

Touch the Future was founded to explore the question: *How has childhood changed since World War II?* Recent studies in learning and brain development clearly demonstrate that when the environment changes, we adapt. The greater the changes the greater the pressure to adapt. With this in mind we can look at changes in the outer environment and explore how they affect learning, sense of place, relationships, feelings of empathy, and values: factors implicit in the formation of the all-important self-image. How have changes in the environment we call 'childhood' affected the self-image of young people today?

What is the environment of childhood? What do we mean when we say 'childhood?' Consider that it is adult culture—beliefs, behaviors and assumptions—that creates the box we call childhood. If a child's intelligence and capacity to learn is infinite, we should look at the box rather than the child when we attempt to define childhood.

Childhood is more a set of limitations than a period of life suited to expansive, adaptive learning. If our focus were on learning, rather than limiting, our systems of education, athletic programs, and just about everything we call childhood would change dramatically.

We live in a culture based on comparison and contrast—contest. Life is a contest. We get grades. We line up in class. Who is tallest? Fastest? Most attractive? We measure everything. This is part of the box we call childhood. Whenever one is in a contest—being measured, tested, and compared—there exists the possibility of fear, failure, judgment, and the need to be defensive. This need to defend is woven into the environment. The greater the risk, the greater the need to invest energy in the defense structure we call our ego - which comes with a corresponding loss of learning ability and performance.

Clearly the level of contest has increased, demanding that more and more attention be devoted to self-defense. By *contest* I mean those learning environments, which are not free; composed of unstructured play. If contest implicitly strengthens the self-centered ego, as a defense reflex, then the question arises: Is it possible to raise or educate a child in a way that prevents this ego-defense reflex from developing?

In child's play or the *Zone*—the *Flow* state of peak performance—the ego disappears as the whole body and mind focus on the task or challenge. We might consider that what we think of as the ego only pops up along with the need to defend or justify. The less security there is, the louder it screams and the more dominance it asserts in order to protect its image - which seems quite natural for a defense structure.

Is it possible to raise a child in such a way that this defensive self-image isn't needed? With this question we begin to look at childhood in terms of basic trust, safety and threat. Remember, however, that in a contest culture threat is ever-present. It's always there. There is a *right way* and if you don't do it that way you are *wrong*.

When the child first tries to do anything, most often they don't succeed. Failure is built into the system. The parent feels it's really important to tell the child the right way to do things. I did so yesterday when my son washed the car. He didn't do it *my right way* and I had to tell him. I couldn't help myself. The concept of right and wrong is built into the structure. School and grades, judgments reinforce the need for this psychological defense mechanism.

Five years ago we began a project called *The Intelligence of Play*. A colleague happened to be an athletic performance specialist. His proven methods involve helping top golfers get out of their own way and free their innate intelligence perform as it was designed to do. It became obvious that the ego gets in the way of learning and performance. It wastes attention and energy, usually on psychological fears, which are only as real as we make them.

What are they going to think of me? This is the big question we ask when someone is looking, a question, which brings us back to basic trust and safety and the defense reflex called the ego.

All of us have had moments when that defense structure is not there and we enter the *zone* (or *flow*, there are many names for it.) I think the best and most basic name for this egoless state is *play*. Real child's play and what athletes call the zone are the same thing. The child at play is completely entrained. Their body, their emotions, their intellect are all coherently focused on *what's going to happen next?* There's a sense of deep relationship and mystery, a burning curiosity to discover what's next.

I have been interviewing professional golfers, asking what it was about the way they were raised that allowed them to reach an extraordinary level of performance. Two things came up in every interview. The first was love of the game, love of the pure experience. They got involved because mom and dad just loved to play golf. This was the space in which they saw dad at home and at peace, and they simply wanted to become a part of that.

The second aspect was no fear of censor. In other words, it didn't matter what their score was. It didn't matter how well they did. What mattered was that they were participating in the experience, enjoying and learning from every shot.

When they came back from a tournament, their parents didn't ask them, "What did you shoot, what's your score?" There was no equation of score to self-worth. The score didn't matter. They were unconditionally accepted as human beings. Love of the game—whatever that is—and constant, joyful learning is what makes the great champions in life.

Competition came much later and enabled them to pull and test themselves further. Competition is not about beating another person—the root of the word competition means to *strive together*. The competitor is your friend, providing the resistance necessary to draw out hidden potential. It's hard to fully realize potential playing alone.

Three aspects of great learning and performance became very clear - love of the game, of the experience itself, no fear of censor, and a complete sense of entrainment; flow.

Have you ever looked at the mountain and just seen the mountain, without the witness sitting there, saying, 'gee, it's a nice day, isn't it,' without that split taking place? That is what we mean by complete attention, entrainment. The play state, the flow state is that direct, complete engagement in relationship without fear of censor or measurement.

Another colleague, Joseph Chilton Pearce, author of many books (including a national best-seller, *The Magical Child*) was quick to point out that in our contest culture we have replaced learning with conditioning—conditioning being a predetermined, "correct" way to do something.

It's common knowledge that we use a fraction of our potential; some say only five percent of our mental potential at any one time. Part of the reason that we use so little is that we are often repeating what we know.

Most of the time we are conditioning ourselves and our children, rather than really learning. Culture censors and prevents most of us from stepping outside of this conditioning. People are censored rather than encouraged to learn and develop. Childhood is plagued by our insistence that children accept the limitations we long ago adopted for ourselves. And we beat it into them.

Joseph Chilton Pearce also offered that the essence of real learning is real play. So we have conditioning, which is what our schools and athletic programs are based on. And we have adaptive learning, which occurs in the state of play. And play can only take place in complete safety.

Play as a state requires, first and foremost, that you be safe.

You can't be safe if somebody's there measuring and censoring, judging, evaluating. When we replaced self-organizing child's play, sandlot games, for example, and organized them into little leagues, we replaced real learning with conditioning, judgment and fear, which implicitly strengthens the defensive reflex we call me, the ego - and real learning slowed.

The world is growing more complex. Levels of fear and threat are increasing. Parents don't feel safe letting children out into the front yard simply to mess around; they need to know exactly where their kids are and what they're doing at all times. So they place their children in adult-organized programs which can be as damaging—in terms of public fear and humiliation—as they are beneficial.

Fred Donaldson has spent the last twenty-five years playing with special-needs kids and wild animals — bears, elk, seals, dolphins, foxes, and wolves. The reason he seeks out these children—autistic, with cerebral palsy, and so on — is that he has to step out of his cultural model to relate to and really play with them. The cultural self-image of "Fred" has to disappear in order to play with a wild animal or a special child.

Krishnamurti said, "Love exists when I disappear." Fred says, "I can't play until Fred disappears." And, "I can't play with you because you think you're who you are and I think I'm who I am, and we're locked into these identities, which limits our relationship." So Fred seeks out wild animals as playmates because they too demand that he be fully present -- which means that he can't be Fred. And he's done this for many years, all over the globe.

Knowing some of these things, is it possible to create learning environments that don't cause this ego defense-reflex to kick in? Currently it is built into the system along with its implicit aggression and violence. We're all stuck in a structure, which demands that the defense reflex be ever-present. Most can't even conceive of an alternative.

The level of threat determines how much energy and attention has to be diverted into defense. It takes a minimum amount of attention and energy to swing a bat. If you are asking the big question—*what are they going to think of me?*—that attention and energy is fragmented. Part is going into defense -- performance diminishes. The question is, how do we create increasingly challenging environments without strengthening this fear reflex? I think a greater understanding of *The Intelligence of Play* is a way of doing that.

We need to begin with the prenatal relationship between mother and her unborn child. Is it one of fear and anxiety and worry and concern, or is it one of joy and play?

If play is the foundation, rather than worry and contest -- tension is removed. In play there is no possibility of failure. It doesn't matter what you're doing. The purpose of play is to learn, not to achieve a predetermined result. You can't do *learning* wrong. There's no possibility of error in real play, or real leaning. The ego isn't there, only complete attention.

We are asking top athletes, not how they hit the ball but how they were raised—what kind of environment were they raised in that allowed them to love the game and not waste attention and energy on self-defense.

There are several hundred million parents and kids involved with the "organized anxiety programs" we collectively call athletics. They're brutal. Talk about contest and fear reaction—it's rampant, really nasty. It's gotten so bad that athletes are saying we shouldn't have these kinds of organized sports until kids are perhaps eleven or twelve years old. Today we are enrolling kids at four and five.

Childhood has become more censored, more restricted, more limited, less playful in every way, with a corresponding increase in fear, self-defense, ego, me-first, aggression and violence. Fred is very clear that play is an antidote to violence. That is his intention when he takes his work to gangs or corporations - to help people be safer.

Fear and lack of basic trust are core issues. We separate babies from mothers at birth; this induces insecurity right from the start. The defense system kicks right in. Then there is abandonment to day-care and abandonment to television. How do we reframe what we think of as childhood in terms of basic trust? To a parent or educator this means, how do you create a relationship in which there is no fear? Without fear, play as learning can expand, infinitely. Otherwise, we are just conditioning.

Authentic play, original play, is a complete flip on how we view ourselves as individuals, how we think of learning, how we look at development. It forms the basis of a relationship, which is more authentic than the cultural limitations we accept about ourselves and impose on our children. *The Intelligence of Play* means *Learning without Limits*, every day, with the entire world as a playmate.

Now that's a good idea....

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