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Book Review

The Irreducible Needs of Children: What Every Child Must Have to Grow, Learn, and Flourish by T. Berry Brazelton and Stanley I. Greenspan. Perseus Publishing 2000.

Reviewed by

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For this book Dr. Brazelton, America's premier pediatrician, has teamed up with the renowned child psychiatrist, Dr. Stanley Greenspan, to delineate the basic needs of children. They find this to be necessary since they find little in the way of basic research on so essential a topic. They hope that once there are agreed-upon irreducible needs, then there will be less debate about what children need and more action towards meeting those needs for all children. The authors argue that children's needs are often unmet even in the wealthiest of nations.

Brazelton and Greenspan begin by defining seven irreducible needs and then devote a chapter to each. They take the unusual step of splitting each chapter into three parts: the first part presents an essay on the subject, the second presents a dialog between the two physicians as they present their own perspectives and experiences regarding the subject, and the third presents a summation of their recommendations.

The irreducible need they place before all others is "The Need for Ongoing Nurturing Relationships." They assert that human beings are emotional beings, especially when young. Therefore, it is the emotions through which human infants "learn" higher reasoning and problem solving.

Relationships enable a child to learn to think. In his interactions, the child goes from desiring Mom and grabbing her to saying, "Mom" and looking lovingly. He goes from "acting out" or behaving his desires or wishes to picturing them in his mind and labeling them with a word. This transformation heralds the beginning of using symbols for thinking.

Here is one of many exchanges in which the two authors agree on the importance of ongoing relationships and emotional interplay:

Brazelton: I think even intentionality begins back in the womb. Neonates are intentional. Years ago we observed the four stages of reciprocity in the first four months. The first stage is when the mother teaches the baby to be calm and achieve balance within, in order to pay attention to outside signals. Then she teaches the baby to prolong her attention and to wait for signals from a parent. The next is trading smiles and vocalizations and then the beginnings of reciprocity. These are matching the baby's smiles and vocalizations in timing, rhythm, and quality. The baby feels responded to and matched. The fourth is when the baby moves into what Margaret Mahler [a pediatrician and psychiatrist who wrote *The Psychological Birth of the Human Infant* (1975)] called "hatching," turning away from the mother and controlling the situation herself. This gives her the feeling she is in control--a sense of self-esteem. Within that, I think you're seeing the first stages of cognitive awareness. Also, by the time the baby knows the mother's and father's smells, voices, and faces, by six weeks, you should be able to tell by any part of the body and the heart rate whether the baby is interacting with the mother or the father. She knows what to expect from each familiar parent, and she knows it's different. Now isn't that based on an expectancy, an awareness that is both cognitive and emotional at the same time? To try to tear them apart as early as that is impossible. At six to eight weeks, this awareness of differences in each important interactor is the first reliable sign of cognitive development.

Greenspan: I think we can say something even stronger: Emotion is not just part of cognition; it precedes it as far as we can see. Early on, the baby has much more control over his emotional system. According to all current cognitive theories, the baby has to use his motor system to some degree to explore the world. But the child's emotional system probably matures much earlier, and the baby can do many more complicated things with emotions. In a smile, there is a motor component, to be sure, but it's the emotion driving the smile (the facial muscles). The ability to manipulate the world, using your gross motor movements as opposed to your facial motor movements, comes a little later. Even a baby with low muscle tone can show affect with a twinkle in the eyes or maybe in the movement of his tongue. We have to tune in to that. Emotions, motor ability, and cognitive ability are, of course, part of one big whole. But instead of the traditional way of looking at the development of intelligence through manipulating and exploring the world, we can say that the child first uses the expression of emotion as a probe to understand the world. It's through his first affective interchanges that his sense of causality is established.

Both authors are deeply concerned about the increased use of "institutional love" (for both the young and the old). "Institutional love" does not have the meaning or depth of that provided by parents. In day care, as it currently stands, the staff changes frequently and, therefore, does not provide "ongoing" relationships. An impoverished emotional life affects not just the baby's life as a child but the future development of its abilities as a social being and as an intellectual one. Even a child's moral development grows out of its emotional well being. "Not only thinking grows but so does a moral sense of right and wrong. The ability to understand another person's feelings and to care about how he or she feels can arise only from the experience of nurturing interaction." The author's recommendations at the end of the chapter focus, even on an hourly basis, on continuous interaction with others. One recommendation states:

No more than one-third of the infants' toddlers' and preschoolers' time should be spent in fully independent activities. The time that is spent in independent activities should be spent for 10 or 15 minutes here and there rather than in a longer period of independent activities.

In Chapter Two, "The Need for Physical Protection, Safety, and Regulation, the authors find that the United States falls far short. They maintain that a "chaotic" environment ill suits the child. Also, the overuse of TV and the high levels of toxins in our water and air threaten children. They note that, according to a Kaiser foundation study, American children spend over 5 hours a day in front of a TV or computer screen and that, on the average, human breast milk in the United States contains dioxin (Agent Orange) at a level three times higher than that set as the allowable limit in cow's milk in several European countries. They also discuss high levels of child abuse, drug abuse, alcoholism, and tobacco use.

Chapter Three, "Experiences Tailored to Individual Differences," decries standardized testing and education. Children are individuals and should be treated and educated as such. "The current vogue for back to basics and extended school days is unfortunately moving education away from the recognition of individual differences and toward a one-size-fits-all approach. Simply doing more of what has not been working will not prove helpful, nor can you teach a child simply by testing him." Testing and failing, they feel, are counterproductive. The authors promote a system of "mastery" wherein testing merely points out the ways children need to improve before they are given the individualized help needed to try again to master a subject. There is no failing. The authors encourage parents to integrate their interactions with the child so as to meet the child's individual way of relating to the world, to match their child's strengths and weaknesses with

quiet guidance and modeling – at the same time that they understand the difficulties of their advice.

The fourth chapter, "Developmentally Appropriate Experiences," argues that adults should provide the child with an emotional and intellectual environment that is appropriate to where the child is in his or her progression to adulthood. Children 1-3 years of age should see no more than 1/2 hour of TV a day, and for older children, time spent on homework should not interfere with the child's other needs (including family time). The authors recommend limits on the amount of homework children at different stages should undertake, like 1.5 hours per day for children in the 3rd and 4th grade.

"The Need for Limit Setting, Structure, and Expectations," chapter five, discourages physical punishment and encourages modeling. "Physical discipline, such as hitting or spanking a child is no longer an acceptable alternative to discipline. Discipline means teaching, not punishment." By demonstrating patience and concern, parents teach empathy. The authors are aware that working parents have a tough time with limits after being away all day. Several times in the book Dr. Brazelton recommends that working parents establish a daily routine of spending time with their children as soon as they get home, "I feel strongly about recommending to working parents that they set up a homecoming ritual in which everybody gets close all over again. Then they are ready to play a disciplinary role. But not until then."

The authors also feel that by developing and growing up in an environment of expectations, expectations of them and by them, children grow to understand how to live with others gracefully.

Greenspan: A lot of people think that when you respect individual differences and work at the developmental levels of children, you are catering so much to them that you spoil them. But actually, respect for developmental levels is a very important part of limit setting. Levels of development and differences must be taken into consideration. When families brainstorm together on what the consequences are going to be for not doing what you are supposed to do, then everyone becomes a participant in setting down the rules. An atmosphere where there are expectations, structure, and limits appropriate to a child's age and level is necessary for the basic security we've talked about earlier.

Brazelton: I'd say discipline is the second most important thing you can give a child. Love comes first, but very close on its heels comes discipline.

"Stable Communities and Cultural Continuity," the sixth chapter, calls for parents to take a larger part in school and community governance. Parents, teachers and other must work together and not compete.

Brazelton: We are really talking here about a basic need of parents as well as children. Just as we were talking earlier about mothers needing to be mothered, parents need to be embraced within layers of community. Instead, we often have child care or social service that weakens the parent-child attachment. I see it as a kind of gatekeeping.

Greenspan: Gatekeeping meaning?

Brazelton: Well, everybody who cares about a small child is in competition for that child, and so they will unconsciously try to keep other people out of the relationship. They will blame the other person when something goes wrong with the child. This pertains not just to parents and child care people, but also to custody, all kinds of issues.

The authors' final chapter, "Protecting the Future," ends with the chapter's general message that in an increasingly interdependent world, we can no longer focus just on our children or on American children; all children must be considered. "Throughout the world future generations of children and families will be much more interrelated. In order to protect the future for one child, we must protect it for all."

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