

## Needs of Children

**T. B. Brazelton and S. I. Greenspan, *The Irreducible Needs of Children: What Every Child Must Have to Grow, Learn and Flourish* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2000), 228 pages**

**Reviewed by Juliana Weber**

The authors, a psychiatrist and a pediatrician, aim to influence public policy by defining exactly what it is that children need. Legislators cannot encourage and support what is vague and undefined, so the goal is a sensible one. Admittedly, the needs of children cover such wide territory that deciding on new public policies will often require dialogue with specialists in other fields and, probably, a grassroots movement from families after they've decided for themselves how best to meet these needs. Consequently, I would recommend the book to the general interested public on the merits of its research in human development, which can assist us to make informed choices.

The authors identify seven irreducible needs of children: (1) continuous and nurturing relationships; (2) basic physical safety, including nutrition and so forth; (3) experiences tailored to the individual child's sensitivities and interests; (4) experiences tailored to the developmental stage of the child; (5) firm and appropriate rules and expectations; (6) a community that is secure and safe enough to be reflective and collaborative in its support of children and families; and, finally, (7) a serious commitment to children internationally, since the development of, for example, our defence systems, mass communication, and interdependent economies mean that we are closely interconnected on many levels. Each need is discussed, often insightfully, in a separate chapter. Much of the text discusses areas of possible improvement for the average American family, including day-care, school, and a patchwork of services. The proposed solutions are not always well-conceived, but the research summary still has merit.

Continuous and nurturing relationships are difficult in families pressured to be over-scheduled. Dual-income households, the authors point out, and day-care centers often pay minimum wages to workers, who are burdened with the maximum number of children allowable by law. The authors do not offer suggestions on where optimal higher wages for day-care workers (or wages for more workers) might come from, but they do helpfully mention that employers might consider more flexible work hours. The authors focus on choice and empowering families to make their own choices from a greater range of possibilities; consequently, they do not reflect on the possibility that the proliferation of choices might be part of the problem for the over-scheduled, dual-income household that is the latch-key child's crisis.

Despite this lack of reflection, there are helpful recommendations on the kind and quantity of time children need at various ages, even though the choices presented assume at the outset that most families have unalterably two working parents with only spare hours available for parenting during weekdays. The authors make important recommendations about how to reform systems like foster care and family courts and the public education system. Still, despite the limitations of the text on the research offered here, there is much food here for further thought.

There are already some noteworthy public policies which help to ensure that children avoid toxic substances like DDT and lead, the authors note (pp. 62-3). However, the rise in autism (p. 55) and other developmental problems (p. 58) indicates that other toxins or perhaps the over-use of television and video games are slowing or stunting the development of untold numbers of children. The authors' experiences lead them to recommend, in addition to further research on toxins and the possible causes of developmental difficulties, an entire public curriculum on human development, a curriculum just as important as math and science (pp. 66-7). A lifelong curriculum with hands-on experience would allow people in their 20s to have intuitive competence with their own children, helping them face parenting without fleeing to their careers for protection.

That the need for such a curriculum exists at all, now as never before, does not seem to lead the authors to question why this should be. What sounds like a sweeping revolution, a whole new public curriculum, is actually an attempt to leave intact a much larger phenomenon of small, mobile families with little intergenerational contact. Perhaps their tacit acceptance of this phenomenon is the only prudent course of action, but again, I wished for deeper reflection on the part of the authors.

In-depth examination of tailoring experiences to the individual and of development-appropriate experiences cannot be comprehensively treated in a brief and general work like this. The two chapters concerning these areas were, for me, the most insightful of the book, however. Implicitly regarding relationality as the basis of intelligence, the authors find IQ tests to be far less useful than observing how a child relates to others (p. 111). Education of a person, in their view, should result primarily in persons who relate well with others, but our current system bothers to observe only the pathologically bad cases of relationality. The authors bemoan a system that waits for not just difficulty, but for deep failure to arise before intervening (p. 101).

Since relationality is a primary goal, television as a cheap babysitter loses all credibility. As an alternative, the authors suggest minimum numbers of play dates per week for various age levels; maximum amounts of screen time; family time versus homework; and a new way of relating and prioritizing our lives. The authors also make some profound offhand comments about how a particular kind of environment might be toxic for one personality but perfect for another. I wish they had written a whole work on that.

In the chapter on the need for rules, the authors note that morality is based on either admiration or fear (p. 146), but fear-based morality remains situation specific, while admiration and respect-based morality is more stable across situations (p. 147). Children need firm limits and empathy at all times, a need which does not require that a child's wishes always be fulfilled (p. 153). In fact, the authors maintain that maturity is about dealing with disappointments in a constructive way (p. 154). Parents can help their children with this task only within the context of a respectful, empathetic relationship, which takes much time to develop and maintain. The authors suggest two hours per night, evenly dividing the time between setting limits and bonding, which can flow naturally in and out of one another. There is no need for a rigid timer, but every day, children need time to build up the relationship and to reestablish limits (p. 155).

The sixth and seventh goals are so broad, and frankly beyond the expertise of the authors, that I didn't find these chapters very useful. For example, the authors opine that teaching the causes of war is more important than covering the facts of many wars (p. 161). From this, it would seem that the authors see value in reintroducing philosophy, perhaps ethics in public schools, but they would like to collapse it into history and make it a kind of sociology. They treat religion similarly, as something merely sociologically or psychologically important. If a religion were to limit creativity, one of the pillars of personal development for the authors, the religion would be at fault in their logic, even though the authors have elsewhere noted the need for rules and boundaries, at least for children (pp. 171-3).

Both authors helpfully append their own child development charts to the book. If only the rest of the book were so easy to read and reference. Instead, the authors include lengthy interviews between themselves, sometimes accounting for half the pages in a chapter, all in the name of sharing their "flavor of collaboration" (p. xi), whatever that means. It is doubtful whether any concerned parent or policymaker will trouble to analyze the group dynamics or thought processes of the authors. Nonetheless, they do present useful information that will help families decide what is best for their children. Obviously compassionate and informed within their fields, the authors present a valuable contribution to the field of childhood development.

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