

Natural Education – Part 1



Last February I was in LaGuardia airport, during the official school “winter break,” when the waiting area was full of families traveling on vacation. I hadn’t been in any airport for over a year, so I found myself in

shock, because everywhere I looked there was a person connected to an electronic device. Most people were on cell phones, some were on laptops, others were listening through headphones to their CD player, children were playing video games — and all of this in multiple combinations. A husband on his laptop while his wife talked on her cell phone. A teenager sending text messages on her cell phone while her younger brother focused on his Gameboy. And right next to me was an entire family hooked in to private machines of one kind or another, every person plugged in, except for one: the youngest child, a little boy of about five years old. He was wandering, listless, looking for someone to talk to in person.

I continued to watch this one child who could not get anyone’s attention. His mother tried to interest him in an electronic game that he could play by himself, so that she could read a book. This worked for a little while. During that time, I saw his older sister, who was plugged into a loudly playing Walkman, approach her mother and hold out a soda. The mother looked down at her daughter, who began to indicate impatiently, with only silent gesticulations, for her mother to open the drink for her. Mindlessly, the mother did so, gave her daughter the open bottle, and then picked up her book again, the title of which was: *How to Bring Up Respectful Children in a Rude World*. I had to control the overpowering urge to recommend that the mother put the book down, take the headphones off her daughter’s ears, and ask her daughter to speak to her, rather than just gesture. I wanted to ask the mother to please take her young son up into her lap and hold him and talk with him. But she was intently looking for the answers to her problems in a book.

In my many years as a teacher, I have often experienced a child who will hold out a foot to me to tie her shoe, not even asking, but assuming. At first it really surprised me, but subsequently I would see that child’s parent in a rush to get somewhere, tying the child’s shoelaces without a second thought, even though she might be eight years old. So I can’t say that the child is being “rude” by holding up her shoe, feeling entitled to having it tied for her, because this isn’t actually problematic behavior for her. It’s absolutely normal in our sped up, technologically sophisticated society.

The unfortunate aspects of modern times and their effects on children have been written about extensively by many great philosophers and researchers of human psychology and child development. In the foreword to the book *Positive Discipline* by Jane Nelsen, H. Stephen Glenn writes about a shift that took place in America at the start of the Baby

Boom era. “The approximately 4.3 million children born in 1946 overpowered urban schools in 1951,” says Glenn. “They took the achievement tests in 1963, and reversed a three-hundred-year upward trend. In all areas of achievement, children had been improving until this time. The children who were born after World War II started a downward trend in achievement, and an upward trend in crime, teenage pregnancy, clinical depression, and suicide. Clearly, our understanding of and resources for raising and educating children were compromised by urbanization and technology.”

As Westernized children seem to be taking a turn for the worse, researchers who are advocates of “natural education” often look to indigenous cultures to see how they are faring. The author of the *Continuum Concept*, Jean Liedloff, compares indigenous children of South America with their American and European counterparts, and finds the South American tribal children to be healthier, happier, more confident, able, stronger, peaceful, and overall nicer to be with. She developed an entire parenting strategy based on her observations which can only be described as a kind of return to a natural way of being, even though she readily admits these methods may be hard to accomplish while living in modern urban environments and cultures. This new (based on original) philosophy of “attachment parenting” has become increasingly popular among those who can understand concepts such as keeping a child with its parents, carrying the baby in a sling, allowing it to breast-feed as it needs, having the child sleep in the parents’ bed, and so on — all ideas that were recently considered radical, compared to the experiences of hospital-born, bottle-fed, cribbed infants of the past 50 years.

Author Joseph Chilton Pearce has also spoken out in detail about the need for children to be given natural circumstances from birth through infancy and early childhood. In *Magical Child*, Pearce asks: “What is going so wrong in all technological countries today that infantile autism and brain damage are increasing at an epidemic rate, that childhood suicides are increasing yearly, that growing numbers of parents are beating infants and tiny children to death, that schooling is becoming increasingly unproductive, traumatic, even hazardous and improbable to maintain, and so on?”

Pearce presents extensive research comparing American and European children with indigenous children of Uganda, a study that was conducted originally by Marcelle Geber, under a grant from the United Nations Children’s Fund in the 1950s. The conclusions of this study nearly parallel Liedloff’s findings, but not only were their infants and young children healthier and happier, they were also more advanced in their physical and mental capabilities: able to sit up, walk and talk sooner than American and European children. Pearce attributes a great deal of these traits to their natural, home births, mothers carrying their babies in slings while they work, the way that children are a part of the adult world

from the start, and experience life as they had in the womb: close to the heartbeat of the busy mom.

In modern society, where hospital childbirth is a multi-billion dollar industry, doctors are trained to treat childbirth as a medical emergency, as Dr. Christiane Northrup explains in *Women’s Bodies, Women’s Wisdom*. Parents who decide to bring up their child in a more natural way, aligned to original methods, may have a tough road ahead, with little support from the mainstream society around them. They aren’t alone though; there are others who are seeking new (old) pathways, teachers and parents alike.

In a way, isn’t that what the woman was searching for in the airport — answers from a book to help her to deal with a world that she couldn’t control? When a parent picks up a copy of *Positive Discipline*, she or he is attempting to find means and ways to improve their family situation. In chapter one of this book, Nelsen gives a very convincing explanation as to why it is that children are no longer inclined to do as they are told, and why they talk back to their parents, which was not always so common. Her case is that Mom no longer does what Dad says, and Dad’s decisions are not final. Furthermore, Dad doesn’t submit to his boss without question, nor does any minority live in our modern society accepting submissive roles. Says Nelsen, “children are simply following the examples all around them. They also want to be treated with dignity and respect.” However, she points out, “in today’s society, children have fewer opportunities to learn responsibility and motivation... We often rob children of opportunities to feel belonging and significance in meaningful ways through responsible contributions and then complain and criticize them for not developing responsibility.” To solve this, Nelsen recommends that teachers and parents not be too strict or controlling, nor too permissive, but rather that they give children “opportunities to learn in an atmosphere of kindness, firmness, dignity, and respect.”

Here seem to be some very sane clues. As a teacher, I have seen that when children are given responsibility for cleaning, as an example, they feel more part of the adult world. Rather than saying to them, “Look you play over here while I clean,” we include them in our cleaning routine. It is natural to a young child to want to help, to want to be included in adult activities, to want to be considered a valuable member of the tribe. In fact, they do it with almost overwhelming enthusiasm, racing to collect garbage in the playground, delighted to show the teachers how much they have found. When children clean up after themselves, they are not only learning how to leave a place cleaner than they found it, they are learning how to leave a job cleanly, how to leave a relationship cleanly — training that will apply throughout their lives.

In the book *Spiritual Midwifery*, author Ina May Gaskin discusses her experience of the Amish way of life, in which “children help and have good attitudes about helping.” Gaskin describes entering an Amish home

and seeing all the children doing different chores — sweeping the floor, cleaning dishes, cooking — in addition to their helping in the fields. “With all this,” says Gaskin, “I have never heard an Amish child complain about chores. In fact, they usually look as if they are having a pretty good time.”

I have noticed a similar phenomenon in my own nieces and nephews, who were brought up in a traditional Native American home in the mountains of Colorado, with only solar and wind power, no hot water, and only the basic necessities. Although they have been exposed to learning through computers and television, have played video games and go to the movies, there is an aspect to their family life which promotes responsibility that overrides what they might be exposed to from what they refer to as “city life.” During a recent weeklong visit, I never once heard my five- and seven-year old nieces fight, whine, complain, or cry. Not once. They disagreed from time to time, but always found a reasonable way to work things out. They were constantly self-generative, creating their own games without any external stimulation from an adult or any form of electronic equipment. One day, as their mom left for work, she gave them specific instructions about their chores for the day: to sweep the floors, clean up dead flies from the windows, and water the horses. I watched quietly while the girls very happily moved the furniture and swept, then made up imaginary games with the chairs, now a bus, now a nursery, then without any prompting put the furniture back in place. Later, they collected flies and went to find spider webs to put them in because, they told me, they like to feed the spiders. I told them they were perhaps the most unique girls on the face of the earth.

I found a similar attitude with my 15- and 18-year-old nephews. They came to stay with me for a week, and insisted on doing the dishes after every meal, always swept up any mess they found, and constantly asked me how they could help. Having worked extensively with teenagers, in everything from “at risk” situations to over-privileged youth, I have never experienced this kind of care. I had to call up my sister-in-law and ask her how she could have possibly raised the most respectful boys I’d ever met. Her answer: “Screaming, yelling, begging, pleading, crying, and explaining, explaining and explaining over and over again.” My nephews concurred; it took them a long time to get the point, but they eventually saw that they had to help out; it wasn’t an option not to.

Pearce speaks strongly in favor of a natural education that allows children to explore the world as fully as possible, but with boundaries and restrictions. Boundaries, explains Pearce, are what give the child the necessary structure for safe exploration. “The best boundaries are those that establish firm ground rules for interaction with parents and family.” These limits cannot only be established by reasoning, says Pearce, but by setting an example for the child to imitate, which is then backed up by firm, no-nonsense correctives if these boundaries are crossed. A parent or a teacher might feel tired of explaining, frustrated that children seem to have to be told the same things over and over again — but they do, and they eventually get the point, if the adult does not back down from what they know is best.

Of course, boundaries are not the whole answer, only a part, toward helping a child establish identity and responsibility, to feel respected and included. While a child must understand limits and consequences, he or she must also feel completely loved and accepted as they are. There is this important reminder: it doesn’t feel good to the child either when he or she is acting badly. So within the motive of natural education comes the necessary understanding that how a child feels about him or herself has a tremendous impact on all aspects of later development.

There is of course more to be explored in the vast areas between the setting of limits and the expression of love, and this would be found inside an enhanced, conscious, intelligent approach to children’s education. These matters will have to wait for part two of this article (in the next issue of *Fizz*), which will uncover the realms of sensory learning, looking deeper at the effects of television and computers on early childhood development, and the integration of the arts within the standard curriculum of formal schooling. After all, what does it mean for a child to be able to naturally explore the world around them, and more than that, to switch on their natural genius? *

Barbara Sarbin is a freelance educator and artist-in residence whose “Earth School” programs are supported by the Westchester Arts Council and BOCES. For more information about Earth School and the Golden Education Template in America, please visit www.somethinggoodintheworld.org.

Tribeca Tavern

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sound of Ms. Pacman on demo mode swallowing ghosts. Waiting for a friend, I ordered a beer and turned my attention to the end of the bar, the jukebox catching my eye. It invited me over. I accepted, being pulled into its glow. The waitress walking passed me said, “You’re my hero.”

I flipped through the selections, scanning the familiar faces: Velvet Underground, Jo Jackson, U2, Bowie, AC/DC, Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath, CCR, Squeeze, Curtis Mayfield, Billy Joel, Prince, The Platters, The Smiths, Bobby Darin, Stray Cats, James Brown, Public Enemy, George Thorogood, Erasure, Depeche Mode, Jimi Hendrix, Stevie Ray Vaughn, Garbage, Jim Croce, The B52s, Bob Marley, Queen, Elton John, Talking Heads, Rolling Stones, Allman Brothers’ Band, Johnny Cash, Barry White, ABBA, The Ramones, Roy Orbison, Tears For Fears, Marvin Gaye, Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers, The Police, Elvis Costello, Elvis Presley, The Beatles.

The deal: two plays for a buck and seven for two bucks. I slid in my two dollars and carefully keyed in the right codes. I stopped at the Stones’ *Some Girls*, considered starting off with “Beast of Burden,” and opted instead for “Shattered.” My songs got rolling. Someone from behind the bar turned it up. My friend and the night arrived, with three more picks to go. *

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