

Why Children Need Community

Feature – Peter Gray

(Includes *Compassion at Her Core*)

Pathways #41, page 12



Talking Points

- ❖ Peter Gray gives us a great introduction to “natural parenting,” defining it as a “trust in your child’s instincts and judgments.”
- ❖ Gray, a psychologist, reminds us that while a child’s attachment to the mother is intense, children are not designed by nature to only attach to mothers, or even just to mothers and fathers. Because the nuclear family is a relatively “new” phenomenon of social organization (in the larger evolutionary sense), Gray explains how important social bonding with a larger group of individuals is necessary for healthy human development.
- ❖ One of the goals of childhood is to learn, and parents can only offer a narrow slice of all that is in the world. “A too exclusive attachment of child and parent is not only unfair to the child but can also be burdensome to the mother (it usually is the mother, not often the father).”
- ❖ The Efe, hunter-gatherers from the Congo Basin in Africa, offer an interesting opportunity to understand the social relationship of infants and toddlers to social bands. Gray offers some very insightful observations of the ways the Efe engage, as a community, with the youngest members of their community.
- ❖ One of the great benefits of this extensive interaction is not just for the infants and toddlers. “Because childcare is public, every person, including young children, can witness all of the childcare in the band. Nobody becomes a parent without having had lots of experience holding and caring for others’ children and witnessing many others doing so. No adult is left alone to care for a child unassisted.”
- ❖ With this article, Peter Gray wants to address the question, “What can we do, in the context of our social world today, to provide the kind of caring community that children need for healthy development, and that parents also need?” Part of that answer is development trustful parenting.
- ❖ “Trustful parenting sends messages to children consistent with the needs of hunter-gatherer bands: *You are competent. You have eyes and a brain and can figure things out. You know your own abilities and limitations. Your needs are valued. Your opinions count. You are responsible for your own mistakes and can be trusted to learn from them.*”

- ❖ In human historical terms, the rise of agriculture created a shift from trusting parenting to a domineering one. Families grew to meet these labor requirements, and the labor itself became less skilled, and less creative or playful. “While hunter-gatherers needed to be independent and assertive in order to survive, most post-hunter-gatherers needed to be obedient in order to survive. And so, the goal of parenting for most people became that of producing obedient and subservient children.”
- ❖ Gray references research (see Resources) that “reveal a strong correlation between the degree to which a culture’s subsistence depends on agriculture, rather than hunting and gathering, and the degree to which its parenting practices were directed toward obedience rather than self-assertion. The rise of industry led, if anything, to even more suppression of children’s willfulness and independence.” To do this, many agricultural or industrial cultures perpetuated the use of force, but “such parenting was never fully successful. By nature, people are willful, creative and playful.”
- ❖ These forms of economy – unskilled agricultural labor, or unskilled industrial labor – are also becoming less of a focus of our work force. “Today, initiative, creativity, and self-assertion are generally valued in children.” But we have not replaced the directive-domineering parenting of the agricultural/industrial model with a revival of the hunter-gather’s trustful style of parenting. Instead, for a variety of reasons, we have come to see childhood as a highly fragile period of development” where we attempt to protect children from their own “foolishness.”
- ❖ Many parents would like to adopt a more trustful style, but find it hard to do so. The voices of fear are loud and incessant, and the fears are never completely unfounded. So, Gray asks us, “What would it take to revive the trusting parenting style?” The answer may be that a “greater number swimming that way may change the river’s direction.”



Resources

Full references for each article are available at <http://pathwaystofamilywellness.org/references.html>

Watch Peter Gray’s lecture “Trustful Parenting May Require an Alternative to Conventional Schooling.” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uEk4ca1a4XU>

For contrast, read the article, “Predatory Leadership” in this magazine:

http://www.rethinkingeverythingmagazine.com/uploads/6/4/0/8/6408350/re_life_issue_one_final.pdf

Kanyapak Preawtaku, “The Play Deficit.” Forest of Peace. January 23, 2014.

<http://forestofpeace.info/2014/01/23/the-play-deficit-%C2%B7-%C2%B7-if-children-lose-contact-with-nature-they-wont-fight-for-it/>

Gilda Morelli, Edward Tronick, Paul Ivey. “The Efe Forager Infant and Toddler’s Pattern of Social Relationships: Multiple and Simultaneous.” *Developmental Psychology*. 1992. Vol 29, no. 4. 568-577. http://www.psy.miami.edu/faculty/dmessenger/c_rsrcs/rdgs/emot/tronickmorelli.efep92.pdf

Barry, Child, & Baron (1959), “Relation of Child Training to Subsistence Economy,” *American Anthropologist*, 61, 51-63.

A modern application of creating a common bond of motherhood? Dadcamp. “This Woman Just Ended the Mommy Wars with One Facebook Status.” Babble.com. March 9, 2014.

<http://www.babble.com/kid/this-woman-just-ended-the-mommy-wars-with-one-facebook-status/>