

Helping Children Live Counter-Culturally

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In the story, The Three Questions, based on a story by Leo Tolstoy, a young man asks his animal friends three questions,

- When is the best time to do things?
- Who is the most important one?
- What is the right thing to do?

Not satisfied with the variety of answers he receives from his friends, he visits Leo, a wise turtle, who is busy digging a garden. The young man offers to help the turtle dig his garden and soon a series of events occur in which the young man rescues a panda and her baby during a storm. The turtle then discloses to the young man that he has found the answers to the three questions by the actions he has taken.

These are the turtle's wise words:

*The most important time is now,
The most important one is always the one you are with,
And the most important thing to do is to do good for the one who is standing at
your side...
That is why we are here.*

These words reflect the life and teachings of Jesus Christ and are truly counter-culture. Yet, we seem to be losing sight of this if we look at ourselves and the children we are raising.

We must first understand our current culture. Here are some characteristics:

We live in a society that values things over people – over relationships – friends and family

- a convention youth sponsor told me how after their plane landed in San Jose, the youth took out their cell phones and began engaging them rather than each other; **they stopped talking to each other**

We live in a society where our sense of self is measured externally – by grades, clothes, activities for kids, and possessions in general

We live in a society where the focus is on individualism, acquisition and competition as opposed to a prosocial paradigm where the group is at least as important as the individual

We live in a society of two working parents and a high-rate of divorce; where parents are less physically and emotionally accessible to their children

What has been the result?

We have higher numbers of at-risk children, and the socioeconomic group that has grown in this aspect is the affluent, although this has always been a problem of children in poverty; these children, preteens and teens have higher rates of depression, substance abuse, anxiety disorders, somatic complaints and general unhappiness – more than any group of children in this country (The Price of Privilege, by Madeline Levine, Ph.D.)

Peers are raising peers. Our children have greater peer group influence at a younger age when they typically were more influenced by their parents long before they have developed a core sense of who they are. Peer influence may promote a greater acceptance of deviant behaviors which “predicts increases in delinquency, substance abuse, violence, and psychopathology in adulthood.” (The Price of Privilege, by Madeline Levine, Ph.D.)

As early childhood professionals, we know the effects of children who spend long hours in childcare centers – they have higher levels of the stress hormone cortisol. Living at a high stress level does not bode well for our children.

Guilty parents then do the easiest thing they can do for their children – give them things, rather than their time and continue to engage them in group/peer activities: sports, clubs, etc. Time after time, we hear teens saying they wish they had been able to spend more time with their parents – more than having received things, more than belonging to clubs, etc.

Children have become less useful at home, and need much done for them. They have become less self-reliant and less able to problem-solve issues. They have not been allowed sufficient time to resolve the very tasks of early childhood:

- **The ability to delay gratification and to tolerate frustration** – how can this happen when emotional needs are continuously being met by things? How can this happen when children are forced to be part of big groups of peers at an early age and not responded to by a nurturing caregiver – their own mom or dad? It is in the context of a bond with a nurturing caregiver that a child begins to develop this – we all know that. My experience as an adoptive mom of 5 children with disrupted attachments bears this out so well. And this would be another story to tell, but TOO long.

The inability to delay gratification and to tolerate frustration is resulting in a society of arrested adolescents - adults who behave as adolescents because the basic issues and tensions of early childhood have not been resolved. These adults are less giving, more egocentric – see things from a toddler's point of view – need to have their needs met externally

And we all know about the influences of television and screens in general. Besides a tendency to learn violence and be exposed to other inappropriate content, we have a society of children whose neurological development has been rewired as a result of watching screen images steadily before age 2. Our children are reared in front of TVs, computer screens, Play Stations, etc. These children are more inattentive in school, more hyperactive, etc. We say that teaching isn't the same as it used to be. And we can see why. We are raising a society of frontal-lobe disabled children. Our children have more difficulty with paying attention, being motivated, learning by experience and consequences.

In addition, ophthalmologists have found more problems with farsightedness with our children. Children once went outside to play and see the mountains beyond, now they see a screen. Yes, this has affected vision and more young children need corrective lenses.

So, how do we counter this?

Here's where those of us who are lucky enough to be working with young children or who are parents of young children get our chance. ***We can help our children develop a sense of self that will serve them well as an internal guide to make good decisions and be positive contributing members of society who follow the life and teachings of Christ.***

We need to give the gift of time – the gift of time that will enable us to truly nurture our children. When we have time to nurture our children, a strong bond is formed. This strong bond, a basic attachment, enables our children to face the world and its challenges, to cope, to love and care about others. We truly need to think about how we are going to give this most important gift to our children. Can we always say that the reality is both parents must work? What can we do about this? Change our lifestyle?

And while I know that not all parents have this luxury, what can we do about our childcare environments that reflect what children really need? How can we lobby for better paid/better trained childcare workers who get benefits and want to stay in these demanding positions? Or shall we lobby for a parent to stay at home and get paid, get benefits, get respite?

Truly something must change no matter how ridiculous this may sound. Otherwise we LOSE the opportunity to influence our children, and NO, we will not be raising children who think outside the prevailing culture.

Here's a poem I found in the July-Aug. 07, the most recent issue of Timbre! magazine, author unknown:

*“I tried to teach my child with books;
he gave me only puzzled looks.
I tried to teach my child with words,
they passed him by often unheard.
Despairingly, I turned aside;
‘How shall I teach this child,’ I cried?
Into my hand he put the key,
‘Come,’ he said, ‘play with me.’”*

We need to reclaim the role of **play** in the classroom and at home. What do kids learn? They learn all of the essential skills they need to develop emotional intelligence. These skills include:

- Self-control
- Respect
- Kindness
- Tolerance
- Fairness

We are all aware that with **No Child Left Behind Act** many early childhood centers feel compelled to drill children in skills that are mostly inappropriate for their developmental levels. Yes, we know that the alphabetic principle is one of the greatest predictors of children learning to read, but, is the lack of its knowledge the only reason why children don't learn to read? Or is it because they don't have a basic sense of self and the confidence to learn?

Let's start at the very beginning: children need to be raised in loving, nurturing homes where they are given the opportunity to learn frustration tolerance and to delay gratification, where they see themselves as important contributors to a family, where they have this chance because they are actually being raised by adults who care rather than among peers within a group classroom management structure. HELP!

As a church, should we take a more active role in early childhood? Should we instead of planting churches plant day care centers with very well-trained staff with a ratio of perhaps 1 adult to 3 children who can function as a nurturing caregiver when a parent really does have to go to work? Wouldn't this have long-lasting benefits for a society? If we could raise children who were self-confident and loving? Who cared about the group and not just themselves?

Of course, if a parent could stay home, that would be even better, but then as a church, what resources could we offer the stay-at-home parent to enable them to stay sane and financially stable during the parenting years? Shouldn't we be starting here – from the ground up???

And back to thinking about PLAY. While we tend to think of Play as an early childhood phenomenon, we need to reclaim it for our older children as well. My daughter, now 16, has attended an Expeditionary Learning school since junior high and will graduate from the same in a couple of years. I observe her experience and compare it to other teens' school experiences and I am very favorable impressed. What her school has is the element of community building and experiential learning. The students are involved in a variety of outdoor experiences for days at a time that build community and leadership skills. They learn to problem-solve together and share a common language and set of values. This carries over into the classroom and their experiential learning. When you go to a high school dance at her school, it is a friendly atmosphere. While it is made up of students from every walk of life, there is a sense of community. There is a respect and acceptance of differences that I have not seen anywhere else.

When my daughter celebrated her 16th birthday at our home, she invited about 15 friends from her school. What did they do besides eat skewers of food? They played. They

played ultimate Frisbee and walked a slack line. They did so with the abandon of young children. This was a mixed gender group, but no evidence of catty girls or shyness around boys. Everyone knew each other through the experiences they had shared. I was honored to have this group in my home. This group had a counter-culture birthday party.

We need not question so much of what we know is true. We know that young children learn by modeling and direct-teaching. Preschool children see things in black and white, so it is important to tell them to share, wait their turn, to play nicely, etc. As they grow older, they will begin to internalize these values. Sometimes we have seen our older children stray away or rebel at a certain point in time. This does not mean we should not continue to stand for what we know is good and right and true – what is of love, what is of God.

We cannot influence our children unless we have a strong bond with them, and a strong bond with them is more predictive of a strong bond with a higher power – God. My own experience as an adoptive mother with children who have disrupted attachments can attest to this.

We need to allow children to fail without constantly rescuing so that they develop the ability to problem-solve and become self-reliant and confident at the same time that we set firm limits and allow them to deal with the consequences of their behaviors. Somehow we've begun to think that giving firm limits and consequences is equivalent to not loving children, especially when we are not emotionally or physically accessible to our children (due to work, divorce and other stressors). Our feelings of guilt are creating problems for our children as we do not allow them to develop coping skills.

And in view that many young adults are not leaving home when we traditionally believed they needed to, perhaps we need to ask ourselves why. Are we providing them with the coping tools they need to be independent adults?

I challenge us as a Mennonite Church to make big changes in how we raise our children, and I say this as probably the greatest impostor who realizes what has not worked.

We need to remember to teach our children and ourselves the answer to the 3 important questions if we truly want our children to live counter-culturally:

***The most important time is now,
The most important one is always the one you are with,
And the most important thing to do is to do good for the one who is standing at your
side...
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