

Myths to the Contrary, Childhood is a Nightmare

When we watch toddlers dance we feel their joy. When they trip, they don't fall far and their butts are padded. Their excitement at two-legged mobility is infectious.

When we see kids of all ages running, jumping, giggling and then falling asleep at ease, we assume children are carefree and happy.

But, consider your own memories, the ones that come unbidden in your dreams, and the ones that define you and make your daily choices. Wasn't there a nightmare or two in your childhood?

I remember many. That's why I want you to see that close attachment with caring adults is a basic necessity for survival for all of us, not just our own children.

New York Times Columnist David Brooks, alluding to Warren Buffet's \$37 billion gift to charity, writes that he would invest in promoting a hormone that helps mammals bond. "Everything we're learning about the brain confirms the centrality of attachments to human development and the wisdom of Adam Smith's observation that the 'chief part of human happiness arises from the consciousness of being beloved.' "

Why is it, then, that federal, state and local governments continue to spend money on education through continual assessment of math and reading scores? To make schools accountable? The results show an increased dropout rate. To avoid loss of income, some schools don't test those who will score low.

Brooks writes, "The dropout rates are astronomical because humans are not machines into which you can input data. They require emotion to process information. You take kids who didn't benefit from stable, nurturing parental care and you stick them in a school that functions like a factory for information transmission, and the results are going to be horrible."

Information processing of children is left-brained thinking at its worse. It reminds me of the time the California Fish and Game drew a line on the map of the ocean and declared everything south of it a no-otter zone. The otters did not read the map nor obey the proclamation.

When school is emotionally engaging students succeed. When school consists of testing, only those skilled in math and reading, and backed by loving parents, succeed. The rest join a gang, or its equivalent, the army.

In the early 1980's I taught English in an affluent high school. We built an alternative program for potential dropouts. One student, Richard, was assigned to me. At 15 he was six feet tall and angry. The day I met him he tore a chain link fence apart with his bare hands. His parents belonged to Mensa, that organization for people with exceptionally high IQ's, but his father abused him physically. Therefore I had the task of removing him from his home and placing him in another, kinder one.

As Richard moved his clothes into my car, his older, even bigger, brother came out into the street threatening him, ready to whip him again.

I screamed at Richard to get in my car and jumped in front of the brother. He breathed fired at me for a minute (that felt like an hour) and then backed away. I drove off with Richard, shaking so badly it's a wonder I didn't crash.

Richard graduated from high school. I doubt that he would today.

We have to change how we think now or perpetuate a generation of enemies. If you can recognize that your childhood was not complete bliss, you who have the leisure and wherewithal to read this far, imagine the childhood of those gang members—those kids you knew who didn't graduate, the ones you heard about at your last reunion.

The best we can do now is recognize that childhood is a nightmare that most of us survive. How we survived it colors how we survive now. And we can change anything if we first change our thoughts. The only test of our thoughts is our lives.

Let's change our thinking about how we learn.

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