

Book Review

The Epidemic: The Rot of American Culture, Absentee and Permissive Parenting, and the Resultant Plague of Joyless, Selfish Children by Robert Shaw M.D. with Stephanie Wood. Reganbooks 2003.

Reviewed by

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Robert Shaw, a child and family psychiatrist, feels that today's parents have been misled by parenting gurus into doubting their own instincts - instincts which he feels are their best guide. He is so alarmed by current parenting practices and the effects they will have on the coming generation that he describes his book as less of a parenting "How to" book and more of a call to action. Children raised without discipline and moral leadership become selfish or worse. An "endless parade of childrearing experts" confuse parents with contradictory and often counterproductive advice. This overabundance of advice can leave parents stressed and unsure about how to act. By not acting, the author cautions, parents also affect the child; as one paragraph heading states, "We determine our children's future." Parents are ultimately responsible for their children, parents instinctively know best and they have an often overlooked parenting expert always at hand. "You have a live-in parenting expert who shows you every day the effects of what you are doing: your child. Anything that is not going well with your child is a sign that your parenting practices are not working."

He makes his case by presenting cases from his practice and examples from his personal life. A recurrent theme among these cases and his arguments is the importance of the bond that can form between parent and child. He also feels the mother has a unique ability to bond and understand her children. Forming and maintaining that bond is central to parenting. Indeed, daily routines are not a form of discipline but are part of forming a strong attachment to a child as it comes to feel comfortable and secure within his or her routines and relationships.

"This incredible relationship between mother and child is absolutely unique, the single most sacred thing in our culture."

That bond between parent and child is a central theme as the author sequentially discusses some of the major controversies in parenting. He does lean in one direction or the other concerning each issue but he maintains a focus on the effect any decision has on the bond between parent and child. He quickly argues one side or the other on an issue and then moves on to strongly argue for the happiness of parent and child as more important than the concerns of the issue at hand. Concerning breast feeding vs using formula, he feels breast-feeding is the better choice for several reasons. However, he feels that maintaining a strong bond between mother and infant is the major concern. If a mother has difficulty or is uncomfortable breastfeeding, she should formula feed and bond with her infant that way. The worst outcome with either choice is any guilt and stress from the decision that interferes with bonding. The strength of the bond will be more important to the child than any gains from any particular feeding method. Maintaining that bond is a process the author calls the "dance of connection" wherein parent and child watch and communicate with each other so as to remain close.

On the issue of staying at home versus daycare, Shaw feels that at least one parent should spend as much time at home with their infant as possible but again stipulates that attachment to the child is the important thing whatever the choices concerning work. The author discusses "crying it out" and tantrums. To always give in to tantrums is to reward the child for the behavior and to deprive them of the lessons needed for children to develop the self-control necessary to function well in this society.

Parents who rob their children of limits hurt the development of something deep within their child: their capacity to care, to understand, and to show concern. From adversity, from limits, from "no's," and from expectations, children develop greater depths of empathy, compassion, and understanding. Without these experiences, they develop a one-dimensional view of the world as the provider of what they want, when they want it.

Dr. Shaw espouses giving children a respite from overly busy lives to allow them some "downtime" during which they can contemplate and learn from their many experiences. He also firmly opposes television. The act of watching television, whatever the programming, is not good for children and besides the messages in the media and the larger society are terrible; one chapter is entitled, "Raising Moral Children in a Valueless World." He feels television should be allowed in small amounts (with the parents watching appropriate shows with their children)

because it is such a common activity that to live completely without it would be to stand too far outside of the culture. Self-esteem, another often discussed parenting topic, derives from being a happy, productive child not from having the child praised for everything the child does.

Self-esteem as portrayed by the current generation of pop psychologists is nothing less than self-worship, narcissism. As the self-esteem movement marches on, we can begin to see that the problems of American children-disaffection, delinquency, poor academic achievement-have multiplied along with it.

The emphasis on a twisted notion of self-esteem is part of a lack of discipline and structure that requires nothing of children; they need not contribute and grow to view the people and the world around them as suppliers for their needs. Shaw feels this is a great disservice to children. Loving children means having expectations of them and giving them a moral education through modeling, thought and deed.

When I refer to moral and ethical training, I am speaking of the process by which a family passes on the values that they hold dear. The passing on of values takes place at every level of development that we discuss in this book. You do it when your baby throws his cup from the high chair and you make it clear that such behavior is not appropriate and take the cup away. You do it when you establish routines ("bedtime at eight o'clock") and limits ("no TV until your homework is done"). You do it when you praise people for behavior that reveals their valor, caring, or generosity. You do it when you spend hours reading and conversing with your child and your special dance of connection takes place. You do it when you give your child first a warning, then a disapproving look and a firm no as he reaches for a forbidden object. Then, if he persists, you remove him from the scene; you don't just keep saying no. Remember: your young child doesn't think in terms of abstract values but is concerned with whether you smile, frown, or stop him from doing something. Your child will internalize all these signals, even if he goes through periods of resistance.

Because the society that surrounds them is increasing amoral, parents these days have an increasingly difficult job. Because the larger society has no values, the importance of the parents' efforts in teaching values only increases.

If society is in a sense going mad--and I believe the school shooters are telling us something like that--the effort needed to raise your child is going to approach the heroic.

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