Why *do* children need parents?

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What children need

Opinions of what children need vary even between parents. Finding a general definition of children's needs and wants despite the social and cultural differences in the world may seem impossible. However, an internationally agreed document does exist, in which these wants and needs are set out. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (www.unicef.org/crc/crc. htm) is a set of standards and obligations for the treatment of children that grew from the recognition that children have universal needs and that these can be defined. The Convention was agreed upon by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1989 and came into force in September 1990. It has since been ratified by nearly all members of the United Nations (with the notable exception of the USA and Somalia) and is thus the most universally accepted human rights document in history.

One of the guiding principles of the Convention is the "best interests of the child". Building on current scientific knowledge, including psychology, it gives a culturally independent picture of what children need to thrive. It presents the vision of a child as a human individual, and a family and community member, who has specific needs if he or she is to attain human dignity and harmonious development. The Convention distinguishes between physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social needs.

On a purely physical level children need an adequate standard of living and protection from physical danger, in order that they may enjoy basic health and welfare.

Mental needs are practically defined as the need for education, leisure and recreational activities. Specifically mentioned is the need for schooling and literacy and access to information through books and other media.

Spiritual needs are strongly emphasized in the preamble to the Convention. Children need to grow up being accorded (and embracing) the spiritual values of the Charter of the United Nations: peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity (www.un.org/aboutun/charter). They also have the right to freedom of cultural and religious expression and the need to acquire self-respect.

Moral needs are physical and personal integrity, in particular the right to express their own views, be taken seriously and freely express their thoughts. Children need to be treated without discrimination and their "evolving capacities" must be respected.

Finally, children need to be integrated into a stable community and family environment. They need continuity of upbringing in a steady ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background and with love and warmth – because this gives them the security they need for their development.

How parents meet children's needs

The Convention on the Rights of the Child states in its preamble that "the child, for a full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment." Furthermore, a child has, as far as possible, the explicit "right to know and be cared for by his or her parents" (Article 7) and "a child shall not be separated from his or her parents against their will", unless separation is in the child's best interests (Article 9). Thus, the Convention recognizes that children need a family and in particular that they need parents.

It should be noted that families vary greatly in composition and the concept "parent" admits a broad interpretation: the "nuclear" family is neither the recommended nor typical family form. Many children grow up in isolated one-parent units in big cities, or in large families that are well integrated into a close community, or in polygamous families in which they have several "mothers" but share their father with many other children. There are also adopted and fostered children and children who live in residential care, whose parental figures change every day. Tragically, many children, particularly in low-income countries, grow up without parents.

The parents' role

What role is intended for parents that makes them so important for the well-being of children? The Convention upholds the primary responsibility of the family – in particular parents – to ensure that the needs of the child are fulfilled. Other structures, such as government institutions, can and should support parents in fulfilling this role. However, the responsibility for ensuring that children's needs are met is clearly placed with their parents.

In order to understand the exact role of parents in the upbringing of children and to examine how parents can fulfil children's needs, I shall examine the various needs more closely and consider how parents can effectively fulfil them.

The physical needs of child are obvious. Without food and shelter a child will die. The political and economic conditions in Western economies enable most parents to fulfil these needs (although as individuals they can do little to combat problems such as environmental pollution, which can damage both physical and mental health; Berry Brazelton & Greenspan, 2002).

The child's intangible, non-material moral, spiritual, mental and social needs are generally acknowledged to be more difficult to fulfil, and are often neglected, even in rich Western society. Yet a child deprived of its non-material needs will also suffer enormously and develop physical, emotional and social deficits (Keller Pringle, 1975: p. 42; Berry Brazelton & Greenspan, 2002: p. 13). The distinguished doctor and psycho-analyst John Bowlby recognized this fact and his research into the effects of separation on children radically changed attitudes towards their treatment. It was through Bowlby's work (e.g. 1951, 1969) that non-material needs came to be generally acknowledged and were integrated into supranational documents on the protection of children, such as the Convention for the Rights of the Child. In this respect Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs, which assumes that psycho-social needs such as safety, love and recognition need be addressed only after physiological needs have been met is misleading. The mental, spiritual, moral and social needs of children are as important as their physical needs.

The essential role of parents in fulfilling children's needs stems from the decisive influence of the first years of life for a child's intellectual, emotional and moral development. This fundamental psychological insight is generally recognized and accepted. There is an enormous literature on parenting; unsurprisingly no consensus model of "perfect parents" exists. Trying to be a "perfect parent" is a set up for disappointment anyway, because all parents make mistakes. In the following discussion I will examine four generally agreed aspects of good parenting or – expressed from the child's viewpoint – children's needs. My discussion is based on the following sources: Pringle, 1975; Leach, 1988, 1996; Clare, 2001; Berry Brazelton & Greenspan, 2002; Ginott *et al*, 2003.

Children need love and security

"The greatest terror a child can have is that he is not loved, and rejection is the hell he fears." John Steinbeck, *East of Eden*

Love is probably the most elementary and important need. However, it eludes scientific definition and is hardly measurable objectively. Security in the non-material sense is also difficult to describe. Very broadly defined it means the ability to withstand separation, which is the basic cause of anxiety and fear of loss. However, it is possible to clearly define what loving parental care is, and many aspects of loving, protective interaction between parents and children have been described and evaluated (e.g. Pringle, 1975: pp. 42–53; Berry Brazelton & Greenspan, 2002: pp. 31–108). Giving a baby or a small child the feeling that it is unique and more important than anybody else in the world creates a foundation on which all later external relationships and inner feelings are built. The emotional interaction that a child learns through a loving, continuous and secure relationship with its parents forms a basis for cognitive and intellectual development. It enables a child to feel and respond to affection and build meaningful and trusting social relationships. It enables a child to engage in purposeful mutual communication – with or without words – which is a prerequisite for socialization and cognitive skills and the development of learning and literacy in a wider environment. The child learns to distinguish between good and bad feelings and thereby develops the basis for later moral values. Finally it creates the environment of trust in which a child can feel, develop and ultimately fulfil the spiritual needs described above.

Children need new experiences

Children want to learn about their environment. They want experiences that advance their cognitive and personal development. In early childhood new experiences are perceived primarily through language and games; and parents are uniquely positioned to create the stimuli that children want. Parents not only provide the new experiences, but also intuitively ensure that these are appropriate to the child's particular personality and cognitive development. Through language and games young children start to learn how

the world works. They learn for instance to recognize patterns in interactive sequences with their parents. "If I call, my mother or father will come and attend to my needs"; "If I throw sand into my sister's face, my sister will cry and my parents will tell me not to do it". If specific behaviours lead to desired reactions, the child perceives its influence on its environment and develops a feeling for its own identity. This leads to the ability to recognize own wants, e.g. a drink, and to express them. Such early emotional experiences, supported by and in interaction with parents, form the basis of essential cognitive abilities such as creativity, logical thought and curiosity, which are needed for success and happiness in later life.

Children need praise and acknowledgement

To grow from a helpless baby into a self-confident and self-accepting adult a child must go through an enormous emotional, intellectual and social learning process. The most effective support in this process is praise and acknowledgement. Support in this respect teaches the child trust, determination and per-severance, and enables the individual to master new challenges, in particular to fulfil his or her needs.

Children need responsibility

From the earliest age, children want to do things for themselves. This want can be fulfilled as soon as a child has attained a degree of personal indepen-dence. Parents teach their children to feed and dress themselves, which are early expressions of responsibility. Much of this learning is motivated by imitation and the example of parents or siblings. Parents also provide the first experiences of possessing and caring for their own objects. Responsibility is embedded in the framework and the limits that parents set for their children's experiences. Limits are necessary for practical reasons such as the physical safety of the child, but they are also essential to the learning of social skills such as controlling anger and

of the moral values of respect towards other beings and objects. The framework and limits that parents impart on their children are the preconditions for living as a social and moral person.

The parent's role

What is the goal of parenting? It's to help a child to grow up to be a decent human being: a person with compassion, commitment and caring, a person who finds their role in society and their role in life. Children learn what they experience, and parents set the tone. Well beyond early childhood, where the world speaks to the mind of a child, parents' language is more intimate: parents speak to the heart. Thus, when parents live their role not only with an open mind but also with an open heart, it'll be a good start. I have found that the therapeutic discipline of Tri-Energetics helps establish this starting point and I have written about this approach in two other articles: "The role of Tri-Energetics in parenting" and "Philip, a gifted child with ADHD". Both articles are available on this website.

References

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