

What About The Children?



RESEARCH SUMMARY

Developmental Optimization (2013)

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The 'nature or nurture' debate, with respect to human development, has over recent years received significant scientific backing for the nurture element of development. It seems that brain development has a large component of plasticity, that is to say, neuronal growth and connectivity in the brain is largely determined by experiences of our local environment in infancy. Furthermore epigenetics, that is modifications to genetic material induced principally by stress events, can exert permanent changes in the expression of genes and have a knock-on effect on behaviour and development that progresses into adulthood. Now that this 'nurture' component of human development is widely accepted, particularly at the infant stages of life, the question arises: – is it possible to optimize the development of infants' experiences to provide a framework for the best outcomes for future human well-being? Those outcomes might contain personality characteristics such as empathy, conscience, socio-moral development, self-regulation, and other characteristics such as intelligence and health. If we are to treat human development as an optimization issue, we need to establish baselines for those characteristics; with that baseline determined, one could then make judgements about optimization goals.

In this paper, the authors focus chiefly on the goal of human moral functioning. This is a complex goal to aim for and with many integral components. The authors consider four components related to social problems in American society.

1. The breakdown in the enjoyment of sociality – 50% of all adults are now single.
2. Dissatisfaction with mismatched expectations in adults.
3. The rise in the number of families displaying antisocial behaviour.
4. The increase in the number of children entering Kindergarten with behavioural dysregulation.

Moral development is not simply an issue of 'do no harm'; there is a more prosocial element that requires a sophisticated social engagement. The paper has nothing to do with social engineering. Two principal components in infant development govern prosocial behaviour: self-regulation and concern for others.

Self-regulation is key for successful development. It begins at birth when there is neurological immaturity and is highly influenced by the infant's relationship with the mother (or principal caring adult). The mother needs to be sensitive and respond to stress responses in the infant. If the mother is unresponsive, there will be a maladaptive response in the infant. It will exhibit depressed affect and a lack of social proposals compared with a child from a well-nurtured background. Repeated experiences of stress in the infant, creates an entrenched habit of dysregulation and insecure attachment. On the other hand, attentive caregiving by the mother creates a

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relational communication system between mother and child. This process starts early in life with face-to-face interactions between the infant and its mother and lays down channels for brain emotional signalling. The regulation of emotion in the infant goes hand in hand with the development of the attachment relationship with its mother. Mature emotional and regulatory systems form the basis for rewarding social interactions later in life.

Concern for others is a key factor in moral development. Clearly there is more than the baseline requirement of 'do no harm'. The developing child needs to experience empathy for others in different experiences and be prepared to take on some responsibility for the other's welfare. Empathy is shaped by the infant-mother interaction. In turn, this can induce empathy in her child's interaction with other children. By this, the mother fosters the child's emotional attunement.

The key to an assessment of optimization for infant development is the establishment of a baseline set of behaviours. Recently Narvaez and colleagues have developed a Family Life Attitude Behaviour Measure (FLAM); this measures maternal behaviours and their attitudes to consistent care. FLAM was tested on US and Chinese mothers; there were only minor cultural differences between the two groups. The FLAM attitudes were then measured on a group of 50 mothers of 3-year-old children. Early analysis of the results suggests that self-regulation and emotion recognition are key factors in moral development.

The neurobiological correlates of infant development have led to an increasing concern that many problems in infant, adolescent, and adult development have an early attachment-related neurobiological origin. This can be serious, not only for the person affected, but for society in general. In an attempt to counter this progression of thought, some researchers have suggested that children are remarkably resilient to stresses that occur in war zones, or orphanages with minimal care. So how can low-quality day-care be a real problem? This difference of opinion is the result of using dissimilar criteria for assessing the two different positions. The criterion for resilience is measured by some form of end-point achievement, such as graduation from high school, reproducing a child, or avoidance of incarceration in prison. In other words, resilience is reduced to a type of survival of the fittest. Resilience measures are a blunt instrument and do not function through subtle indicators of well-being for a thriving life. Resilience criteria do not incorporate psychopathologies and medical disorders that emanate from insecure attachment between the mother and her child. In contrast, developmental optimization is aimed at identifying aberrant behaviours, and constructing strategies for the mother-infant relationships that develop moral personalities in infants together with the avoidance of mental, medical and social ill-health.

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