

Chapter One

WHY PARENTS MATTER MORE THAN EVER

Twelve-year-old Jeremy is hunched over the keyboard, his eyes intent on the computer monitor. It's eight o'clock in the evening and tomorrow's homework is far from complete but his father's repeated admonishments to "get on with it" fall on deaf ears. Jeremy is on MSN Messenger, exchanging notes with his friends: gossip about who likes who, sorting out who is a buddy and who an enemy, disputes over who said what to who at school that day, the latest on who is hot and who is not. "Stop bugging me," he snaps at his father who, one more time, comes to remind him about schoolwork. "If you were doing what you're supposed to," the father shoots back, his tone shaking with frustration, "I wouldn't be bugging you." The verbal battle escalates, the voices grow strident and in a few moments Jeremy yells "You don't understand anything," as he slams the door.

The father is upset, angry with Jeremy but above all, with himself. "I blew it again," he thinks. "I don't know how to communicate with my son." He and his wife are both concerned about Jeremy: once a cooperative child, he is now impossible to control or even to advise. His attention seems focused exclusively on contact with his friends. This same scenario of conflict is acted out in the home several times a week and neither the child nor the parents are able to respond with any new thoughts or actions to break the deadlock. The parents feel helpless and powerless. They have never relied much on punishment, but now they are more and more inclined to "lower the boom." When they do, their son becomes ever more embittered and defiant.

Should parenting be this difficult? Was it always so? Older generations have often in the past complained about the young being less respectful and less disciplined than they used to be, but today many parents intuitively know that something is amiss.

Children are not quite the same as we remember being. They are less likely to take their cues from adults, less afraid of getting into trouble. They also seem less innocent and naive--lacking, it seems, the wide-eyed wonder that leads a child to have excitement for the world, for exploring the wonders of nature or of human creativity. Many children seem inappropriately sophisticated, even jaded in some ways, pseudo-mature before their time. They appear to be easily bored when away from each other or when not engaged with technology. Creative, solitary play seems a vestige of the past. "As a child I was endlessly fascinated by the clay I would dig out of a ditch near our home," one forty-four year-old mother recalls. "I loved the feel of it; I loved moulding it into shapes or just kneading it in my hands. And yet, I can't get my six-year-old son to play on his own, unless it's with the computer or Nintendo or video games."

Parenting, too, seems to have changed. Our parents were more confident, more certain of themselves and had more impact on us, for better or for worse. For many today, parenting does not feel natural.

Today's parents love their children as much as parents ever have, but the love doesn't always get through. We have just as much to teach, but our capacity to get our knowledge across has, somehow, diminished. We do not feel empowered to guide our children toward fulfilling their potential. Sometimes they live and act as if they have been seduced away from us by some siren song we do not hear. We fear, if only vaguely, that the world has become less safe for them and that we are powerless to protect them. The gap opening up between children and adults can seem unbridgeable at times.

We struggle to live up to our image of what parenting ought to be like. Not achieving the results we want, we plead with our children, we cajole, bribe, reward or punish. We hear ourselves address them in tones that seem harsh even to us and foreign to our true nature. We sense ourselves grow cold in moments of crisis, precisely when we would wish to summon our unconditional love. We feel hurt as parents, and

rejected. We blame—ourselves for failing at the parenting task, or our children for being recalcitrant, or television for distracting them, or the school system for not being strict enough. When our impotence becomes unbearable we reach for simplistic, authoritarian formulas consistent with the do-it-yourself/quick-fix ethos of our era.

The very importance of parenting to the development and maturation of young human beings has come under question. “Do Parents Matter?” was the title of a cover article in *Newsweek* magazine in 1998. “Parenting has been oversold,” argued a book that received international attention that year. “You have been led to believe that you have more of an influence on your child’s personality than you really do.”ⁱ

The question of parental influence might not be quite so crucial if things were going well with our young. That our children do not seem to listen to us or to embrace our values as their own would, perhaps, be acceptable in itself—if they were truly self-sufficient, self-directed and grounded in themselves, if they had a positive sense of who they are and if they possessed a clear sense of direction and purpose in life. We see that for so many children and young adults those qualities are lacking. In homes, in schools, in community after community developing young people have lost their moorings. Many lack self-control and are increasingly prone to alienation, drug use, violence, or just a general aimlessness. They are less teachable and more difficult to manage than their counterparts of even a few decades ago. Many have lost their ability to adapt, to learn from negative experience and to mature. Unprecedented numbers of children and adolescents are now being prescribed medications for depression, anxiety or a host of other diagnoses. The crisis of the young has manifested itself ominously in the growing problem of bullying in the schools and, at its very extreme, in the murder of children by children. Such tragedies, though rare, are only the most visible eruptions of a widespread malaise, an aggressive streak rife in today’s youth culture.

Committed and responsible parents are frustrated. Despite our loving care, kids seem highly stressed. Parents and other elders no longer appear to be the natural mentors for the young, as always used to be the case with human beings and is still the case with all other species living in their natural habitats. Senior generations, parents and grandparents of the baby boomer group, look at us with incomprehension. “We didn’t need how-to manuals on parenting in our days, we just did it,” they say, with some mixture of truth and misunderstanding.

This state of affairs is ironic, given that more is known about child development than ever before and that we have more access to courses and books on child rearing than any previous generation of parents.

The Missing Context For Parenting

So what has changed? The problem, in a word, is *context*. No matter how well intentioned, skilled or compassionate we may be, parenting is not something we can engage in with just any child. Parenting requires a context to be effective. A child must be receptive if we are to succeed in nurturing, comforting, guiding and directing her. Children do not automatically grant us the authority to parent them just because we are adults, or just because we love them or know what is good for them or have their best interests at heart. Stepparents often are often confronted by this fact, as are others who have to look after children not their own, be they foster parents, baby sitters, nannies, daycare providers or teachers. Even with one’s own children the natural parenting authority can become lost if the context for it becomes eroded.

If parenting skills or even loving the child are not enough, what then is needed? There is an indispensable special kind of relationship without which parenting lacks a

firm foundation. Developmentalists¹ call it an **attachment** relationship. For a child to be open to being parented by an adult, he must be actively attaching to that adult, be wanting contact and closeness with him. At the beginning of life this drive to attach is quite physical in nature—the infant literally clings to the parent and needs to be held. If everything unfolds according to design, the attachment will evolve into an emotional closeness and finally a sense of psychological intimacy. Children who lack this kind of connection with those responsible for them are very difficult to parent or, often, even to teach. Only the attachment relationship can provide the proper context for child rearing.

The secret of parenting is not in what a parent *does* but rather who the parent *is* to a child. When a child seeks contact and closeness with us, we become empowered as a nurturer, a comforter, a guide, a model, a teacher or a coach. For a child well attached to us, we are her home base from which to venture into the world, her retreat to fall back to, her fountainhead of inspiration. All the parenting skills in the world cannot compensate for a lack of attachment relationship. All the love in world cannot get through without the psychological umbilical cord created by the child's attachment.

The attachment relationship of child to parent needs to last at least as long as a child needs to be parented. That is what is becoming more difficult in today's world. Parents haven't changed—they have not become less competent or less devoted. The fundamental nature of children has also not changed—they have not become less dependent or more resistant. What has changed is the culture in which we are rearing our children. Children's attachments to parents are no longer getting the support required from culture and society. Even parent-child relationships that at the beginning are powerful and fully nurturing can become undermined as our children move out into a world that no longer appreciates or reinforces the attachment bond. Children are increasingly forming attachments that compete with their parents, with the result that the

¹ Psychologists or other scientists who study human development.

proper context for parenting is less and less available to us. Not a lack of love or of parenting know how but the erosion of the attachment context is what makes our parenting ineffective.

The Impact of the Peer Culture

The chief and most damaging of the competing attachments that undermine parenting authority and parental love is the increasing bonding of our children with their peers. It is the thesis of this book that the disorder affecting the generations of young children and adolescents now heading toward adulthood is rooted in the lost orientation of children toward the nurturing adults in their lives. Far from seeking to establish yet one more medical-psychological disorder here—the last thing today’s bewildered parents need—we are using the word “disorder” in its most basic sense: a disruption of the natural order of things. For the first time in history young people are turning for instruction, modeling and guidance not to mothers, fathers, teachers and other responsible adults but to people whom nature never intended to place in a parenting role—their own peers. They are not manageable, teachable or maturing because they no longer take their cues from us. Instead, children are being brought up by immature persons who cannot possibly guide them to maturity. They are being brought up by each other.

The term that seems to fit more than any other for this phenomenon is **peer orientation**. It is peer orientation that has muted our parenting instincts, eroded our natural authority and caused us to parent not from the heart but from the head—from manuals, the advice of “experts” and the confused expectations of society.

What is peer orientation?

Orientation, the drive to get one’s bearings and become acquainted with one’s surroundings, is a fundamental human instinct and need. Disorientation is one of the

least bearable of all psychological experiences. Attachment and orientation are inextricably intertwined. Humans and other creatures automatically orient themselves by seeking cues from those to whom they are attached.

Children, like the young of any warm-blooded species, have an innate orienting instinct: they need to get their sense of direction from somebody. Just as a magnet turns automatically toward the North Pole, so children have an inborn need to find their bearings by turning toward a source of authority, contact and warmth. Children cannot endure the lack of such a figure in their lives: they become disoriented. They cannot endure what I call an **orientation void**.^{*} The parent—or another adult acting as parent substitute—is the nature-intended pole of orientation for the child, just as adults are the orienting influences in the lives of all animals that rear their young.

It so happens that this orienting instinct of humans is much like the imprinting instinct of a duckling. Hatched from the egg, the duckling immediately imprints on the mother duck—he will follow her around, heeding her example and her directions until he grows into mature independence. That is how nature would prefer it, of course. In the absence of mother duck, however, the duckling will begin to follow the nearest moving object—a human being, a dog, or even a mechanical toy. Needless to say, neither the human, the dog, nor the toy are as well suited as the mother duck to raise that duckling to successful adult duckhood. Likewise, if no parenting adult is available, the human child will orient to whoever is near. Social, economic and cultural trends in the past five or six decades have displaced the parent from his intended position as the orienting influence on the child. The peer group has moved into this orienting void, with deplorable results.

^{*} Unless otherwise noted, the first person singular in this book refers to Gordon Neufeld.

As we will show, children cannot be oriented to both adults and other children simultaneously. One cannot follow two sets of conflicting directions at the same time. The child's brain must automatically choose between parental values and peer values, parental guidance and peer guidance, parental culture and peer culture whenever the two would appear to be in conflict.

Are we saying that children should have no friends their own age or form connections with other children? On the contrary—such ties are natural and can serve a healthy purpose. In adult-oriented cultures, where the guiding principles and values are those of the more mature generations, kids attach each other without losing their bearings or rejecting the guidance of their parents. In our society that is no longer the case. Peer bonds have come to replace relationships with adults as children's *primary* sources of orientation. What is unnatural is not peer contact, but that children should have become the dominant influence on each other's development.

Normal But Not Natural Or Healthy

So ubiquitous is peer orientation these days that it has become the norm. Many psychologists and educators, as well as the lay public, have come to see it as natural—or, more commonly, do not even recognize it as a specific phenomenon to be distinguished. It is simply taken for granted as the way things are. But what is *normal*, in the sense of conforming to a norm, is not necessarily the same as *natural* or *healthy*. There is nothing either healthy or natural about peer orientation. Only recently has this counter-revolution against the natural order triumphed in the most industrially advanced countries, for reasons we will explore.* Peer orientation is still foreign to indigenous societies and even in many places in the Western world outside the “globalized” urban

* See chapter 3

centers. Throughout human evolution and until about the Second World War adult orientation was the norm in human development. We, the adults who should be in charge—parents and teachers—have only recently lost our influence without even being aware that we have done so.

Peer orientation masquerades as natural or goes undetected because we have become divorced from our intuitions and because we have unwittingly become peer oriented ourselves. For members of the post war generations born in England or North America and many other parts of the industrialized world, our own preoccupation with peers is blinding us to the seriousness of the problem.

Culture, until recently, was always handed down vertically, from generation to generation. For millennia, wrote Joseph Campbell, “the youth have been educated and the aged rendered wise” through the study, experience and understanding of traditional cultural forms. Adults played a critical role in the transmission of culture, taking what they received from their own parents and passing it down to their children. However, the culture *our* children are being introduced to is much less likely to be the culture of their parents than that of their peers. Children are generating their own culture, very distinct from that of their parents and, in some ways, also very alien. Instead of culture being passed down vertically, it is being transmitted horizontally within the younger generation.

Essential to any culture are its customs, its music, its dress, its celebrations, its stories. The music children listen to bears very little resemblance to the music of their grandparents. The way they look is dictated by the way other children look rather than by the parents’ cultural heritage. Their birthday parties and rites of passage are influenced by the practices of other children around them, not by the customs of their parents before them. If all that seems normal to us, it’s only due to our own peer orientation. The existence of a youth culture, separate and distinct from that of adults, dates back only fifty years or so. Although half a century is a relatively short time in the history of

humankind, in the life of an individual person it constitutes a whole era. Most readers of this book will already have been raised in a society where the transmission of culture is horizontal rather than vertical. In each new generation this process, potentially corrosive to civilized society, gains new power and velocity. Even in the twenty-two years between my first and my fifth child, it seems that parents have lost ground.

According to a large international study headed by the British child psychiatrist Sir Michael Rutter and a criminologist, David Smith, a children's culture first emerged after the Second World War and is one of the most dramatic and ominous social phenomena of the twentieth century.ⁱⁱ This study, which included leading scholars from sixteen countries, linked the escalation of antisocial behavior to the breakdown of the vertical transmission of mainstream culture. Accompanying the rise in a children's culture distinct and separate from the mainstream culture, were increases in youth crime, violence, bullying and delinquency.

Such broad cultural trends are paralleled by similar patterns in the development of our children as individuals. Who we want to be and what we want to be like is defined by our orientation, by who we appoint as our model of how to be and how to act—by who we identify with. Current psychological literature emphasizes the role of peers in creating a child's sense of identity.ⁱⁱⁱ When asked to define themselves, children often do not even refer to their parents but rather to the values and expectations of other children and of the peer groups they belong to. Something significantly systemic has shifted. For far too many children today, peers have replaced parents in creating the core of their personalities.

All indications a few generations ago were that parents mattered the most. Carl Jung suggested that it is not even so much what happens in the parent-child relationship that has the greatest impact on the child. What is *missing* in that relationship leaves the greatest scar on the child's personality— or “nothing happening when something might

profitably have happened," in the words of the great British child psychiatrist D.W. Winnicott. Scary thought. An even scarier thought is that if peers have replaced us as the ones who matter most, what is missing in those peer relationships is going to have the most profound impact. Absolutely missing in peer relationship is unconditional love and acceptance, the desire to nurture, the ability to extend oneself for the sake of the other, the willingness to sacrifice for the growth and development of the other. When we compare peer relationships with parent relationships for what is missing, parents come out looking like saints. The results spell disaster for many children.

Paralleling the increase of peer orientation in our society is a startling and dramatic increase in the suicide rates among children, fourfold in the last fifty years for the ten-to-fourteen age range in North America. Suicide rates among that group are the fastest growing with a 120 percent increase from 1980 to 1992 alone. In inner cities, where peers are the most likely to replace parents, these suicide rates have increased even more.^{iv} What is behind these suicides is highly revealing. Like many students of human development, I had always assumed that parental rejection would be the most significant precipitating factor. That is no longer the case. I worked for a time with young offenders. Part of my job was to investigate the psychological dynamics in children and adolescents who attempted suicide, successfully or not. To my absolute shock and surprise, the key trigger for the great majority was how they were being treated by their peers, not their parents. My experience was not isolated, as is confirmed by the increasing numbers of reports of childhood suicides triggered by peer rejection and bullying. The more peers matter, the more children are devastated by the insensitive relating of their peers, by failing to fit in, by perceived rejection or ostracization.

No society, no culture is immune. In Japan, for instance, traditional values passed on by elders have succumbed to Westernization and the rise of a youth culture. That country was almost free of delinquency and school problems among its children

until very recently but now experiences the most undesirable products of peer orientation, including lawlessness, childhood suicide and an increasing school drop out rate. *Harper's* magazine recently published a selection of suicide notes left by Japanese children: most of them gave intolerable bullying by peers as the reason for their decision to take their own lives.^v

The effects of peer orientation are most obvious in the teenager, but its early signs are visible by Grade 2 or 3. Its origins go back to even before kindergarten and need to be understood by all parents, especially the parents of young children who want to avoid the problem or to reverse it as soon as it appears.

A Wake-up Call

The first warning came as long as four decades ago. The textbooks I used for teaching my courses in developmental psychology and parent-child relations contained references to an American researcher in the early 1960s who had sounded an alarm that parents were being replaced by peers as the primary source of cues for behavior and of values. In a study of seven thousand young people, Dr. James Coleman also discovered that relationships with friends took priority over those with parents. He was concerned that a fundamental shift had occurred in American society.^{vi} Scholars remained skeptical however, pointing out that this was Chicago and not mainstream North America. They were optimistic that this finding was probably due to the disruption in society caused by the Second World War and would go away as soon as things got back to normal. The idea of peers becoming the dominant influence on a child came from untypical cases on the fringe of society, maintained his critics. James Coleman's concerns were dismissed as alarmist.

I, too, buried my head in the sand until my own children abruptly disrupted my denial. I had never expected to lose my kids to their peers. To my dismay, I noticed that

on reaching adolescence both my older daughters began to orbit around their friends, following their lead, imitating their language, internalizing their values. It became more and more difficult to bring them into line. Everything I did to impose my wishes and expectations only made things worse. It's as if the parental influence my wife and I had taken for granted had all of a sudden evaporated. Sharing our children is one thing, being replaced is quite another. I thought my children were immune: they showed no interest in gangs or delinquency, were brought up in the context of relative stability with an extended family that dearly loved them, lived in a solid family-oriented community and had not had their childhood disrupted by a major world war. Coleman's findings just did not seem relevant to my family's life. When I started putting the pieces together, I found that what was happening with my children was more typical than exceptional.

"But aren't we meant to let go?" many parents ask. "Aren't our children meant to become independent of us?" Absolutely, but only when our job is done and only in order for them to be themselves. Fitting in with the immature expectations of the peer group is not how the young grow to be independent, self-respecting adults. By weakening the natural lines of attachment and responsibility, peer orientation undermines healthy development.

Children may know what they want, but it is dangerous to assume that they know what they need. To the peer-oriented child it seems only natural to prefer contact with his friends to closeness with his family, to be with them as much as possible, to be as much like them as possible. A child does not know best. Parenting that takes its cues from the child's preferences can get you retired long before the job is done. To nurture our children, we must reclaim them and take charge of providing for their attachment needs.

Extreme manifestations of peer orientation catch the attention of the media: violent bullying, peer murders, childhood suicides. Although we are all shocked by such

dreadful events, most of us do not feel that they concern us directly. And they are not the focus of this book. But such childhood tragedies are only the most dramatic signs of peer orientation, a phenomenon no longer limited to the concrete jungles and cultural chaos of large urbanized centers like Chicago, New York, Toronto, Los Angeles. It has hit the family neighborhoods--the communities characterized by middle class homes and good schools. The focus of this book is not what is happening out there, one step removed from us, but what's happening in our very own backyard.

For the two authors, our personal wake up call came with the increasing peer orientation of our own children. We hope *Hold On To Your Kids* can serve as a wake-up call to parents everywhere and to society at large.

The Good News

We may not be able to reverse the social, cultural and economic forces driving peer orientation, but there is much we can do in our homes and in our classrooms to keep ourselves from being prematurely replaced. Because culture no longer leads our children in the right direction towards genuine independence and maturity, parents and other child rearing adults matter more than ever before.

Nothing less will do than to place the parent-child (and adult-child) relationship back onto its natural foundation. Just as relationship is at the heart of our current parenting and teaching difficulties, it is also at the heart of the solution. Adults who ground their parenting in a solid relationship with the child parent intuitively. They do not have to resort to techniques or manuals but act from understanding and empathy. If we know how to be with our children and who to be for them, we need much less advice on what to do. Practical approaches emerge spontaneously from our own experience once the relationship has been restored.

The good news is that nature is on our side. Our children want to belong to us, even if they don't know that or feel that and even if their words or actions seem to signal the opposite. We can reclaim our proper role as their nurturers and mentors. In Part Four of this book we present a detailed program for keeping our kids close to us until they mature, and for re-establishing the relationship if it has been weakened or lost. There are always things we can do. Although no approach can be guaranteed to work in all circumstances, in my experience there are many, many more successes than failures--once parents understand where to focus their efforts. But the cure, as always, depends on the diagnosis. We look first at what is what is missing and how things have gone awry.

ⁱ Judith Harris. *The Nurture Assumption*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999

ⁱⁱ Psychosocial Disorders in Young People: Time Trends and Their Causes
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ⁱⁱⁱ This was the conclusion of Professor David Shaffer, a leading researcher and textbook writer in developmental psychology, after reviewing the literature on peer influence. Commenting on the current research, he states " ... it is fair to say that peers are the primary reference group for questions of the form "Who am I?" (David R Shaffer, *Developmental Psychology: childhood and adolescence*. Second edition, 1989. California: Brooks/Cole Publishers, p. 65)

^{iv} The suicide statistics are from the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control in the United States and from the McCreary Centre Society in Canada. The statistics on

suicide attempts are even more alarming. Urie Bronfenbrenner cites statistics that indicate that adolescent suicide attempts almost trippled in the 20 year period between 1955 - 1975. (Urie Bronfenbrenner. *The challenges of social change to public policy and development research*. Paper presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research and Child Development, Denver, Colorado, April, 1975)

^v Harper's, December 2003

^{vi} Professor James Coleman published his findings in a book entitled, *The Adolescent Society*, published by the Free Press in New York in 1961.