War Against Parents*. Houghton Muffin Company: 1998

⁹ See Buzzell., p. 12

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 24

Joan Almon is the chairperson of the Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America. She travels widely lecturing and working on behalf of the young child in today’s society.