

How to Raise Civilized Children in an Uncivilized World

Are teasing and bullying more prevalent today than they were a generation ago? Are children less forgiving? More disrespectful? Operating on a shorter fuse?

Judging by the turnout at a lecture on this topic last April, more than a few teachers and parents are living with these questions and looking for ways to foster good will in school and elsewhere.

The speaker was Waldorf teacher and psychologist Kim Payne, an Australian who has worked in southeast Asia and Britain, as well as the United States. Based in Northampton, Massachusetts, Payne has a private practice working with troubled youth, from kindergartners to twenty-year-olds. His talk, entitled "Planting the Seeds of Kindness," dealt with the social and spiritual roots of bullying behaviors and what we can do to address them.

The roots of violence in our culture, he said, lie in a lack of social contact. We live in an "I"-centered society, where individualism is prized, business transactions are impersonal, divorce is common, and community support is harder and harder to find.

Raising children in this environment takes more conscious effort than it did years ago. In the days when people had jobs for life, lived in the same towns for generations, and shared common values with their neighbors, it wasn't necessary to arrange playdates or discuss parenting "styles." People raised children the way their parents raised them, without giving it a second thought. And a whole community of others, from shopkeepers to grandmothers, was there to help.

Things are different now, not just here, but all over the world.

As part of his work with the Peace and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, Payne traveled 1500 kilometers to visit a community near Krueger National Park that still conducts initiation rites for boys entering puberty. Even there, he said, the elders complained about the younger generation: "Oh, our boys won't come to initiation practice; they won't let us beat them, starve them, cut them. All



Three-year-old Somerset Gall in the nursery garden.

they're doing is standing around talking."

Talking.

Payne wondered if this could be the real initiation rite.

One of his particular interests over the years has been rites of passage: what are they today? At what point do children know who they are? In the past, these rituals were administered from the top down, by higher authorities. The Jewish bar mitzvah and the Catholic confirmation are two traditional ways of marking spiritual maturation in a child. Today, however, the most successful rites of passage seem not to be something you *do for* your children, but something you *do with* them.

He noted that even in Native American sweat lodges, in which coming-of-age rituals were held, much of the initiation happened during the communal building of the lodge, before any official rites took place.

Rudolf Steiner, founder of the Waldorf School movement, once touted what he called "the new sacrament of human encounter." Payne theorizes that it is through dynamic one-on-one human encounters, dealing with the joys and sorrows of everyday life, that children develop empathy. And it is this empathy that is required if we want to break the cycle of violence in society.

Furthermore, he said, it is parents, not shamans, who are the new initiators. If they don't do it, the society will become horizontal, he warned, resembling a scene from William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. Peers will rule.

"You have to get involved," he urged parents. Embrace conflict. Don't separate children when they are having an argument. Help them work it out. It is through conflict that children develop a sense of who they are.

Western cultures, he said, are devoted to pain avoidance. Instead of developing ourselves inwardly, we seek outer stimulation, often engaging in compulsive behaviors or addictions. He went on to list 24 examples of what he called "escape routes," among them perfectionism, vandalism, fundamentalism, materialism, eating disorders, exercise, drugs, media, therapy, and work.

Criticism, he noted, is one of the most prevalent addictions of our time.

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Watch a television program like *Friends* and you may hear a hundred comebacks in a single half-hour. In children, this addiction to criticism manifests itself as disrespectfulness ("dissing") or bullying. Bullying is a way of making yourself feel bigger by making someone else feel smaller. Kids who engage in this kind of behavior, said Payne, have "self-esteem issues." He added that children who are regularly victimized by bullies may also be engaging in addictive behavior. A child becomes a target, he said, when he or she has no role in the group.

Oddly enough, a zero tolerance policy, in which an attempt is made to squash the bully completely, can be a breeding ground for other types of addictions, Payne said. Denied his or her usual behavior, a child may simply become compulsive about something else, like video games.

The real task for adults is to build bridges between the child's moral or feeling life and the child's actions. The goal is not to ostracize or isolate bullies, but to socialize them.

If you label a child a bully and punish him, you create an anti-hero, said Payne, which tends to polarize the children in the group as well as the teacher. This response also puts more pressure on the victim, who will continue to be bullied in "sneakier ways."

It's useful if you can create a culture in which the children consider it not so much bad, but stupid, to be a bully. Then a peer can safely say to a bully, "Duuuh. That's just

so stupid. Why did you need to do that?" Since teachers see only one of every 20 bullying incidents, some of which are very subtle, it's important to create a culture in which kids can say 'no' and tell an adult when necessary.

He pointed out that Waldorf classes are like families. Because they remain intact for years, every child knows every other child intimately, and as a result, the conflicts can be more intense than in conventional schools. Waldorf schools have traditionally dealt with bullying in an implicit way, through storytelling, classroom seating assignments, or the casting of parts in plays. But there are some children who need to be dealt with explicitly, said Payne. And the process needs to be consistent and transparent.

He described a typical game of Four Square, which he called "the ultimate conflict game," as an opportunity to teach conflict resolution skills. Usually there is a lot to argue about in this game: was the ball out or not? When a disagreement arises, the first step is to ask the combatants: "What's happening?" Identify the issue quickly, but don't blame. Then paraphrase back to them what each one has said. Try sharing a story from your own biography, a time when you were in a similar situation. Then ask the children to come up with ideas (perhaps three ideas in two minutes). Tell them if they can sort it out, you'll give them the ball back. Don't make them promise anything; say "try."

You can also choose one child to be a line judge, or truth-sayer, who is immune from criticism. For serious infractions, he said, it's helpful to have older children around to facilitate a sit-down conference.

Some schools have formal social inclusion policies that parents, teachers, and students have helped write. This is especially true of public schools in Britain, Scandinavia, Asia, and Australia, where schools are required to have a bullying policy and are inspected regularly to be sure they are in compliance. The strongest societies, said Payne, are the ones in which the rules are few, but clear. A rule in a kindergarten, for example, where children are busy constructing things, might be: "we only have houses that everyone can visit."

Along the continuum of implicit to explicit approaches, every child has a different threshold at which they "get it," Payne said. It's the job of the teacher to find that threshold.

At home, the most effective parenting style, he said, is an *authoritative* one in which misbehaving children are consistently reintegrated into the social life of the family. Styles he cited as ineffective are: *punitive* (adults are authoritarian and children become stigmatized), *neglectful* (adults abdicate their responsibilities and children become indifferent), and *permissive* (adults collude with the children, who then become unaccountable).

As adults, said Payne, we need to get over our "harmony addiction" and develop policies both at home and at school for dealing with conflict in a straightforward way.

Cyrus Burns and his mother, Lorimer, participants in the school's Parent Tot Program, help clean up the nursery garden.

