

Kids are Not the Problem



A case for investing at least the same attention and resources to inspire and mentor adults, parents and childcare providers, as we now give to the care and education of young children.

Mention parenting or early childhood education and people naturally think about children. Children don't need early childhood education. Parenting is about adults. We hear the words "parenting is about adults," nod our heads up and down but deep down we know it's really about kids. This prejudice is blinding.

Focusing exclusively on kids, ignoring the needs of adults, is like changing a tire when the car is out of gas. We do it all the time, mostly out of self defense. We might compare our obsession with kids to treating baby fish in a polluted stream. A better response would be to stop polluting the stream. Fish flourish in clear waters. Adults are the stream children swim in.

It's nice to have good information about developmental stages, but a little information goes a long way. What we need most are *The Basics*. Friend and mentor Joseph Chilton Pearce summed up early childhood education, which is more about adults than children, with three observations:

1. Understand the model imperative
2. Take your cues from the child, and
3. Play on the surface and allow optimum learning to take place beneath the level of our awareness

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We're confused about lots of things. We think cooking is about food, for example. Cooking is the act of mixing stuff together. The person doing the mixing is the cook. The process is the "ing." Cooking refers to the cook. What happens to the soufflé depends on how well the cook relates to spinach. What happens to kids depends on the skill and sensitivity of adults. Parenting refers mostly to adults.

Many adults are also confused about Joe's third principle, *The Intelligence of Play*. Research defines *Play* as nature's design for the optimum learning at any age. If we understood this, parents and the people who care for children would look more like playgrounds than teachers or worse still, prison guards.

Take the word *playground*. Ground is an environment. Play is the state that this environment is designed to induce. The richer, more diverse the playground, the more engaging the play, the greater the learning. Great parents and people who care for children are playgrounds.

Understanding the *Intelligence of Play* is critical. Play is not an activity. Balls are not play, pianos are not play. Play describes a very specific state of relationship. This state embodies and draws upon basic core capacities, the full spectrum of intelligence. The basics are: wonder, curiosity, inquiry, observation, deep listening, imagination, trust, belonging, flexibility, open mindedness, the willingness to try new things, energy, passionate attention, humor, honesty, care, empathy and affection. Play is the natural order of the body and mind in relationship.

To adulterate means to contaminate, disturb, pollute, infect or confuse (create a state of dis-ease), which is the impact many approaches to parenting and education have on children. There exists another possibility. The adult rediscovers this natural and optimum state of body and mind and meets the child in this coherent field, *coherent* meaning a pattern without conflict, and together they learn, each discovering precisely what is needed at their respective developmental age and stage. The state of play is nature's design for optimum learning and performance, lifelong. The greater the challenge the greater the need to access the full spectrum of intelligence found in the state of authentic play. Not being in the state of play is abnormal. In play meeting the moment is so compelling that it demands 100% of our attention, leaving no attention to reflect back, to judge or evaluate how well we are doing that moment.

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This self-centered reflection gives rise to the false impression that there is a "doer" separate from the "doing." The self-image we defend is only active in states of inattention. With complete attention there is no self-image, only the reciprocal interaction with the environment, what we call play. The self image, with all its cultural categories, false limitations and boundaries, disappears, freeing the full spectrum of energy and intelligence to meet the moment completely.

Athletes call this natural optimum state *The Zone*, researchers call it *Flow*. Every child knows that it's *Play*. Being the natural state for optimum learning, children are naturally in it. The key to optimum parenting and education is for the adult to also be in this state along with the child. This brings the adult-child relationship into coherence, a pattern free of conflict. Upon this foundation, united in this shared coherent field, the adult and child experience, explore this amazing, wonderful, challenging moment of living completely, with 100% of their energy and passion, and grow together in this reciprocal experience of shared meaning. This is what I mean by *Play*.

It takes a whole adult to mentor a whole child. The more aware, sensitive, creative, and playful the adult, the richer the learning experience is for children. In this light we begin to appreciate Pearce's first principle, the "model imperative." French speaking mother - French speaking child. No model - no development of that potential. That's the rule. A model is a living example of how to relate to the world. Every move we make, every thought we think, every challenge we face, every relationship we encounter, the way we greet the postman, pet or kick the dog, is part of what Pearce calls the model imperative. If we want healthy, sane, passionate children, we need to nurture these qualities in adults. That is the model imperative.

Spinning the parenting spotlight around so it shines on adults rather than kids, which the model imperative does, changes everything. Adults become the focus of attention. They become the clay that needs shaping. We want our kids to be happy, successful, secure, productive, engaged participants in the social web called life. In order to develop these qualities in children we have to experience and express them ourselves. We need to model all the great things we want for our children. That means you and I must be healthy, sane, intelligent, creative, happy, successful participants in the social web called life.

Kids are Not the Problem

Realizing that kids are not the problem is the first step. Developing *The Basics* is the second. What are *The Basics*? Curiosity, energy, passion, care, attention, the capacity to listen, asking questions, experiencing empathy, humor, flexibility, honesty, imagination and wonder, plus, for parents and childcare providers, a little information about developmental ages and stages. (Not too much information, however. We will get confused. Our intellect will prevent us from practicing item two, taking our cues from the child).

Develop *The Basics* and we can master anything, including parenting. Without *The Basics* no amount of information will turn a person into a great anything. Einstein developed *The Basics*, imagination, wonder, curiosity, the capacity to listen and ask deep questions, and because of this he became a great physicist. Because he had a solid foundation in *The Basics* Einstein was able to play with his imagination like a world-class athlete plays with a ball. Adults who develop *The Basics* play with children the way Einstein played with ideas.

Why is this important? As much as 95% of what a child learns each day occurs through direct experience, leaving only 5% to formal instruction. What children learn is what they experience. And what they experience most is the way adults behave.

Watching dad change a tire, for example, involves technical information, which way to turn the lug-nuts, and emotional information, the inner state - calm, frustrated, anxious, angry - dad is experiencing as he goes through the process. The intellectual information, how to change a tire, represents only 5% of what a child learns watching dad. Dad's inner state shapes 95% of the experience children learn and become. Think of King Midas and the golden touch. Every child we relate to is uplifted and inspired or dragged down by our positive or negative state when we touch them. How we do things is much more important, at least for children, than what we do.

Do we feel safe or threatened? Are we curious or bored? Do we trust the world or need to defend against it? Using the same skills as elite athletes and successful businesses, The Nurturing Project helps parents and providers recognize the difference between good states and states that are not so good. Then, using proven tools, we encourage them to live and model optimum states of learning and performance for children.

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The adult meets everyday challenges like Michael Jordan meets a basketball, and models this optimum learning relationship for the children they love. It's a classic win-win. The Nurturing Project does this on a regular basis by providing the experiences, not just the data, which adults need to deepen their listening and communication skills, to reduce stress and conflict, develop critical and creative thinking, as individuals and more importantly with others, especially children.

Upon this foundation The Nurturing Project models and explores the best science and childcare practices from around the world, in a group setting, where parents and providers can benefit from the collective wisdom and experiences of others (peer mentoring). The project goes a step further and engages the local business community as "civic mentors," inviting them to deepen the conversation by modeling their problem solving, management and local networking skills, in ways that support and develop healthy families.

We have entered a new era. Learning and performance are "state specific." In the future adults will strive, like world-class athletes, to be in the best possible state as they respond to the challenges they face. This will instantly translate into optimum learning environments for children, during the most explosive stages of their development. The Nurturing System provides the structure and the tools for parents, childcare providers, educators and civic leaders to revolutionize child development and education by "becoming the change they want to see" in their families and communities. Pearce is correct:

1. Understand the model imperative.
2. Take your cues from the child, and
3. Play on the surface and watch learning and optimum performance unfold just beneath the level of our awareness.

Really, that's it. Now, go out and play.

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The Nurturing Project

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