

Abstract:

Integrating other work on parenting and prevention, family resilience, positive development, the effects of various kinds of parent-child relationships, transformational and experiential learning and social justice, we show that a combination of developmental understanding and family systems praxis provides powerful and effective tools for facing the challenges that today's parents face. We make a case for "optimal parenting" as a more comprehensive response to these challenges and briefly discuss the value and far-reaching ramifications for our families, society and planet.

Currents in Family Studies: A Critical Appreciation

The last 40 years have shown a notable change in public policy regarding drug use, domestic violence, and other undesirable conditions faced by American families. As our research shows, the movement from a "discipline and punish" strategy to an approach that includes problem prevention has a strong pedigree and years of research to support it. With their enormous impact on society as a whole, family issues such as drug abuse prevention have taken center stage in governmental and charitable organization missions. Their strategy relies upon the belief that these problems are preventable through some potent combination of education, legislation, and intervention.

Notably, however, recent scholarship recognizes that the prevention approach cannot lead to sustained health and well-being. Preventing a behavior from occurring does not mean that the causes and motivations for that behavior have been rectified. It does not include auxiliary strengths. It says nothing about the future.

Prevention is, by definition, partial. The implicit assumption is that the lack of addiction or violence signifies health. It has become increasingly clear that this is inaccurate. In response, a scholarly movement has arisen that seeks to understand and foster "family resilience." This field investigates the qualities by which families are able to withstand crises and catastrophic events and remain more or less intact. While resilience is

a more powerful concept than prevention, it still refers to the ability to bounce back from or survive traumatic events, and is therefore focused on dealing with difficulties.

A newer thread in the scholarly discourse is "positive development." A succinct account of the distinctions among the prevention, resilience, and positive development is offered by Jennifer Kerpelman in relationship to parent education and adolescent development:

"The prevention model emphasizes risk and protective factors/processes, where a focus on processes may help improve what parents are told in terms of how to reduce the likelihood of adolescent problems. The resiliency perspective emphasizes protection, identifying how factors within people, families, and other environments promote positive outcomes in the face of adversity. Both prevention and resilience approaches aim to reduce youth problems and are useful for practitioners working with parents of at-risk or troubled youth. A contrasting yet complementary approach is that of positive youth development. Similar to the concepts of resilience and protection, the goal of positive youth development is to help children and adolescents build their assets in order to reach their full potential. This approach concentrates less on specific problem prevention, or on

particular groups of adolescents who need intervention, and tends to focus on all youth and on increasing personal and interpersonal strengths.” (Kerpelman, 2004, p. 16)

Kerpelman goes on to assert that the family relationships are the most important factor in determining the efficacy of all three approaches. It’s clear from her work and the work of her colleagues that a more comprehensive parent education program is needed to address the issues faced by American families today.

Thankfully, the research emphasis on children and families is shifting away from pathology and towards positive development, resilience, and prevention (Armstrong, Birnie-Lefcovitch, & Ungar, 2005; Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004; Catalano, Hawkins, Berglund, Pollard, & Arthur, 2002; Kerpelman, 2004; Larson, 2000; Patterson, 2002; Simon, Murphy, & Smith, 2005; Small & Memmo, 2004). This trend has great value for families. It avoids the stigma that inevitably results from labeling families dysfunctional—a stigma that blocks parents and children from seeking education and assistance. It supports the strengths of families, honors diversity, and stretches across all ages of childhood as well as all types of families.

Family as a system

The basic conceptual shift towards a systems approach to family has been succinctly summarized by Cox and Paley in the *Annual Review of Psychology*.

“We consider here some of the principles of a general systems theory as applied to understanding the family as an organized system. These include properties of (a) wholeness and order, referring to the idea that a whole is greater than the sum of its parts and has properties that cannot be understood simply from the combined characteristics of each part; (b) hierarchical structure, wherein systems are composed of subsystems that are really systems of their own; (c) adaptive self-stabilization, which refers to homeostatic

features of systems that compensate for changing conditions in the environment by making coordinated changes in the internal workings of the system; and (d) adaptive self-organization, complementary to the notion of self-stabilization, referring to the ability of open, living systems to adapt to change in or challenge to the existing system” (Cox, 1997, pp. 2-3).

Once family is appreciated as a system the door opens to positive development, resilience, and prevention. (Eirini & Ann, 2003; Ingram, 2003; Levin & Trost, 2000; B. Luvmour, 2006; Minuchin, 1974; Smart & Sanson, 2001) The interactions within a family determine the development of each family member as well as the family as a whole (Hoffman, 1981, 2002; Minuchin, 1974). Research so far supports some general principles: Familial boundaries need to be flexible so that family members can learn how to recognize and access support, yet sufficiently defined so that no one is bereft in times of need (Minuchin, 1974; Wallace, 1997); Family communication is critical to family health (Bateson, Jackson, Haley, & Weakland, 1956; Hoffman, 1981, 2002; Ingram, 2003; Vangelisti, 2004).

As the attachment research shows, it is now commonly accepted that maintaining close relationships in early childhood is critical to well-being (Bowlby, 1982; Ornstein & Sobel, 1987; Rholes & Simpson, 2004; Siegel, 1999). Happily, the importance of relationships for all of childhood is gaining currency (Klein, 1990; Langer, 1989; B. Luvmour, 2006; Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975; San Diego County Office of Education, 1997). Smart and Sanson, for instance, show that social competence is dependent upon parent-child relationships throughout childhood (Smart & Sanson, 2001). Supportive relations with parents through the teen years reduce risks for both physical and behavioral problems. An outstanding example of this is the massive study by the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development of thousands of adolescents, which revealed that eighty-four per cent of teens rank family relationships as extremely important. The study also found four meaningful contacts per day between parents and teens significantly reduces emotional distress,

suicide thoughts and attempts, violence, early sexual activity, cigarette use, alcohol use, marijuana use, school absenteeism, and becoming pregnant. Connecting at breakfast, after school, dinner and bedtime are so important that the study named it the most important factor in teen health (National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health, 1998).

The aforementioned scholarship provides powerful support for the family systems view. It clearly describes prevention and offers support for resilience (Benard, 1995). However, it offers little in terms of a definition of positive development. To rectify these shortcomings we have to turn to the fields of child development, humanistic and transpersonal psychology, and holistic education for they specifically study positive development. Researchers from these fields use a variety of different names in their attempt to describe positive development. Carl Jung called it the fulfillment of personality (Jung, Read, Fordham, & Adler, 1953). Humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers talked about the “fully functioning human”, (Rogers, 1961, 1983) while his peer Abraham Maslow referred to “self-actualization” (Maslow, 1971). The educator Frederick Froebel, who revolutionized early childhood education in the early 1900s, spoke of the divine becoming manifest in the child (Froebel, 1909). Maria Montessori, updating Froebel, called it the manifestation of Intelligence (Montessori, 1966). Paul Tillich, whose insights revolutionized the field of religious philosophy, preferred the term *ultimacy*, which simply means to be all you can be (Forbes, 1999; Tillich, 1956).

The case for optimal parenting

Unfortunately, well established research about the needs of every family is locked up in academic discourse and not available to the families themselves. As a consequence parents and teachers continue to operate on old paradigms of family well-being, resulting in a lack of prevention, inadequate interventions, and poorly spent resources.

Since it is commonly accepted that children are the future and that the way we nurture and educate children is the singularly best leverage point for creating a just

and prosperous society, a question naturally arises: What relationships support optimal well-being in children? And as children grow and learn in the matrix of family, a correlative question appears: How can parents learn about and then implement relationships which support optimal well-being?

Addressing these questions is at the heart of what we at EnCompass call “optimal parenting.” In our modern world, the family is becoming crushed between the needs and demands of the market economy, of commercial advertising, of media promotion, of political ideas, and impersonal governmental administrations. People no longer understand the rules of these daunting systems that intersect and become overwhelming. Alienation and loss of meaning are the results when the force of these large systems confronts the individual.

The connections of love, support, and care in families is the place where each individual finds the nurturing necessary to create meaning in their lives. The health of the family system is extremely important for the development of well-being. The importance of this development impacts the quality, health, and viability of individual action in all public life.

Society depends on the development of healthy individuals. Humans are bound together by powerful needs for social connection with feelings of loyalty and identification, we offer the perspective that it is from a stable base of well-being that one is free to venture out into the perspective of others and the diversity of this world. The ability to work together depends on the values, morals, and social skills of the individual. Who can effect change in society but the individual who has developed and matured in well-being? An individual who has developed a sense of justice and care that is balanced, responsive, and responsible, is capable of seeing others as worthy of respect. The family is the provenance for developing the moral character necessary to recognize the equal worth of others, which is the basis for protecting human rights.

Each individual is called upon daily to make rational judgments in the course of work and life. That individual needs the safe space of home and family to rejuvenate

and raise psychologically and emotionally healthy children. In the impersonal world of institutionalism and competition, the family should be a refuge in a warm sheltered world of intimacy.

The plurality of cultural differences requires a relationship to context and differing norms; it is the points of connection, combined with the ability to know oneself reflexively, that binds humans together as one species expressed with a diversity of cultural clothing and norms that we operate by. To find points of commonality necessary for communicative practices, one must tap into one's humanity and extend into a commonality of humanness. We argue that it is the intrinsic knowledge of one's rightful place in one's center and home, combined with familial relationships of love and trust that allows one to expand into a connected relationship with all humanity.

Adults are children first, and children establish their identities, morals, and values in the context of family relationships, love, care and the nurturing of parental guidance. In her essay, *Autonomy, Recognition, and Respect*, Joanna Meehan said it succinctly, "The capacity to respect others which leads to an ability to conceive of all people as fully equal members of the moral and social community is . . . rooted in childhood" (Meehan, 1995, p. 244).

Developmental Sensitivity

It is our premise that families are the crucible of society. The primary location of all learning and growth for children is in the context of family relationships. A second premise of our work is that all life forms unfold in stages and development occurs in an irreversible direction towards greater complexity. Humans are dynamic systems with a biological unfolding in a constant feedback loop with the environment. This is true for both adult and child in the family, as it is for all life. There is no doubt that humans subtly affect one another by the very nature of our being. We sense each other, empathically feel one another, and ingest each other's quality of being in a multitude of ways.

In this vein, Josette & Ba Luvmour have carefully developed a lexicon describing well-being in children called Natural Learning Rhythms (NLR) (EnCompass, 2004; B. Luvmour, 2006; J. Luvmour & Luvmour, 1993). NLR combines the best of child development and family dynamics in a format that families can easily understand and apply. In keeping with EnCompass' ethos that every family is its own culture, NLR describes the relationships that support optimal well-being but does not prescribe how to actualize them. Each family can then create the relationships according to their own background and resources. Most families welcome the opportunity to reconfigure their familial relationship to optimize well-being. Of course, many of the examples gleaned from twenty years of work are made available to those families who wish specific suggestions.

Experiential Learning

Our twenty years of fieldwork have revealed that parents learn best through direct experience. Seminars for parents are not enough, for the information gained there is often lost in the exigencies of everyday family life. Therefore, we at EnCompass have developed experiential learning programs for the whole family. Nothing compares to parents learning, then practicing what they have learned, and finally reflecting on their experience with other parents and facilitators.

In order to facilitate experiential learning for the whole family, EnCompass staff use cooperative games and activities, initiatives and challenge course activities. There are hundreds of exercises in our tool bag and our facilitators' book on the subject has won the Parent's Choice award. Children enjoy themselves and families learn together. This is backed up, of course, by the learning about NLR that parents engage during education blocks in the program.

Experiential learning has a venerable and well researched history. From John Dewey (Dewey, 1929) to the present success of service-based learning (<http://www.servicelearning.org>), experiential learning for children has led to academic excellence, increased community awareness and involvement, and deepened self esteem and confidence (Forbes, 1999; Froebel,

1909; Gresham, 2001; Lewin & Lewin, 1948; Liebschner, 1992; J. Luvmour & Luvmour, 1992; J. Luvmour et al., 2002; Miller, 1990; Montessori, 1966, 1995; Piaget, Gruber, & Vonáeche, 1977; Rogers, 1983; Rousseau & Archer, 1964; Sherman, 2001; Widmayer, 2005). EnCompass, using NLR and the above named activities and exercises, has extended experiential learning to include whole families.

Family Programs for the 21st Century

Combining parent education for developmental sensitivity with experiential whole-family activities provides the opportunity for family members to learn, experience, reflect and apply what they have learned to

real in-the-moment situations. With ongoing support from the EnCompass staff, participants experience greater parenting confidence and communication. (EnCompass, 2004)

Thus, EnCompass has pioneered a new direction for family well-being. The emphasis is moved from pathology to education for positive development. The opportunity is whole family learning, which brings both meaning and enjoyment to all family members. The result is what we all wish for—families who enjoy one another, bring out the best in one another, and face life's challenges together. Healthy families make a healthy society. All of society benefits.

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A key staff member of EnCompass Institute, Albee has worked at EnCompass for over 12 years as a program co–designer and facilitator, leading groups of families, children, and professionals through experiential learning programming.

Owner of Faster Connections, Inc. since 1990, Albee Kara has been responsible for the IT needs of numerous small businesses, nonprofits, schools, creative professionals & consultants. Albee lives in Portland, Oregon with his lovely wife, two beautiful daughters, and a cat.

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