

# COOPERATIVE CHILDREARING

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Radical Psychiatry theory has a bias: a strong conviction that personal relationships are happiest when people are most equal, and when they agree to behave cooperatively with each other. Most of what we've written about cooperative relationships (see Chapter 4) has been about adults: lovers, spouses, friends, roommates, and so on. Often, however, we are asked to help people work on problems with children, and they are surprised to learn that our tilt toward equality is as strong here as it is elsewhere.

## **EQUAL RIGHTS/UNEQUAL POWER**

In fact, conducting a cooperative relationship with a child is more confusing and complex. Two adults may have pretty nearly equal power, but a child and an adult do not. When we teach the “rules of cooperation,” we always begin by pointing out that they apply only in cases where people are equal. Don't try to be cooperative with your boss or landlord, we caution people. But between grown-ups and children, the power is not equal: adults are physically larger and stronger; children cannot earn a living, wander safely anywhere they care to walk, transport themselves from place to place, and so on; adults know important things that kids do not.

How then can we advocate treating children as equals when they are not? And even if that were possible, isn't it too much trouble? Kids are rightfully self-centered, concentrated on their own worlds, not capable of making decisions for the good of the group. Isn't it courting disaster to give up parent-made rules and edicts?

First of all, we need to distinguish between equal rights and equal power. Children and adults are entitled, we believe, to equal rights. Children and adults do not, however, have equal power. When Simon, aged ten, wants to go to see a monster movie, and Gloria, aged forty, wants to see a thriller, Gloria would make a mistake, we believe, if she settled the conflict by citing her prior claim to decision-making rights, simply because she preceded Simon on this earth. Gloria might use her greater power: “We're going to the thriller, because I won't pay to go to the monster movie and I won't drive to the theater where the monster movie is playing.” Simon might pull out some tricks of power he has. He might cry, pout, storm around, refuse to go at all. But his power is only to retreat or to harass; if he really wants to see a movie, Gloria has the ultimate power: money and mobility.

What we advocate, then, is equal rights for children and adults, combined with a clear and honest vision of how power is in fact unequal. If you know better than your one-year-old that speeding automobiles kill, you do not respect her equal right to cross a street whenever she pleases. You use your greater power to restrain her. But if you want your twelve-year-old son to do his homework every night and he wants to watch TV, and if you consider his rights to be equal to your own, then you reason with him. You may even reason super-persuasively. But you do not threaten to beat him, or even to withdraw his allowance, if he disobeys you.

Why not? you may ask. How wearing to “reason” with a headstrong twelve-year-old. John, papa to Jesse, a four-year-old who knows exactly what he wants and how to argue for it, asks to be persuaded why he should do the tiring work of negotiating with his son. Why not pick him up, put him in the car and say, “Too bad, Jesse, we're doing it my way!”

True, it is easier at the moment to throw the kid in the car. Here are three reasons to take the longer route:

**1. Violence pervades our culture.** It infests families. Its first and final bulwark is the belief that it is all right to strike children. Hitting children is a final abuse of power that stands, however well concealed, directly behind the usurpation

of decision-making power by adults. There is no way John could succeed in throwing Jesse in the car if they both didn't know he was able, and in the final analysis willing, to use his superior force against his son.

**2. To pre-empt children's rights is to break their wills.** Kids are freedom-loving like the rest of us. From infancy, they will fight back against tyranny. But eventually they will lose that fight, for adults are indeed a superior force. When they do, they have learned an important lesson: that at root they are powerless to affect their own lives, not to mention the world around them. “Disciplined” children become socially-docile adults.

**3.** Finally, a more selfish and practical argument: obedience is very hard to obtain for all time. **Children who have been forced to submit today will fight back tomorrow.** Unless you are willing to use Dickensian tactics, to keep the rod always visible and often employed, your kids will get you back. It is no big surprise that teenagers rebel against everything; they've been waiting for years, until their bodies caught up with their souls and they could fight back. Unfortunately, by then the means they've learned (from master teacher-parents) are less than honest and kind: lying (“I'm spending the night at my friend's house” is a clear echo of “I'm taking away your allowance for your own good”), bullying (“Just try to stop me” sounds suspiciously like “That's final and I won't discuss it any more”), etc.

So, if you aren't concerned about violence or convinced of its connection with childrearing; if you aren't persuaded by a need to produce a generation of adults who feel and act powerfully in the world; then spare the rod for your own sake. You will reap the rewards in the not-too-distant future, as your kids grow older and larger and treat you with the respect you've always shown them.

## **FASHIONS IN CHILDRERING**

Theories of childrearing have been around for as long as Cain and Abel. They engender enormous storms of intensity. Many people keep quiet about politics, violence, their religious beliefs, almost anything and everything they believe — until it comes to childrearing.

Walk down the street with an infant, and some stranger may tell you the baby is dressed too warmly, or not warmly enough. Men who have never held a baby younger than twenty-five insist on the need for a firm and disciplined hand. Grey-haired women tell you Baby should be sleeping through the night by now, and imply that those 2 a.m. feedings are the fault of poor mothering. Grandparents view your red-rimmed eyes unsympathetically, and insist you “simply have to let the child cry herself to sleep a few times.”

Ways of childrearing engender such energetic conflict because they reflect our most heartfelt beliefs about life. How we treat our children grows from our axioms about people, whether they are good or bad, civilized or savage, in need of social molding or born with an instinct toward kindness and respect for others. Moreover, we feel deeply obligated to treat our children in ways we think will instill them with the beliefs and traits they need, in our opinions, to succeed in the world. No wonder then that discussions about children are rarely polite and intellectual. They touch the core of ourselves, our fears and convictions about our relationships to life and to others.

Childrearing fashions swing back and forth, tipping the scales to favor grown-up rights one decade, children's rights the next. The Victorians believed children were to be “seen and not heard.” The rules of behavior set by adults were designed to keep kids from disrupting the lives of their elders. It was considered to be good training for children to learn to obey and to squelch any natural inclinations (toward joy, playfulness, sexuality, etc.) which might interfere with their good behavior in a restrictive culture later in life.

Permissiveness, the opposite of authoritarianism, tends to be a popular philosophy in times of economic boom. Unlike the Victorians, who lived in an age of industry-building and capital-accumulation, when thrift and austerity were a

practical virtue, middle-class people in affluent times can afford to experiment. Post-World War II fashions, influenced by writers like Benjamin Spock, instructed parents to nurture the wild impulses of little folks. In a reaction against the body binding and emotion squelching of an earlier time, parents sought to free their children's spirits. My own parents still tell the story with glee of how I called my father a “big dope” when I was angry at him. Their parents would have been shocked and punitive at such a statement. Parents were influenced by the Freudian theory that the characters of youngsters are formed within the first few years of life, and frightened that they might make terrible and irreversible mistakes. Permissiveness was sometimes a euphemism for paralysis: better to do nothing than to risk fixing the little darling's psyche at some inappropriate stage of development.

The free-school movement of the '60s carried the notion of children's rights a step further, but also retarded adults' assertion of their own rights further. Adults came to mistrust their own ideas and inclinations, a corollary to the youth movements of the times. The concept of schools without structure and of children's own wants dictating the order of the day was stated with revolutionary fervor – and it was, indeed, a progressive idea. But it placed all the rights in the hands of the children, and denied any to the adults. Tales of chaos and boredom began to characterize free-schools, and the stories contained some truth. Adults, in rebellion against authoritarianism, and unwilling to impose their preconceptions about what children need on their young charges, were afraid to speak up about their own needs. Grown-up needs were mistrusted as possibly polluted by authoritarianism. But children as a result were protected from realities. Other people do sometimes need quiet. Life may really be easier and richer if you know how to read. Teachers' good-will stretches further when there is some negotiated order to the way time is spent during the day.

The pendulum swung back. Its velocity was fueled by the exhaustion and bitterness of self-effacing adults. “Back to basics” became the slogan of the '70s. Not coincidentally, the times were hard. Liberated childrearing had never gripped the imaginations of working class parents. Now it began to seem an unaffordable luxury to middle-class families as well. Alternative schools were transformed from multi-graded, open classrooms to high-achievement, academic learning centers where children were closely supervised while taught the three Rs. Once again, grown-ups knew what children needed to learn, and how to teach it. The natural impulses of little ones, it had turned out, were altogether too natural to be heeded.

Today, one of the favorite phrases of educators and therapists is that “we need to set limits.” The concept suggests a softened approach to the idea that adults must exercise power over the lives of children. It replaces the philosophy of an earlier day that children are little beasts who need to be whipped into shape, but it is kissing cousin to that notion. For couched in dulcet phrases of psychology, the concept of “setting limits” still suggests that grownup knows best and small people must be tamed or they will overstep the limits of safe and sane behavior.

## **RULES OF COOPERATION**

Elsewhere we have written about the rules of cooperation (see Chapter 4). Let us look here at how they apply between adults and children.

**No Secrets or Lies:** Often parents ask advice about how much to tell their kids about their own lives. In general, the answer is the same with kids as it is with adults: tell them everything that might be relevant to them. If you are considering moving to another city, if you are considering making a major change in your love relationship, tell them. They will intuit anyway that big stuff is afoot, and they are apt to imagine possibilities far worse than what is actually in the offing. Hiding feelings, such as anger, confusion, fear or sadness, is another common way grownups lie to children. Kids can handle anything they know up front.

**No Rescue:** Rescue, or doing more than your share (see Chapter 7), is an epidemic condition in American families. Children are thought to be far less capable than they in fact are, both to handle feelings and to take care of themselves. The question of Rescue will come up often as we discuss common problems adults raise about children.

**No Power Plays:** A power play is any action intended to make another person do something against her will. Ways adults power-play kids are many. Kids retaliate in kind. A major power play by adults, however, which children cannot match, is punishment. Punishment, and power plays against children in general, reflect unhelpful beliefs about what kids need, what parents must do, as well as an attitude of hopelessness that anything less than force will resolve disagreements.

## **RESCUE AT THE DINNER TABLE**

Part of what confuses us about giving up power to children is the question of what our responsibility is toward them. If I don't force my five-year-old to clean his room, will he grow up to be a disordered personality? It is commonly believed in our culture that children grow into the adults we create. This view is furthered in several ways. Psychiatrists concentrate their analysis of grown-up behavior disproportionately on patients' relationships with their parents (see Chapter 14), implying that the off-spring's problems are the parents' fault. Parents expect to be judged by how their children behave. We are embarrassed if our kids don't "do it right:" speak politely, perform well in school, appear well-groomed and have conventional haircuts. When grown children live their lives in ways that confuse and dismay their parents, mothers and fathers wail, "Where did we go wrong?" They believe that they are responsible for what their kids do.

The question of parents' influence on their children is a confusing one. How the culture at large acts on our psychology is rarely discussed. Instead, each nuclear family appears to be a unit entirely unto itself, as immune from outside influence as it is isolated from outside help. No wonder that Mom and Dad feel they must do it all themselves, and conversely that it is all their fault.

What we fail to see is that influences beyond our control as parents are affecting our children all the time. We teach them values that are themselves culturally determined: be independent, save money, dress neatly, bathe daily, all are values specific to our place and time. In the far reaches of the Afghanistan mountains, only some of them would be highly regarded. Moreover, the very structure of our family life, the isolation of Mom, Pop and kids in a single-family household, teaches values which we may not consciously share: the value, for instance, of privacy (which often is a cover for secrecy and shame). Privatized families fail to teach skills we need to make and keep friends, even though Mother may urge her children to be more sociable. We learn that the price of intimacy is the sort of dependency in which most families are trapped; no one will feed you, care for you in ill health, tolerate your worst qualities unless they are forced to by blood.

The notion that we are responsible for who our children become goes hand-in-hand with the fear that our children depend on us to do what is healthy and safe for them. Parents make rules about bedtime, eating habits, forays away from home, contact with friends, etc., because we believe that children, left to their own devices, would be subject to overwhelming dangers. As a result, we take more control than is good for our children or for ourselves, over the business of daily living. If we re-examine and scale down our fears, they may contain some useful kernel. Messy rooms, for instance, are unlikely to damage fragile psyches. But it is a reasonable desire that children, particularly boy children who tend to be exempted in our culture, learn the skills of housekeeping. A persuasive argument can be made to that effect, and the skills passed on in a couple of hours. Once learned, however, it is up to the child whether or not he or she does it.

Food is an arena in which power, control and responsibility are often intricately confused in American families, and so it is a good example to consider. Children are made to eat a predetermined amount of food at unvarying intervals. "Three meals a day are good for you." "Eat everything on your plate." "No dessert until you finish your vegetables." The tyranny of the dinner table is as much an American institution as apple pie and the Soaps. Not only are children tyrannized to eat those three well-balanced meals a day, but Mother is tyrannized by making them.

Eating injunctions rest on several assumptions: children's natural inclinations about food are untrustworthy. All people have the same nutritional needs. Appetite is constant; we all should be hungry for the same quantities of food at the same times every day. Without close supervision from parents, children will become ill, too fat, too thin, pimply, or something else too horrible to contemplate.

Parents therefore bear a heavy responsibility: to monitor their children's food intake in detail (be ever on guard against the demon sugar, for instance), and to provide proper meals in a proper sequence, whether their kids want them or not. Two things happen as a result. First, kids grow up ignorant of their own body's requirements, alienated from their own biological rhythms. It is very often true that children, left to their own devices, eat irregularly. Often, a child will eat large quantities of food one day, and then eat lightly the next. Appetite is variable. Allowed to experience appetite, children use it as an accurate index of their own body's needs. Many children prefer six or eight small meals a day to three large ones. Faced with quantities of food at one sitting, their appetite is quickly satisfied, and then they are hungry again a few hours later. Since meals are not available at odd times, they turn to sweet snacks. Moreover, because what they hunger for is different from what they get, they learn to distrust their body's signals, to know what would really satisfy them. Parents are sure their kids would eat badly if left to their own devices, and eventually they are right. Mother knows best because she has unwittingly taught Baby how not to know at all.

Meanwhile, Mother has been doing a lot of cooking, and a lot of nagging. She becomes invested (I use the feminine pronoun here because this is traditionally a woman's assignment) in doing it her way, all the more so because she has cooked so many meals she didn't want to cook and nobody wanted to eat. She becomes all the more a tyrant, thereby guaranteeing the second consequence.

Kids rebel. To replace a natural system of eating with an arbitrary one takes some doing. Many small impulses must be contradicted every day. "No, you may not have a snack now, dinner's in an hour." "Keep away from the cookies, first you have to eat everything on your plate." "Where did you get that candy bar? I thought I told you..." The emotional edge is sharpened by Mother's overwork. Little fights build into major battles. Kids refuse to eat at dinnertime, sneak cookies on the sly, feed the dog under the table. Temper tantrums accompany the dinner bell or, worse yet, there is sullen compliance. Parents fight back. Not only must Junior eat everything, he must be cheerful and sociable while doing it. Meanwhile, parents wonder why this is so hard. Visions of the happy American dinner table dance in their heads. Where did we go wrong? they wonder, and they feel guilty.

This sequence of transactions is described by the concept of the Rescue Triangle (see Chapter 7). Parents Rescue because they believe their children to be Victims (incapable of taking proper care of their bodies' food needs). Children do in fact become powerless because they lose track of what they really want. They rebel and Persecute. Parents meanwhile, exhausted and Victimized by the extra work, also Persecute, then feel guilty and decide that the problem is their own failure as parents. And what do good parents do? They cook more meals and watch over their children more closely; they Rescue, in short, all over again. Thus the Triangle becomes a pointed vicious circle.

The example of Rescue is duplicated in many other areas. Bedtime, safety, schoolwork, suitable friends, how to dress, drugs, all become battlegrounds where "Mother/Father knows best" and kids rebel.

Are we advocating, then, that children be given complete freedom to do whatever they want? If we argue against the concept that parents need to set limits on children's behavior, will it mean that there will be no limits at all?

What does in fact limit the behavior of children is exactly the same as what limits the behavior of adults: the material realities of life and the need to live with other people. Parents, you remember, have rights, too. Joshua, a musical twelve-year-old who "lives for his drums" and has a beat that may someday set the world to clapping, nonetheless may not practice his drums whenever he pleases. Neighbors complain. Problem-solving groups meet in the basement, and need relative quiet. Parents sometimes aren't into rock-'n'-roll. On the other hand, Joshua's right to practice his music is as high on the list as is our right not to hear him. We negotiate. We agree on certain times he can play, and others he cannot. Some of those times are set by material circumstances beyond the control of any of us: a neighbor

works late and needs to sleep until ten in the morning. Other times are compromises. I would like quiet from five to six in the evening, but will trade it some days of the week in return for quiet at noon when I've scheduled a special meeting. The art of making these compromises is demonstrated by the results. Joshua sometimes feels restricted, but not too often: we tinker with the schedule to accommodate. I still think his beat is terrific, a sure sign I'm not being oppressed.

## **WHY PARENTS "RESCUE"**

Lest "Rescue" become another accusation to make hard-pressed parents more guilty, let me say a little about why parents Rescue their children. The first reason is a material one, and a paradox: given a scarcity of help in most households, it is often too much trouble to let kids figure things out themselves, or eat on their natural body schedules, or negotiate every task to be done. Even though Rescue leads to more work in the long run, because kids fail to learn helpful skills, in the short run it can be more efficient. Susan's body may call for eight small meals a day, but when Susan is eighteen months old and one parent is alone with her and a couple of other kids all day, who's to prepare those meals? If there were more adults around, the natural feeding schedule might be practical. It might be possible to set up the kitchen and food in such a way that even tiny Susan could help herself with a minimum of assistance. But without help, who's to blame a mother for teaching her child to eat on a convenient rather than a power-respecting schedule?

The first reason for Rescue, then, is about the structure of childrearing institutions, their isolation and scarcity of labor. That problem leads naturally to the second reason. In the isolated family, parents with primary responsibility, most of whom continue to be women, suffer from a shortage of respect and affection, or what we call strokes (see Chapter 8). Women have long understood that being "good mothers," which means doing everything for your kids and making certain that they are well behaved and well groomed, will earn them strokes. If there is too little power for women in a discriminatory society, then we take power where we can, in the arena of our children. We do so, not because we are "power hungry, grasping super-moms" but because we are human and need respect for our capabilities.

Reason number three for Rescue, however, dictates what we do to win those strokes. Compelling myths mislead us to believe a false picture of what is good parenting. We have already discussed the confusion between responsibility and power. So long as we believe that our children are mirrors of our own failings, we worry too much and work too hard to make them perfect. When three-year-old Jesse spits cherry pits at the formal and austere mother of his friend, his own mother worries that he is mimicking her own rebelliousness. She does not stop to consider that the friend's mother has been bossing Jesse around all day, and he is angry. She assumes responsibility, and feels guilty.

Too little help and too many expectations of ourselves as parents is a recipe for failure. To feel a failure after having devoted a superhuman amount of time and energy to a task does not make for good humor. Persecution results. Sometimes it is subtle: frequent nagging, being "on the kid's case," generalizing about the shortcomings of the younger generation, etc. But very often in our culture, Persecution takes the form of punishment, and punishment becomes violent.

## **NO PUNISHMENT/NO VIOLENCE**

Punishment is a power play. It is a display of force designed to make a child not do something (or do something) that she would otherwise do (or not do). If we want to reconstruct our relationships with our kids to be cooperative, then the very first act must be to give up the notion of punishment.

There is no proposal I make to parents which is more shocking to more people than this one. Our culture's system of childrearing is so firmly anchored to the rock of parental authority, that the idea of eliminating the ultimate tool for enforcing authority is mind-shattering. Parents feel panicked. "What do I do then, when the little stinker won't go to

bed at eleven o'clock at night? Don't tell me to reason with her; I've lost the ability to think, much less reason, by that hour!"

I am sympathetic. If we lived in extended families, or well-peopled villages, another grown-up would probably be available to take over when you are exhausted. The problem, again, is structural. But given a lot of bad choices, I firmly believe that the worst is to resort to punishment. As soon as you say, "Go to bed or you may not play with Sammy tomorrow," you may have won the argument, but you've lost the battle. If you give up the power to punish, then you are much more likely to resort to honesty. "I'm exhausted. I've worked hard all day. You can go to sleep when you like, but you must leave me alone right now, or I'll cry." Try talking about real consequences: "If I can't get some time alone tonight, I may be too tired tomorrow to go to the playground with you." Be careful, though, that it's a real possibility, not a threat. If you find, tomorrow, that you're not too tired, will you still fail to go to make good on your threat? If so, it's punishment.

The tradition of punishing children by spanking them is old and engrained. Many consider it to be the moral duty of adults to use corporal punishment for the "good" of the child. Sometimes, it is a premeditated act designed to produce a given result ("Clean your room, or I'll spank you"). Other times, spanking is an act of uncontrolled rage. In either case it is a brutalization of a weaker person by a stronger one.

Punishment very often turns violent. We live in a culture permeated by violence. There is violence in the media, fear in the streets. The ultimate violence of nuclear war lurks always at the back of our consciousness. When we feel angry at our kids because we've done too much, when we think we have a duty and a right to punish them, and when, most importantly, we have memories of having been physically punished ourselves, it is no wonder that we so often become violent. Child abuse is endemic in American life. In a famous study in the mid-1970s, it was found that 80% of Americans believed in hitting kids; meanwhile, the researchers found, some 46,000 children had been attacked with knives or guns in 1975 alone.<sup>1</sup>

Violence ends a cooperative relationship. As soon as physical force, or even its threat, is introduced into an interaction, equality is abandoned. Grown people are always stronger and more frightening than children. Temper tantrums may be threatening, but they do not equal the power brought to bear by spanking. To spank a child is to make the decision that "Father (or Mother) knows best." Even though most of us do not actually voice the thought, the organizing principle of the relationship in fact becomes: He who has greater physical strength has greater rights. Not surprisingly, children either become cowed and docile, or they battle back, often using guerrilla tactics known worldwide to those without power: passive resistance ("I'll say yes, but I won't take out the garbage"), deceit ("Who'll ever know if I smoke this joint behind that tree?"), strategic withdrawal ("They can make me come home to dinner, but they can't make me smile at them").

Arguments justifying violence against kids are sometimes heartbreakingly thoughtful. Some black adults, for instance, contend that children of color must learn early how to conduct themselves in order to avoid the more serious violence threatened in white racist society toward them. If a kid sasses his mother, better that she should whack him than that he should sass a white policeman and be beaten or jailed. "We'll stop striking our kids," say these parents, "when *They* stop beating and killing us." Zora Neale Hurston, a black anthropologist and writer, describes her father's fear that Zora would be hanged before she was grown, that her mother "was going to suck sorrow for not beating my temper out of me before it was too late." Ralph Ellison described home-punishment as a process of homeopathic violence administered by parents who loved and wished to protect their children.

It is a painful debate. Implicit in the argument is resignation to the state of violence toward black people. Children are trained to watch their step, not to rebel against their victimization in ways that are effective and personally protective.

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<sup>1</sup> Murray Strauss and others, *Behind Closed Doors: Violence in the American Family* (Doubleday, 1980).

Children of color may be less brutalized than if they were not beaten at home, but they are nonetheless brutalized, suffering an oppression which they do not deserve at home or outside.

Even in so dire and violent a dilemma as that facing black children, then, we would urge parents to break the cycle of brutality, to teach their children by example and language that they have rights to dignity, and to counsel them wisely about how to be safe, to band together with others to fight, rather than to rebel as individuals and be killed.

## **THE MANY ARENAS FOR STRUGGLE**

The problems parents work on in problem-solving groups are many. How can I get the kids to do their chores? What about allowances; how much should they get and under what conditions? What should I do about getting my child to do her homework? As kids get older, problems become scarier. How can I prevent my teenager from abusing drugs? What about sex, especially under the threat of AIDS? How can I stop the constant fights about curfews and friends?

While each of these questions deserves its own discussion (which, however, would require another book devoted to the subject), there is some general advice that applies to all of them: talk; negotiate; be honest; be open. Struggles are inevitable; children and parents often have different interests, each legitimate in its own terms, but in conflict. Neither kids nor parents are bad because they disagree. But nor is either side “right.”

To tell your children what you think and feel about something is very different from telling them what to do. “I am terribly frightened about drugs, especially about \_\_\_\_ (fill in the specifics, the more specific the better: driving while drinking, letting your life be dominated by the ‘busy-ness’ of marijuana, experimenting with hard drugs that might be unsafe on the street.)” “I’m scared about your flunking out of school, because I know how hard it is to get jobs that are tolerable without a high school diploma.” “I’m not going to turn the TV set off, but I want you to know I think ‘The A-Team’ is incredibly sexist and racist for the following (detailed and elaborate) reasons.”

Overall, what we urge is that parents stick up for their own rights, while giving children theirs. Nothing helps the quality of parenting as much as support for parents. Find people to talk to who share your childrearing philosophy, and consult them about every detail, every self-doubt, every rageful impulse. Help in the home may be hard to come by; at the very least, be sure you have help in your heart.

Parenting is in a state of dramatic change. Today, more and more children are raised by single parents, mostly mothers. At the same time, more and more fathers are engaging as active parents in their children's upbringings. Ever larger proportions of Americans living in poverty are small children. All these facts alter the ways in which we relate to kids, and raise new questions and problems.

Our contribution as Radical Psychiatrists continues to be an advocacy for power and rights of children, as well as some experience about how to be cooperative. It is just a beginning. But what is surprising is how dramatic and helpful changes occur when children are treated with respect and parents are relieved from isolation and total responsibility.