

"Beautiful...It is Arnold's reverence for children that I love." — Jonathan Kozol

ENDANGERED

JOHANN
CHRISTOPH
ARNOLD



*a young
Child in a
Hostile World*

ENDANGERED

Your Child in a Hostile World

Johann Christoph Arnold

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Whenever people ask me about having children or not having children, I never tell them what to do," Morrie said, looking at a photo of his oldest son. "I simply say, 'There is no experience like having children.' That's all. There is no substitute for it. You cannot do it with a friend. You cannot do it with a lover. If you want the experience of having complete responsibility for another human being, and to learn how to love and bond in the deepest way, then you should have children." "So would you do it again?" I asked. "Would I do it again?" he said to me, looking surprised. "Mitch, I would not have missed that experience for anything..."

M I T C H A L B O M

F R O M T U E S D A Y S W I T H M O R R I E

To my grandparents, Eberhard and Emmy Arnold, whose life-long love of children and young people inspired this book.

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Foreword

Hope is the thing left to us in a bad time.

IRISH PROVERB

THERE ARE MORE THAN enough books on parenting. That was one of the few things I was certain of when I set out to write this book. A father of eight and grandfather of twenty-two, I have had ample opportunities to experience parenting in action, and I sense that what today's parents lack most is not expertise or ideas, but daring. They simply lack the courage to put their children first.

As we enter a new millennium, we stand at a crossroads. On the one hand, prosperity and progress have benefited many; on the other, millions are trapped in situations of homelessness and unemployment, starvation and disease. The split is not only an economic one. Evils such as racism, violence, and neglect affect people on both sides of the divide.

In general, the forces that transformed society so rapidly over the last generation continue to change it at such a rate that it is anyone's guess what the world will look like in even a decade or two. But one would have to be extremely naive to predict that it will be a safer or happier place for children.

A book on parenting can't change the world. But parents and teachers can – by saving each child entrusted to them. And that's why I have decided, in this book, to offer you the encouragement of others who have "been

there.” Whether single, married, or divorced, whether comfortable or struggling, these people have children of their own or work with children, and the wisdom reflected in their stories is rooted in the realities of daily life. But it is also born of hope. Because no matter how dark the horizon seems, we must never forget that for us, as for children, a new millennium – and the chance for a new start – begins every morning.

R I F T O N , N E W Y O R K

M A Y 2 0 0 0

1. The Trap of Indifference

The greatest evil in the world is not anger or hatred, but indifference.

E L I E W I E S E L

WHEN SUSAN AND NICK decided to start a family, they were both working full-time jobs, but try as they might, their combined income simply “didn’t go the whole distance.” Savings were out of the question – after the bills were paid, there was never enough to put anything aside. On top of that, Nick’s job carried no medical insurance, and Susan’s no maternity leave. Still, they were determined to have a baby. So they did.

Not surprisingly the couple found little sympathy at work. Nick describes himself as “just a regular family man working hard,” but says he was treated “like a welfare cheat.” As for Susan, she was asked, “Couldn’t you have planned a little further ahead?” No one was openly cruel, but no one was happy for them either, and as time went on, this indifference came to hurt more deeply than anything that might have been said.

When the baby came, the couple delighted in their new role as parents, but barely. There wasn’t any time. For one thing, delivery room complications resulted in unexpected medical bills, and Susan had to get back to work right away. For another, it was almost impossible to find affordable day care on the couple’s newly constrained budget. After a frantic two-week search, Nick found a place that had an opening for newborns, but when he went to view

the place, he found a private residence owned by two elderly women, and some eighteen babies and toddlers, each dirtier and more disconsolate than the rest, strapped into car seats and watching television. Susan hated the place as much as Nick did, but there was little choice. Drop the job, or enroll baby Jenny. They did the latter.

Susan and Nick's dilemma is not an unusual one; in fact, it is repeated in countless places and variations. But its familiarity makes it no less shameful or frustrating. When a young couple who wishes to start a family faces such obstacles in one of the most prosperous countries in the world – and one of the most prosperous decades in memory – something is seriously wrong. And I'm not talking about a lack of planning.

On the bright side, of course, Jenny is better off than many children: born to a mother who wants her, she also has a father and a roof over her head. But what kind of world awaits her as she grows?

Each day in America, some 22 children are murdered or killed; each night an estimated 100,000 children go to sleep in parks, under bridges, or in homeless shelters. Some 2,800 children see their parents divorce each day, while for a 1.5 million, the only way to see their fathers is to visit them in prison.

Globally, the statistics are even more unimaginable: almost 40,000 children starve to death daily, while millions more work under forced labor conditions, including the brothels of Asia's tourist-supported sex market. In armed conflicts from Central America to Africa, an estimated quarter of a million children are currently employed as soldiers, some of them as young as five years of age.

For Jenny, as for countless other children, the world is hardly a welcoming place. From the playground to the bedroom, the issues that will sooner or later confront them read like items from a police blotter: child abandonment and child abuse, sexual assault and self-mutilation, exposure to drugs and easy access to guns. What's a parent to do?

It's a good question. Most of us have our hands full just looking out for our own children without worrying about someone else's day care problems –let alone the nameless masses of Mozambique, Sao Paulo, Calcutta, or the Bronx. With only so many hours in the day, we have our own lives to live, and when the chips are down, it's clear who's going to get our attention first. Of course, that's precisely the point of my anecdote about Susan and Nick. Unable to fathom more than the most immediate needs, even for the best reasons, we try to cope by blocking out the rest. We end up caught in the trap of indifference.

Ironically, the government welcomed the new millennium by proclaiming 2000 the Year of the Child. Incredulous, I wrote to an African-American journalist friend and asked him what he thought about it.

I see nothing harmful in proclaiming a year of the child. Perhaps there is even something laudatory about it. But in truth such a proclamation, no matter how nobly-intentioned, will have little real impact on the wretched lives lived by billions of babies who fight to draw breath on this planet.

Diplomats and politicians answer to power interests, and they are instruments of such forces. Last time I checked, kids don't have a PAC [political action committee], nor do they command capital. They are smooth little symbols that are kissed at election time. But when the real business of politics shifts into gear, they are virtually ignored.

If they survive, today's children will inherit a world that their fathers and grandfathers have ravaged, where the seas are acidic cesspools that the whales have fled, where rain forests are Indian memories never to return, and where human greed has plundered Mother Earth's innards and turned human genes into factories for profit. They will inherit a diminished planet where fresh water is increasingly rare, and where fresh air is a commodity...

We live in a world that fears and hates its young. How else can one explain the bequest of such a foul, polluted, and hollow inheritance? This generation, which came of age in the midst of a rising tide of human liberation movements, is now one of the most repressive in human history, as it consigns its young to more dungeons for longer periods than did their

parents' generation. It bleeds resources from already crumbling urban and rural schools, and aids and abets an irrelevant education whose core message is obedience.

Knowledge is but another commodity that is available to the few that can afford it. For millions of poor children in a nation that has amassed more wealth than the ancient Roman Empire, schools are dreary and dilapidated – grim abattoirs of the mind.

Our children hunger for love. They have two-hundred-dollar sneakers, video games, computers. Some even have their own cars – the bright glittering detritus of two working parents. They have all of the latest toys, but no love.

Unloved, how can children love? Unloved, how can they do else than hate...

On calendars, in newspapers, and on the lying lips of pimping politicians, The Year of the Child will be proclaimed loudly and proudly. But after the calendar turns, the newspapers are balled up and trashed, and the politicians cry crocodile tears as they “feel your pain,” our children will still be the castaways of the ship of capital. They are drowning in a sea of lovelessness, and after 2000 they will continue to drown.

Naturally we cannot only blame the government. We bear a guilt too, we whose privileged middle-class lifestyles have, at least in part, created the ghettos and barrios where every card is stacked against the children of the poor; who remain silent in the face of policies that threaten the future of whole nations; who look the other way when the children of other races and classes are repressed, imprisoned, starved, or enslaved. As long as we remain knowingly aloof, we cannot claim innocence.

Though a drop in the bucket in terms of their effectiveness, the trips, I have taken to Third World Countries were vital experiences for me, not least because they drove home a truth none of us can be reminded of often enough: it is always children who suffer most for the sins of the world. And that is as true in a “developed” country as in an impoverished or war-torn one.

Clearly we cannot all fly to the Third World or move to the inner city. Even if we could, there would be little purpose in doing so. But neither can it be right to close out everything that lies beyond our door – and settle for a life of self-centered oblivion.

Thoreau wrote in his journal, “Only that day dawns to which we are awake.” It is the same with many of life’s riddles. Once we get out of our easy chairs and open the blinds, their elusive answers will dawn on us. We will discern priorities that pull us beyond our comfort zones and into problems we can actually do something about. And we will realize how many children there are who can be reached and saved.

But that will mean putting away our speeches about the Year of the Child and finding the child who needs us today. It will mean laying aside our analyses about the endangered state of childhood and concerning ourselves with children themselves. It will mean starting to live as if children really mattered to us.

In 1991, while we spent billions to “save” the people of Kuwait from Iraq, two million of our own neglected children – three times Kuwait’s entire population – attempted suicide. Eight years later, in 1999, we tried to “rescue” the people of Kosovo from Serbia by bombing both to smithereens; meanwhile, during the very same period, thousands of American and Western European children died at the hands of their own violent parents and guardians.

If children mattered to us, we would recognize that they are the real victims we ought to be fighting for and mobilize on their behalf. We would turn our national budget upside down, with spending for children at the top, and guns and bombs at the bottom – if we left them there at all. New schools, not new prisons, would mushroom across the land, and politicians would win on the most creative platform for education, not the toughest approach to dealing with crime.

New children are born into our torn and twisted world every day, and each one brings (in the words of Indian poet Tagore) the “renewed message that

God has not lost faith in mankind.” It’s a mystical thought, but it carries a challenge as well. If the Creator has not lost faith in our humanity, who are we to do so? The world may be in a sorry state, but that should not keep us from welcoming children – the messengers of its salvation.

After all, if the cause of so much that is wrong is our own indifference, the path toward a solution cannot remain hidden for long. If the greatest evil in the world is not anger or hatred, but indifference, then the opposite also holds true: the greatest love is the attention we pay to each other, and especially to our children. We serve children best simply by noticing them – by paying attention to them...

2. Material Child

Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

J E S U S O F N A Z A R E T H

“Come in,” said the professor.

John opened the door. Goatstroke was reading an academic journal. He gestured toward the wooden chair that faced his desk. John sat down silently and looked around the room, waiting for his mentor to finish...

John inhaled, painfully. “You know Martha – my wife – is pregnant again.”

Goatstroke inclined his head slightly.

“So,” said the professor, “I imagine you’ll have it taken care of as soon as possible?”

“Martha wants to have the baby,” John finished in a weak voice...

“Yes, but –” Goatstroke had to stop, to collect himself. “Listen,” he said. “You have got to persuade her. If not for her career, then for yours... You have got to understand... this is your career, John. You must have your priorities in order... This is the kind of thing that separates the men from the boys...”

IN A WORLD WHERE the dollar has cast its spell over every corner of public and private life, the most insidious danger to children may be the economic lens through which we view them. To see children as assets or investments is calculating enough, but given the number of conversations like the one above (from

writer Martha Beck's recent memoir about having a baby at Harvard) it is clear that plenty of parents-to-be see them in less favorable terms: as burdens, risks, and liabilities. Clearly, we live in a culture that not only fails children at repeated turns of the road but is often openly contemptuous of them.

Ironically, the same materialism that breeds such hostility toward children also welcomes them with open arms when they have money to spend. Labor laws may have removed children from the workforce in the western world, but our generation has its own, equally effective form of enslavement: the discovery of the child as a consumer. As advertisers tap the bottomless pockets of adults whose money is fueling the most prosperous economy in the history of the world, they are discovering the most lucrative market of all: their little (and not so little) boys and girls. At once the easiest targets and the most persuasive wheedlers, today's children and teens have been successfully harnessed to pull their parents back to the mall week after week, month after month, and year after year.

Schools are no better. In increasing numbers of districts around the country, financial incentives such as new computers, sports equipment, and vending machines are being used to coax principals into signing deals with companies such as Channel One and Pepsi, who gain in return the exclusive right to market their wares to eager crowds at lunchtime and recess.

Despite the fact that millions around the globe grow up in acute poverty, most children in developed regions like western Europe and the United States have far more than they need; we are raising a generation of what can only be called spoiled brats. Many parents are quick to blame the materialistic culture at large – for example, the steady diet of commercials and advertisements that children are exposed to daily – but as far as I can tell, the problem has other roots as well.

Pampered children are the product of pampered parents – parents who insist on getting their own way, and whose lives are structured around the illusion that instant gratification brings happiness. Children are spoiled not

only by an overabundance of food, toys, clothing, and other material things. Many parents spoil them simply by giving in to their whims. While they are still in the playpen, this is bad enough, but as they grow older, the problem gets much worse. How many harried mothers spend all of their energy simply trying to keep up with their children's demands? And how many more give in to their children just to keep them quiet?

As a child of European immigrants who fled to South America during the Second World War, I grew up in what I now see was poverty. For the first several years of my life, we often ate only the bare minimum: cornmeal mush with molasses, or bread spread with lard and sprinkled with salt – something we regarded as a special treat. Yet, I would find it hard to imagine a happier childhood. Why? Because my parents gave us time and attention on a daily basis. No matter how hectic their schedule, for instance, they tried to eat breakfast with us before we went off to school each morning. They did this for over a decade, until my youngest sister (there were seven of us) graduated from high school.

The idea of a family meal at the beginning (or even end) of the day is seen as a luxury by most people today; even if they wish for it, conflicting schedules and long commutes make it impossible. But regardless of the reason, it is the children who lose out, and I am not convinced that it is always a matter of economic necessity. As often as not, the fractured hodge-podge of comings and goings that passes for family life in many homes seems to be the result of an insistence on maintaining a certain standard of material well-being.

Obviously, it is impossible to live without money and material goods, and every household must have its provider and its plans for the future. But ultimately it is the love we give our children, and not the material things, that will remain with them for life. And that is something we all too easily forget when the lure of a bigger paycheck, a better job, or a chance to make an extra buck comes our way. As Pat, a friend who spent most of her childhood following her father from one job opportunity to the next, recently wrote to me:

Like most men of his generation, my father chose to immerse himself in his career. He was an officer in the air force. I can remember very vividly the occasions that he really took time to be with us. Because they were so few, each one was very special. We loved our father very much; he was so attentive and gentle when he was at home. At the time we didn't feel ignored; it seemed quite normal that he had to work every weekend or be away for a month to a year at a time. But now that I'm an adult I wonder what he sacrificed all that time for. A career? His country? Certainly not for the money. It strikes me as selfishness masked as duty. Yet I am sure that if my marriage had continued and my husband and I would have had children, we would have done the very same thing. It's considered "normal" in middle and upper-middle-class families to put one's career first...

I see so many middle-class parents immerse themselves in their work. Working forty to sixty hours a week is an easier way to get immediate satisfaction than spending time with your kids. It's much easier to be part of a system with defined rules and objectives, and to succeed in a corporate environment, than to sort things out at home.

A common excuse is, "I'm working to put my child through college," or "I want to pay off my mortgage so I can leave something for my children." There's no doubt about it: it's much harder to give yourself and your time to your children than to work "for them," to amass money "for the future" – in effect, to buy your children's love. But they don't want an inheritance. They want you, and they want you now.

Pat aptly points out that children don't see material benefits in the same way adults do. To go back to my childhood in South America: I distinctly remember a North American visitor who fussed over me and my sisters and asked us if it was hard to live with so little. Looking up at the stranger, I wondered if he was crazy. Hard? What on earth did he mean? I thought I was living in paradise. It is easy for me now, as an adult, to understand his point of view, especially after having brought up my own children in the relative wealth of the United States. But at the same time I cannot forget that fifty years ago,

from a different angle, I saw it as the sign of a weak mind.

Speaking of differences in perspective, I have been amazed to find, on my travels around the world, that in some of the most impoverished places on earth there is also the greatest devotion to children. These places boast none of the material advantages that we take for granted in the developed sectors of the West. Infant mortality rates are high, food is meager, and medicines are always in short supply, if they are available at all. Toys are sticks or tin cans; clothes are made of rags or old T-shirts; babies lack bottles and cribs and strollers. Yet nowhere have I seen such radiant smiles or such warmhearted hugs. Nowhere have I seen greater affection between parents and teens, elderly people and small children, than in these places.

What is it about the plush homes and classrooms of our own country, where every material need is more than adequately attended to, that leaves our children in such a different state? Perhaps, according to child psychiatrist Robert Coles, it is the lack of something to live and work for besides a better car and a bigger house:

I think that what children desperately need is a moral purpose, and a lot of our children here aren't getting that. Instead they're getting parents who are very concerned about getting them into the right colleges, buying the best clothes for them, giving them an opportunity to live in neighborhoods where they'll lead fine and affluent lives and where they can be given the best things, to go on interesting vacations, and all sorts of other things...

I don't advocate poverty. Nor am I blind to the fact that there are plenty of poor children in the "developed world," from the orchards of California and Washington to the slums of Rome and London's East End. In those places and others too numerous to name, children are being denied the most basic necessities – let alone the additional trappings that most of us feel we deserve. Yet I firmly believe that ultimately the well-being of a child is not dependent on his or her access to material wealth. Anyone who clings to such a short-

sighted mentality has succumbed to a foolish and even dangerous myth.

Mother Teresa once observed, after a visit to North America, that she had never seen such an abundance of things. But, she went on, she had also never seen “such a poverty of the spirit, of loneliness, and of being unwanted...That is the worst disease in the world today, not tuberculosis or leprosy...It is the poverty born of a lack of love.”

What does it mean to give a child love? Many parents, especially those whose work keeps them away from their families for days or even weeks at a time, try to overcome feelings of guilt by bringing home gifts. Well-meaning as they are, they forget that what their children really want, and need, is time and attentiveness, a listening ear and an encouraging word. Unfortunately, many children rarely receive these things.

When Gina, a friend of one of my daughters, took a job as a preschool teacher at a private day school in Georgia, she was initially impressed. It was small, orderly, and well-furnished, with only a handful of children in each class, and all of them seemed to come from affluent homes. Before long, however, her enthusiasm turned to shock.

The parents of the children I care for have everything they want – fancy cars, expensive clothes, big houses, and plenty to spend – but so many of them are going through divorces, so many are cheating, doing drugs and alcohol, or fighting and abusing each other at home...And you can see it in the kids.

One little girl, Amanda, is three years old and seems to do nothing but throw temper tantrums –she has built up that much anger and frustration toward her parents. Often she says things like, “I hate Daddy” or “I’m not going to let my Mommy pick me up today.”

Amanda’s parents don’t live together; in fact, they’ve never been married. They have split custody, which means in her case that she spends a certain number of days per week with one parent, and then an equal number with the other, and so on. The days she gets switched from Daddy to Mommy and vice versa are always a mess. She wets her bed at naptime, bites, hits, and

scratches other kids, and generally disrupts the class at every opportunity.

Amanda's mother recently started going out with another guy, whom she has instructed Amanda to call "Dad," so now she has two Daddies. She's totally confused! On top of this, her mother expects her to be a "good girl" and look nice all the time. I've learned to make sure her hair isn't messy when her mother comes to get her at the end of the day.

There's another kid, Jared, who is extremely insecure, especially at nap-time. Every day I have to sit next to his mat and rub his back or stroke his hair and sing to him – and that's not to get him to sleep, but just to calm him enough so he'll stay lying down.

I've been a sitter for Jared at home on occasion, and I can tell you why he's so unhappy – I found out the first evening I walked into the house. While his mother and dad rushed around their condo, fixing themselves up for a night out, ten-month-old baby Drew was sitting alone in his high chair in the kitchen with an empty bottle, crying. Jared, who's barely three, was alone in the living room, huddled on the sofa and watching an R-rated film on TV. As I stood there in the doorway, Jared's mother breezed past me with instructions about bedtimes before dashing off to some party with her husband, who was waiting outside in the car...

Clearly, it is one thing to have children. To create a home – a place of love and security – is quite a different matter. Unfortunately, many adults lack a sense of what this means. They are always "too busy" to have time for their children. Some parents are so preoccupied with their jobs or (as in the case of the couple above) their leisure activities, that even when they do see their children at the end of a long day, they have no energy to really be there for them. They may sit in the same room – even on the same sofa – but their minds are still at work and their eyes on the evening news.

Deep down, every parent knows that bringing up a child entails more than providing for them. It's a rare father or mother who won't readily admit that they "really ought to spend more time" with their children. Yet it's just as rare to find parents who are willing not only to make such a recognition, but also to carry their good intentions into deeds.

Dale, a good friend who used to work for one of the largest law firms in the world, is one such parent. Though Dale once made more money per year than many people make in a lifetime, his paycheck and his prestige meant little to his family – perhaps because he was never at home to enjoy it with them. Excuses didn't go over well, either with his wife or his children, so rather than dig in his heels, Dale decided to try listening. Soon he had heard enough and made up his mind that there was only one thing to do: quit the firm.

About ten years ago, a colleague and I were driving home from a Cub Scout pinewood derby competition... While the van-full of boys played and laughed in the back seats, he cleared his throat and broached a difficult subject. "Dale, you are making a big mistake by leaving the law firm. Do you realize that?" He was referring to my decision to give six months notice of my resignation. "It's not like you can just do whatever you want," he continued. "You have five children. You have a duty to give them the best life possible and to send them to the best universities they can get into. You are shirking your duty."

I let a few moments pass. Finally, I replied. "It wasn't my idea. I never intended to cut back to less than twenty hours per week. My daughters pleaded that I quit."

It was true. For the last two years I had balanced twenty hours per week as a lawyer with an equal amount of time serving men dying of AIDS and cancer. This was a dramatic change from my life as a lawyer who lived on airplanes, opening accounts all over the country and working eighty to ninety hours a week. But then the Gulf War hit. My part-time legal work suddenly exploded, and soon I was back to my old schedule.

About six weeks into this reversion, my sixth grade daughter disappeared from school: she simply wasn't there one afternoon when we went to pick her up. We looked for her for over two hours and finally contacted the police. Later she was found by a friend walking alone on a roadside, crying. Her explanation was simple: "Dad, when you were gone all the time, it didn't matter. But now I've gotten used to you being here, and I can't take it. I want you to quit being a lawyer."

First I tried to get my ninth grade daughter to talk some sense into her younger sister, but it didn't work. She agreed with her completely. Then I put it all down on paper for them to contemplate – to show them just how stiff the economic consequences would be: pay for your own clothes, car, gas, insurance, yearbooks, prom, college, trips, etc. It didn't matter. My daughters wanted me...

My colleague was bringing the van to a stop at a red light. "Look," he said impatiently. "You're shirking your responsibility!" A few moments passed before I sealed the discussion. It seemed too important to finish quickly. I was focusing on a clump of trees that refused to fall in line, refused to be controlled, refused to be cut down and processed at the corporate mill.

"I disagree," I told him gently. "I disagree. And I bet, in your heart of hearts, that you do, too."

3. Great Expectations

I Have Always Been Regretting That I Was Not As Wise As The Day I Was Born.

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

IN A MAGAZINE PIECE I recently read about a Kenyan school that holds its classes in a shady grove outdoors, the headmaster (who had helped plant the trees as a child) recalled an African saying: “When you plant a tree, never plant only one. Plant three – one for shade, one for fruit, and one for beauty.” On a continent where heat and drought make every tree valuable, that’s wise advice. It’s an intriguing educational insight too, especially in a time like ours, when vast numbers of children are endangered by a one-sided approach that sees them solely in terms of their ability to be fruitful – that is, to “achieve” and “succeed.”

The pressure to excel is transforming childhood as never before. Naturally, parents have always wanted their children to “do well,” both academically and socially. No one wants their child to be the slowest in the class, the last to be picked for a game on the field. But what is it about the culture we live in that has made that natural worry into such an obsessive fear, and what is it doing to our children? What is achievement, anyway? And what is success, other than some vague, lofty ideal?

My mother used to say that education begins in the cradle, and not one of today’s gurus would disagree. But the differences in their approach are instruc-

tive. Whereas women of her generation sang their babies to sleep just as their mothers had done – because a baby loves the sound of its mother’s voice – today’s tend to cite studies on the positive effects of Mozart on the development of the infant brain. Fifty years ago, women nursed their babies and taught their toddlers finger games as a matter of course; today, most do neither, despite endless chatter about the importance of bonding and nurture.

As an author I became aware, after completing my first book, of something I had never noticed previously: the importance of white space. White space is the room between the lines of type, the margins, extra space at the beginning of a chapter, a page left blank at the beginning of the book. It allows the type to “breathe” and gives the eye a place to rest. White space is not something you’re conscious of when you read a book. It is what isn’t there. But if it were gone, you’d notice it right away. It is the key to a well-designed page.

Just as books require white space, so do children. That is, they need room to grow. Unfortunately, too many children aren’t getting that. In the same way that we tend to overwhelm them with material things, we tend to over-stimulate and over-steer. We deny them the time, space, and flexibility they need to develop at their own pace.

The ancient Chinese philosopher Lao-Tzu reminds us that “it is not the clay the potter throws that gives the jar its usefulness, but the space within.” Children need stimulation and guidance, but they also need time to themselves. Hours spent alone in daydreams or in quiet, unstructured activities instill a sense of security and independence and provide a necessary lull in the rhythm of the day. Children thrive on silence too. Without external distractions they will often become so consumed by what they are doing that they will be totally oblivious of everything around them. Unfortunately, silence is such a luxury that they are rarely allowed the opportunity for such undisturbed concentration. Whatever the setting – mall, elevator, restaurant, or car – the low murmur (or blare) of piped-in music or background noise is incessantly there.

As for the importance of giving children unstructured time, nineteenth-century writer Johann Christoph Blumhardt warns against the temptation to constantly intrude, and emphasizes the value of spontaneous activity: “That is their first school; they are teaching themselves, as it were. I often have the feeling that angels are around children...and that whoever is so clumsy as to disturb a child provokes his angel.” Certainly there is nothing wrong with giving a child chores and requiring him to carry them out on a daily basis. But the way many parents overbook their children, emotionally and timewise, robs them of the scope they need to develop on their own.

It is a beautiful thing to see a child thoroughly absorbed in his play; in fact, it is hard to think of a purer, more spiritual activity. Play brings joy, contentment, and detachment from the troubles of the day. And especially nowadays, in our hectic, time- and money-driven culture, the importance of those things for every child cannot be emphasized enough. Educator Friedrich Froebel, the father of the modern kindergarten, goes so far as to say that “a child who plays thoroughly and perseveringly, until physical fatigue forbids, will be a determined adult, capable of self-sacrifice both for his own welfare and that of others.” In an age when fears of playground injuries and the misguided idea that play interferes with “real” learning has led some forty percent of the school districts across the country to do away with recess, one can only hope that the wisdom of these words will not go entirely unheeded.

Allowing children the room to grow at their own pace does not mean ignoring them. Clearly, the bedrock of their security from day to day is the knowledge that we who care for them are always at hand, ready to help them, to talk with them, to give them what they need, and simply to “be there” for them. But how often are we swayed instead by our own ideas of what they want or need?

After the massacre at Columbine High School in April 1999, administrators rushed to provide psychologists and counselors to help traumatized students process their grief. But the teenagers didn’t want to see experts. Though

many privately sought professional help later, on their own terms, they first flocked to local churches and youth centers, where they dealt with their grief by talking to their peers.

The tendency to intervene, especially when a child is in trouble, is a natural one, but even then (perhaps especially then) it is vital to be sensitive to the child's needs. That's what Nicole, a mother of four, learned when their quiet English village was rocked by a savage murder:

In June 1996 a local woman and her daughter were beaten to death near the edge of our property, while walking home from the local elementary school. A second daughter was beaten too, though she survived. My daughters, who were six and eight, had often played with the girls, who were the same age. Days and nights of tears followed—in fact, my daughters still wept at intervals months after the incident.

As a mother, I was naturally worried about the traumatic effects of the crime, and the whereabouts of the murderer (who is still at large). I was tempted to question my children as to how they were doing and what they were thinking about the whole thing. But I tried to refrain. I knew that to help them, I needed to hear what they had to say—what their own spontaneous reactions were—and not impose or project my own motherly ideas on them first...

Amazingly, they never spoke once in fear of our neighbors' murderer, as every adult in the area was doing. Instead, they asked, "Why did that man hate them so much? They didn't do anything to him..."

In the weeks after the murder, well-meaning friends repeatedly urged us to "move on." "Don't let your children get hung up on this gruesome event," they warned us. "Help them get over it as quickly as possible." But I couldn't. At that point my children needed to grieve, and I could not bring myself to subject them to adult ideas about healing.

In *Ordinary Resurrections*, his new book about children in the South Bronx, Jonathan Kozol reflects on another angle of the same issue: the way adults tend to guide children through even the most casual conversations. He says it,

too, is a result of our tendency to hurry – and our reluctance to let them sort life out in their own way, at their own pace.

Children pause a lot when reaching for ideas. They get distracted. They meander – blissfully, it seems – through acres of magnificent irrelevance. We think we know the way they're heading in a conversation, and we get impatient, like a traveler who wants to “cut the travel time.” We want to get there quicker. It does speed up the pace of things, but it can also change the destination.

Of all the ways in which we push children to meet adult expectations, the trend toward high-pressure academics may be the most widespread, and the worst. I say “worst” because of the age at which children begin to be subjected to it, and the fact that for some of them school quickly becomes a place they dread, and a source of misery they cannot escape for months at a time.

As someone whose scholastic career included plenty of mediocre grades, I am familiar enough with the dread that accompanies bringing home a report card. Thankfully, my parents cared far more about whether I got along with my peers than whether I achieved an A or a B. Even when I failed a class, they refrained from scolding me, and eased my anxieties by assuring me that there was a lot more in my head than I or my teachers realized; it just hadn't come to the surface yet. According to Melinda, a veteran preschool teacher in California, such encouragement is only a dream for many children, especially in homes where academic failure is seen as unacceptable.

We have parents asking whether their two-and-a-half-year-olds are learning to read yet, and grumbling if they can't. The pressure some parents put on children is just incredible. I see children literally shaking and crying because they don't want to go in to testing. I've even seen parents dragging their child into the room...

I had a little boy one year, Miles, whose parents were pushing him to get him ready to enter a very expensive private school. I bumped into his father at the beginning of the next school year and he said, “You know, Miles has been so stressed out that we're going to get him into counseling.” It was true

that Miles was stressed out, but I was sure it was because of the rigorous testing they'd put him through during the summer...He had started crying the day of the testing, and he'd cried every day since then.

In some instances, the frenzy to compete begins even before a child is ready to start school, as this recent newspaper column about the trials of one New York City couple shows:

A couple of weeks ago, she and her husband got word that their five-year-old son had been skunked at all six private schools they applied to for next fall's kindergarten class. "Don't worry," the head of their nursery school had assured them. "You will certainly get into at least one of your top choices."

Famous last words. For whatever reasons, all six schools passed on their bright son with the winning smile and splendid test scores. That tattoo of rejection hurt, she admits. Nor did it help to learn that other families landed in the same boat.

Now comes the hard part...Do they move, reluctantly, out of town? Do they keep their son in nursery school for now and try the private-school rat race again next year? Do they sigh in resignation and send him to the local public school?

The dilemma facing this couple is a measure of how frantic life has become...in a world of strivers. "People are twisting themselves inside out," the woman said. "You slap yourself around and say, 'It's only kindergarten.' We're not talking about cancer. But it changes your life...Besides," she added, "the parental community can be vicious... Your child's admissions profile becomes a measure of your success. That's the yuckiest part of it. These are babies we're talking about."

In the end, she said, she and her husband will probably keep their son in his present nursery and then go through the private-school drill once more, next year. "That's what tears me up," she said. "He has to be paraded like a show horse again."

It's true the examples above represent the extreme end of the spectrum. Still, they cannot be dismissed, because they shed light on a disturbing trend that affects education at all levels. More and more, it seems that we have lost sight

of the “child” in childhood and turned it into a joyless training camp for the adult world. Jonathan Kozol writes:

From around the age of six or seven, and up to eleven or maybe twelve, the gentleness and honesty – the sweetness – of children is so apparent. Our society has missed an opportunity to seize that moment. It’s almost as though we view those qualities as useless, as though we don’t value children for their gentleness, but only as future economic units, as future workers, as future assets or deficits.

When you read political debates on how much we should spend on children, you’ll notice that the argument usually has nothing to do with whether children deserve a gentle and happy childhood, but whether investment in their education will pay off economically twenty years later. I always think, why not invest in them simply because they’re children and deserve to have some fun before they die? Why not invest in their gentle hearts as well as in their competitive skills?

The answer, of course, is that we have abandoned the idea of education as growth, and decided to see it only as a ticket to the job market. Guided by charts and graphs, and cheered on by experts, we have turned our backs on the value of uniqueness and creativity and fallen instead for the lie that the only way to measure a child’s progress is a standardized test. Not only are we neglecting to plant trees for shade and beauty – we are planting for only one variety of fruit. Or, as Malvina Reynolds puts it in her song “Little Boxes”:

And they all play on the golf course,
and drink their martinis dry,
And they all have pretty children,
and the children go to school,
And the children go to summer camp,
and then to the university,
Where they put them all in boxes,
and they come out all the same.

Granted, children ought to be stretched and intellectually stimulated. They should be taught to articulate their feelings, to write, to read, to develop and

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defend an idea; to think critically. But what is the purpose of the best academic education if it fails to prepare children for the “real” world beyond the confines of the classroom? What about those life-skills that can never be taught by putting a child on a bus and sending him to school?

As for the things that schools are supposed to teach, even they are not always passed on. Writer John Taylor Gatto points out that though American children sit through an average of 12,000 hours of compulsory academic instruction, there are plenty who leave the system as 17- and 18-year-olds who still can't read a book or calculate a batting average –let alone repair a faucet or change a flat.

It is not just schools that are pressuring children into growing up too fast. The practice of rushing children into adulthood is so widely accepted and so thoroughly ingrained that people often go blank when you voice your concern about the matter. Take, for example, the number of parents who tie up their children's after-school hours in extracurricular activities. On the surface, the explosion of opportunities for “growth” in things like music and sports might look like the perfect answer to the boredom faced by millions of latchkey children. But the reality is not always so pretty. Tom, an acquaintance with friends in suburban Baltimore, says:

It's one thing when a child picks up a hobby, a sport, or an instrument on her own steam, but quite another when the driving force is a parent with an overly competitive edge. In one family I know – I'll call them the Joneses – Sarah showed a genuine talent for the piano in the second grade, but by the time she was in the sixth, she wouldn't touch a keyboard for any amount of coaxing. She was tired of the attention, sick of lessons (her father was always reminding her what a privilege they were), and virtually traumatized by the strain of having been pushed through one competition after another. Yes, Sarah played Bach beautifully at seven. But at ten she was interested in other things.

In the case above, and countless others, the pattern is all too familiar: ambitious expectations are followed by the pressure to meet them, and what was once a perfectly happy part of a child's life becomes a burden that is impossible to bear.

Einstein once wrote that if you want brilliant children, read them fairy tales. "And if you want them to be more brilliant, read them more fairy tales." Obviously, such a quip is not the sort of answer an expert might give to the discouraging trends described above. But I still believe it is a thought worth reflecting on. It is the inventive sort of wisdom without which we will never pull ourselves out of the ruts we are currently stuck in.

As for the parental desire to have brilliant children in the first place, it is surely just another sign of our distorted vision – a reflection of the way we tend to view children as little adults, no matter how loudly we may protest such a "Victorian" idea. And the best antidote to that is to drop all of our adult expectations entirely, to get down on the same level as our children, to look them in the eye. Only then will we begin to hear what they are saying, to find out what they are thinking, and to see the goals we have set for them from their point of view. Only then will we be able to lay aside our ambitions and recognize, as poet Jane Tyson Clement puts it:

child, though I am meant to teach you much,
what is it, in the end,
except that together we are
meant to be children
of the same Father,
and I must unlearn
all the adult structure
and the cumbering years
and you must teach me
to look at the earth and the heaven
with your fresh wonder.

4. The Power of a Hug

Before I had children, I had six theories about bringing them up; now I have six children and no theories.

L O R D R O C H E S T E R

MENTION CHILD REARING to Eric, and you're sure to get him going about his childhood. The third of eight siblings, he grew up in a well-heeled suburban neighborhood that regarded his family as a model household. A doctor and devoted family man, Eric's father returned from his office on time every evening and rarely went out on weekends. His stay-at-home mother was equally devoted. Yet neither Eric nor any of his brothers and sisters liked being at home, especially when their father was around.

Our household functioned wonderfully, but only by appearances. In actual fact it was ruled by fear. It's not that my father ever beat us – though he did on rare occasions spank or slap us. But woe betide you if you set him off. You never knew what kind of punishment you'd receive...

Dad, a master disciplinarian, kept us in line by effectively crippling us with an ongoing sense of dread. One summer night he caught my older brother Jack sneaking out of his bedroom window to go out with his friends. Dad ran outside and waited till he was safely on the ground. Then he confronted him: "Well, son, it's clear you prefer running around outside. Maybe you ought to stay outside."

For the rest of that summer Jack had to eat his meals outside, next to the dogs. "Maybe he'll learn what it's like to act as a civilized human being,"

5. Deeds, Not Words

*Don't worry that your children
never listen to you. Worry that they
are always watching you.*

ROBERT FULGHUM

IN A RECENT NEWS article about high school students in Tokyo, the writer notes that though the stereotypical Japanese teen is obsessed with academic success, the reality is often quite different. "...In the last five years, freewheeling sex, heavy drinking and delinquency have exploded among the high-school set. In the place of the nose-to-the-grindstone ethic of long study hours and single-minded focus on exams and careers...the motto of the current crop of 15- to 18-year-olds seems to be that girls and boys just want to have fun."

While acknowledging the fact that some of the more outrageous claims he heard may be exaggerations – "We don't have any real serious boyfriends, just sex friends," a group of girls told him – the writer says that for many of the students he talked to, daily life really is an endless cycle of shopping, having sex, doing drugs, and visiting tanning salons. Tired of incessant lectures about the virtues of industriousness, alarming numbers are dropping out of high school altogether and opting instead for the "excitement" of urban nightlife.

"In an earlier generation, these children...might have chosen to run away," a youth worker told the reporter. "Nowadays, though, many parents avoid in-

6. The Easy Way Out

*There are two main human sins
from which all others derive:
impatience and indolence.*

F R A N Z K A F K A

ASK ANYONE TO NAME the chief dangers facing children today, and they're likely to tick off a predictable list—homelessness and malnutrition, poor education and inadequate healthcare. They're not wrong. But the longer I work with children, the more concerned I am about another quiet wave that carries just as a great a menace: the mindset of avoidance. Call it what you want—convenience, denial, or stubbornness—but if there's anything that characterizes education across the board, it's the persistent habit of turning our backs on the hardest questions, and falling for the answers that soothe us back to sleep.

Though the tendency to settle for the most painless solution to a problem is a normal human trait, it is rarely a healthy approach to child rearing. Of course, the very idea that parenting is a “problem” is a negative one. After all, raising the children we bring into the world ought to be a privilege and a joy. Yet fewer and fewer parents view their natural responsibilities in these positive terms. And the result is that fatherhood is no longer a natural duty, but one governments must chase men to fulfill; motherhood is at once attacked and seen as the supreme sacrifice; and loving (now downgraded to “bonding”) is regarded as an art or a learnable skill.

7. In Praise of Black Sheep

I am convinced that there is ten times more good than bad in a child, and about the bad, we can wait and see.

JANUSZ KORCZAK

IN A CULTURE TEEMING with hyper-competitive parents – and myriad opportunities to compete – it’s easy enough to find teen pop queens and academic whiz kids, precocious computer scientists and pint-sized tennis stars. These days, the models that smile from glossy magazines are often high school girls; and teenage businessmen make headlines buying and selling stocks on the Internet.

As with every trend, however, there’s another side that doesn’t make the news, and stories that won’t make you smile. It’s the worrying statistics on high school dropouts and teen suicides, “underachievers” and children behind bars. It’s the quiet pain of the obese, the awkward, the disabled, and the slow. It’s the epidemic of the hyperactive, the addicted, the medicated, and the depressed. And at the bottom of everyone’s list, it’s the scarred childhoods of those who lack warmth, hope, and encouragement, not because there’s anything wrong with them, but simply because they’ve been made to feel that they’re losers.

There’s a black sheep in every flock, or so the saying goes, and because it is so true, there are few of us who don’t know one, or didn’t know one as

8. Discovering Reverence

*When a child walks down the road,
a company of angels goes before him proclaiming,
“Make way for the image of the Holy One.”*

H A S I D I C S A Y I N G

IN A SOCIETY BESET by countless problems, the greatest dangers to children seem obvious enough: poverty, violence, neglect, disease, abuse, and countless other ills. Visible or invisible, suffered or only seen, these evils have always been there, and everyone agrees that they are terrible things. But what can any one of us do to overcome them? In a 1919 essay on the question of social renewal, Hermann Hesse suggests that the first step is to recognize its root cause: our lack of reverence for life.

All disrespect, all irreverence, all hard heartedness, all contempt is nothing else than killing. And it is possible to kill not only what is in the present, but also that which is in the future. With just a little witty skepticism we can kill a good deal of the future in a child or young person. Life is waiting everywhere, flowering everywhere, but we only see a small part of it and trample much of it with our feet...

In identifying irreverence as a power that kills life, Hesse touches on something that endangers children more than anything else in the world today. Irreverence for children pervades almost everything in our culture, including

9. Learning to Let Go

*You may house their bodies but not their souls...
which you cannot visit even in your dreams.*

K A H L I L G I B R A N

IT IS NO SMALL thing to bring up even one child – to clear the shallows of childhood, to navigate the rocky passages of adolescence, and to steer him safely down river into the harbor of adulthood. But the journey does not end there: after raising our children and setting them on their feet, we must let them go. In any case – and most of us wouldn't have it any other way – children do grow up to lead lives of their own. Our primary task, then, must be to raise them in such a way that when they go out into what Pestalozzi calls “the stream of the world,” they are strong enough to make their own decisions, and to hold to them. Viktor Frankl, a survivor of Auschwitz best known for his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, writes:

Research on heredity has shown how high is the degree of human freedom in the face of predisposition. As for environment, we know that it does not make a person, but that everything depends on what he makes of it, on his attitude toward it. But there is another element: decision. We ultimately decide for ourselves! And in the end, education must always be education toward the ability to decide.

While inspiring, Frankl's advice is easier to reflect on than to actually practice. Because if there's anything almost every one of us succumbs to again

Afterword

*There is never time to say our last word –
the last word of our love or remorse.*

J O S E P H C O N R A D

IT IS ONE THING to read (or write) about bringing up children, and quite another to actually do it. Words are easy to come by; so are anecdotes and suggestions. Yet without deeds, the soundest educational theory is useless, as is the most trustworthy parental instinct. When all is said and done, we must put away our books and go out to find the children who need our love.

In our country alone there are thousands, possibly millions, of children who have never felt the tenderness that every child deserves; who go to bed hungry and lonely and cold; who, though housed by the parents who conceived them, know little of the love of true parenthood. Add to that the numberless children for whom such love can never become a reality, even if desired, because the cruel cycle of poverty and crime has landed father or mother or both behind bars. Still, we cannot despair.

If only a fraction of us who have resources were willing to commit our energy and time to helping one endangered child, even our own child, many might be saved. And even if our kindness takes the shape of the smallest, most negligible act, it will, like every deed of love, never be wasted. Invisible as it might be on its own, it will still carry meaning; together with others it may have power to change the world.

Acknowledgments

DOZENS OF PEOPLE HELPED bring this book into print, but I would especially like to thank Ellen, Emmy Maria, Hannah, Charles, Kim, Chris, and many others.

I would also like to thank Dale Recinella for his contributions to the book, as well as numerous others whose names have been changed to protect their privacy.

Finally, I thank my wife, Verena. Without her encouragement, *Endangered* could not have been written. And without her knack for catching mistakes everyone else misses, it would be an inferior book.

Acknowledgments are also due the following writers and publishers:

Mitch Albom, for the excerpt from his book *Tuesdays with Morrie: An Old Man, A Young Man, and Life's Greatest Lesson*. Copyright © 1997 by Mitch Albom. Reprinted by permission of Doubleday / David Black Agency.

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Clyde Haberman, for the excerpt from his article "Rat Race Intrudes at Age Five," *The New York Times*, March 10, 2000. Copyright © 2000 by the New York Times Co. Reprinted by permission.

Barbara Kingsolver, for the excerpt from her article "Either life is precious,

