

Appendix II

DOES EXPLORING CHILDHOOD HAVE A THEORY?

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This paper was prepared by Marilyn Clayton, Director of EXPLORING CHILDHOOD. It is designed to supplement the Overview of EXPLORING CHILDHOOD which describes the pedagogical approach and conceptual framework of the course, by describing in depth the program's "theory about raising children"; defining what the program sees as its proper role in providing support, resources, and recommendations; and defining the areas in which the program feels decisions can be made only by those who know and are directly responsible for the welfare of a child. This paper appears in the materials for teachers, but it is concerned with some basic issues involved in the relationship of caregivers to younger people, and consequently may be appropriate for students, parents, or anyone involved in the EXPLORING CHILDHOOD program who is responsible for the care of children.

We are often asked if we have a theory about the right way to raise children.

Clearly, there is immense variety in child-rearing practices around the world. In some cultures children sleep next to their parents every night; in others it is considered harmful for parents and children to sleep in the same room. Some cultures feel physical punishment is necessary to ensure a child's growing up in the "right" way; others believe that physical punishment is damaging. Practices differ from culture to culture, and in a society like ours--where families come from many cultures--practices differ from family to family. We would be hard put to conclude that there is one right way to do any one thing, especially since attitudes about what you do can be as significant as the content of the act.

Nevertheless, much specific child-care advice is offered daily in the public media. Although the content of this advice often changes, pendulum-fashion, from one generation to the next, it is usually offered with authority, and seems to contribute to the insecurity people feel about their own judgment and competence in childrearing. We encourage people to choose the approaches that feel right for them, because the responsible person who knows and loves a child and his or her life circumstances is best suited to make the daily decisions that will affect that child's future. Our theory is that, in choosing approaches, it is helpful for any caregiver to have insight into the forces that shape the experience and development of a child. We have selected four areas in which we feel insight is important:

- . how children experience the world;
- . what is transmitted in human interactions;

- . the social forces that affect a family's ability to protect and nurture its children;
- . who you are and what you bring to caregiving.

How Children Experience the World

Piaget and Erikson are two theorists whose ideas have helped us think about how a child's experience may be different from an adult's experience, and about how children learn. Parents, teachers, and philosophers have considered these questions for centuries. Of those who speak for our time, we selected Piaget and Erikson because the focus of their work is consonant with what we feel our role should be: their work provides ideas about what a child's world is like, rather than prescribing what a caregiver should do. Because people's theories grow out of the perspectives of their cultures and the needs and experience of their own lives, we have tried to give theories a biographical context.

Piaget deals with the manner in which a child's mind takes in and structures the world, and suggests such factors as egocentrism, inability to deal with two things at one time, the slow growth of the ability to symbolize, the vibrancy and the limitations of being rooted in the here-and-now. These factors have implications not only for children's intellectual abilities, but also for the way they interpret all of their experience. Children cannot, for example, feel guilt until they can hold in mind and compare two things at once--what they are actually doing and what they should be doing.

Erikson illuminates for us children's daily experience by suggesting that the kinds of needs children have for others change as their bodies develop, and that children are learning different kinds of lessons about themselves and others at different points in the life cycle: for example, learning about trust in the early part of life when they need almost everything done for them, and later learning about others' reactions to their budding independence and their own success at it.

Piaget and Erikson tell us about lenses through which children take in and interpret the world, and about the dominant concerns and curiosities, emergent needs and abilities that structure the perceptions, actions, and interactions of a child's daily life. Our interest in Piaget and Erikson does not come from unquestioned agreement with their conclusions, but from what they have chosen to look at--the way in which children experience the world. Their conclusions about the nature of children's experience, however, seems reasonable to us.

Do their views of how children experience the world provide us with any guidelines for working with children? The implication of both Piaget's and Erikson's views of a child's experience is that children are "active" learners--that is, what children are doing naturally, spontaneously, and continuously, is setting up their own opportunities to test out the things that surprise them, make them curious, worry them, or challenge their ability to control their muscles, their emotions, and the course of events in their world.

The idea that a child is "active," in contrast to the idea that all learning opportunities have to be set up for a child, raises two practical questions: How much should a caregiver plan for a child? And how much should children be allowed to control?

With respect to planning, a child is not likely to learn much from either a totally barren or chaotic environment, or from an environment whose events are planned and sequenced in a way that is unresponsive to a child's needs and interests. It follows that a critical part of a caregiver's job is to listen carefully to a child. Knowing something about universal characteristics of development--the probable needs, perceptions, and emerging abilities and interests of a child in the early life cycle--can, of course, be very helpful in listening to children, so long as caregivers also take into account the individuality of a child.

Montessori helps us think about the issues of planning in offering the example of one approach: provide materials specifically designed to allow children to exercise some predictable, developing abilities and curiosities. For example, believing that children learn through all their senses, Montessori prepares them for reading by providing sandpaper letters that allow children to explore the letters' forms tactilely as well as visually. Does this kind of approach result in too much "structuring" of a child's activity? There is disagreement on this question; even schools that follow Montessori's basic principles differ in how much to structure a child's activity.

How much to structure a child's time, and with what, is a question for the caregiver to decide, because values and beliefs about what is important are involved. What we can do is help you think about your values and your view of the future in deciding what you want a child to learn, outline

developmental factors for you to consider in deciding how to meet a child's interests, and make you aware of the messages you send out in structuring what children do.

According to the "active" view of children, young children are often testing how much they can control. A second practical question, then, is how much should children be allowed to control? Children who are not allowed to control any events in their lives are likely to feel powerless. Children who are allowed to control everything are likely to be frightened by their power, and may introduce a great deal of stress into family interactions. We can help you think about what character traits you value in children and adults--such as independence, obedience, and responsibility--and we can help you think about how the kind of freedoms and supports children may be testing at given points in the early life cycle change with development. Given this perspective and information, decisions about control include choices about values, which can only be made by those who know and are responsible for a child.

What is Transmitted in Human Interactions?

All babies need people to love them. Not only is a baby's learning impaired when there are no loving caregivers, but "failure-to-thrive" cases show us that some babies with inadequate human attention cannot even gain weight. Early in life, the way a child's unfolding needs are met will determine the child's sense of self-identity and view of the characteristics of others. As children grow older, the function of caregivers goes beyond feeding, sheltering, and cuddling, to serving as models of the complicated

entities that human beings are. Possibly as a result of their total dependence on other human beings for a large segment of their lives, children are capable of being acutely perceptive of the reactions of others. The reactions and actions (both verbal and nonverbal) of the people children depend on carry messages that tell a child what is good and bad in the world, what is important and unimportant, who that child is.

We cannot tell you what the content of a caregiver's messages should be, because clearly this depends on what you value in a human being. We do attempt to help you become aware of the innumerable messages caregivers give to children. Because students will be working in fieldsites with children not their own, it is important for them to understand that children live with families whose love and attention is critical to their survival and sense of identity, and that children have been hearing and incorporating family messages daily since birth.

Finally, we think it important for caregivers to be aware of both the messages a child sends out and the feelings these messages evoke in them as caregivers. The second sense in which we say children are "active" is the sense that, from the moment they are born, they are sending messages about their needs. These messages evoke reactions in caregivers not only about the child's needs, but also about the caregiver's adequacy in meeting them. Messages from a child shape a caregiver's sense of competence, and can pattern the course of that relationship and any other relationship in which the caregiver is responsible for a child. Because babies differ in temperament from birth, caregivers with much the same nurturing potential may receive different messages from different babies. The caregiver of a

baby who is hard to console, for example, is more likely to feel inadequate to the task. While it is important to listen carefully and be responsive to children's messages, it is also important to have some perspective about the effect of those messages on your feelings as a caregiver. One way to achieve perspective is to share experiences with colleagues; another is to learn some ways to evaluate your own work with children. EXPLORING CHILDHOOD hopes to help you do both.

The Social Forces That Affect a Family's Ability to Protect and Nurture its Children

Few families in the world are isolated and able to supply all the resources each needs to survive and grow. Adults responsible for the care of children need self-esteem and a sense of security about their ability to provide for their families. Adults who are unemployed, or whose contributions are not valued by society; adults who are lonely, with no nourishing contacts in the community; and adults who were not valued as children may feel incompetent at providing the basic resources, skills, and models their children need. Child abuse, for instance, seems to occur in families that are under emotional stress, at times when an emotional loss is suffered by a caregiver who already feels lonely, unsupported, and unable to affect the forces that control his or her life. Just as lack of love can impair an infant's ability to grow and learn, lack of nourishing contacts with family, friends, and society can impair an adult's ability to nurture a child. We believe that awareness of the needs of families, and the stresses on caregiving that result when these needs are not met, is important for students both in

these present roles as caregivers for other people's children, and in their future roles as parents and people who make decisions that affect the lives of families.

In addition to the way a society provides resources and social networks, a culture affects the lives of children and families by the messages it sends through its media and institutions, its fairy tales and television programs. The way in which communities and the society at large provide for the needs of families, and the kinds of images valued by a culture are decisions made over long periods of time--sometimes with a great deal of thought, sometimes with little thought, and sometimes as practices that have grown out of tradition. Our role here is to provide some ways to think about the needs of families.

Who You Are and What You Bring to Caregiving

Everyone has strong feelings and beliefs about what children and caregivers should be like. If you discuss with your colleagues your reactions to a particular child or to a particular caregiving incident, you are likely to discover that people have different reactions, and that feelings on these issues are often surprisingly strong. Where do expectations and feelings about children and caregiving come from? One source is the culture of the community and the larger society; the extent to which you and colleagues come from the same community may determine the similarity of your views. Another source is your own family--the voices that have been telling you from the time you were an infant what is good or bad behavior, what a child should be rewarded or punished for, what a parent should worry about. These voices from childhood exert a strong influence on the kind of reaction people have

to children and their feelings about themselves when grown.

In caring for children, anyone's children, you will be making decisions every day, and you will have to learn what's right for you. As a teacher or student you can take some guidance from the values of a child's family and community (and should, .in fact, take these into account). As a parent you may be on your own in making your decisions. What we can do is help you be aware of some of the things that affect your decisions. You bring to caregiving a temperament, a history of experiences, a special perspective from your own point in the life cycle, and your own values, expectations, needs, and sense of identity. What are your expectations for children? Considering the stresses, hopes, needs, and conditions that shaped your family's expectations for you, which do you want to apply to the children you care for, which do you want to modify? Finally, what kind of expectations do you want to have for yourself?

EXPLORING CHILDHOOD'S message about child rearing is that it is helpful:

- . to be aware of the forces that affect the development of a child;
- . to gain perspective and ideas for your work with children from the experience of others who have studied and worked with children, from the traditions of your own family and community, and from the approaches of other families and other societies;
- . to build your own approach out of this understanding and perspective, and to explore what feels right for you in terms of your own beliefs, traditions, values, and identity.