

EPILOGUE

A letter to US parents, grandparents and teachers

In today's world, it is increasingly true that no one can thrive unless all are thriving together. Our communities are becoming more and more interconnected and interdependent. Malaise in one corner will inevitably, sooner or later, affect the whole. On the other hand, a burst of happiness anywhere in the world sends ripples that touch all of humanity eventually, if only subtly. As we strive to create a loving environment for our own children, we should pause to think how the children around us are faring. The babies and children of other families will one day be the leaders of our children's world. They will be our children's doctors, lawyers, senators, and community leaders. Every one of us has a stake in the wellbeing of *all* children; and so it is well worth "taking the temperature" of childhood in our nations and around the world.

American children are not doing well in comparison to the children in the rest of the developed world. You may be shocked by what you are about to read. Across a number of key indicators, the care of children in the United States lags behind that of nearly every other industrialized democracy.

In 2007, the United States earned second to last place in a ranking of children's wellbeing among the world's affluent and developed nations.¹ Why is that the case? What else is going on for American children today? Let's take a closer look:

- 中 The USA has the highest child abuse death rate in the developed world. In the last 10 years, over 20,000 children died at home at the hand of family members – that is nearly four times the number of US soldiers killed in Afghanistan and Iraq.²
- 中 Corporal punishment in schools is still legal in nineteen states, where teachers strike children on the buttocks with a wooden paddle.³ Only two developed nations, the US and Australia, have failed to enact a nationwide ban in schools. This practice is now illegal in the education systems of well over 100 nations.
- 中 Troubled American teenagers are sent to unregulated, privately owned juvenile boot camps in various locations throughout the nation. At many of these boot camps, discipline includes physical beatings and solitary confinement. A number of unintended deaths have occurred.⁴ Outraged citizen groups have been formed to expose and combat this widespread institutionalized mistreatment of children.⁵
- 中 The United States is the only Western nation that imposes life sentences without the possibility of parole for juvenile offenders. Children as young as 13 are imprisoned for life. This violates several international human rights treaties.⁶
- 中 The United States has the highest rates in the industrialized world of the following indicators: teenage pregnancy, teen birth rate, sexually-transmitted diseases, illicit drug use, childhood obesity, diabetes, and use of antidepressants.⁷ Around 95% of the world's Ritalin is prescribed within the US and Canada.

² Innocenti Report Card 7: An Overview of Child Wellbeing in Rich Countries: unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/rc7_eng.pdf

² everychildmatters.org

³ nospank.net/classrm.htm & stophitting.com

⁴ nospank.net/boot.htm

⁵ cafety.org

⁶ amnestyusa.org & aclu.org

⁷ • nationmaster.com, select "health"

- 中 The average American child, age three to four, watches around 4 hours of television per day. One in 4 children under two; two of three 6-year-olds; and nine of ten 8–16-year-olds, have a TV in their own room.⁸ There are many reasons these statistics should be viewed as extremely alarming; we discussed the disastrous effects this can have on children’s psychological health in Chapter 9 (see subheading: Television—the play killer). But the devastating effects of television on children’s emotional intelligence do not stop there. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, by age eighteen, the average young American will have seen two-hundred-thousand acts of onscreen violence. Is this something we should be worried about? Can viewing onscreen violence actually make viewers more violent? There are now more than a thousand studies that have determined that it can.
- 中 Despite being the world’s wealthiest nation, the United States has one of the least generous parental leave provisions in the world; an average of twelve weeks with no pay. This is considerably less than every European country, less than all countries in the Americas (North and South), and even less than many African and Asian countries. Compare this to Denmark: 18 months at 100% of pre-birth pay, Argentina: 3 months at full pay and Kenya: 2 months at full pay.⁹
- 中 The United States is the only country—besides Iraq—where metal detectors are used in schools.¹⁰
- 中 The United States is the only country in the world in which infant boys are routinely circumcised for non-religious reasons—at a little over 50 percent—despite the fact that no medical association in the world recommends this practice, and despite the fact that it is now recognized as an unnecessary, traumatic, and damaging procedure (see Chapter 5: “To Circumcise or not?” and [circumcision.org/ position.htm](http://circumcision.org/position.htm))
- 中 The Baby-Friendly Initiative (BFI), spearheaded by WHO and UNICEF, has proven to be crucial in elevating rates of breastfeeding around the world—a key public health issue. But at the time of this writing, merely 5% of American babies are born in BFI-accredited facilities, since there are just 121 Baby-Friendly hospitals and birth centers in the US. In Sweden, 100% of births take place in BFI-accredited facilities, and in Australia, the rate is 1 in 3.
- 中 The United States remains one of only two nations, along with Somalia, not to have ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.¹¹

The United States is the most powerful economy in the world. It is the nation that can most afford the best provisions for families and children, and so it is surprising that so many American children have been receiving less than they deserve.

Without a doubt, from coast-to-coast, the US can boast innumerable communities that are prosperous, peaceable and stable—in which the children thrive and are nurtured. But childhood is formative, and when the wellbeing of a critical mass of children is compromised, this can be very costly for any nation. How might the state of affairs for America’s less fortunate children be reflected in the general functioning of society?

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- Paul Hawken 2007, *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Movement in the World Came into Being and Why No One Saw It Coming*, Viking: New York, p. 118.
 - Gregory S. Paul 2005, “Cross-National Correlations of Quantifiable Societal Health with Popular Religiosity and Secularism in the Prosperous Democracies,” *Journal of Religion and Society* 7:18.

⁸. Aric Sigman 2005, *Remotely Controlled—How Television Is Damaging Our Lives* Vermillion, London, p 50.

⁹. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parental_leave

¹⁰. Paul Hawken 2007, *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Movement in the World Came into Being and Why No One Saw It Coming*, Viking: New York, p. 118

¹¹. childrightscampaign.org

The US suffers a much higher homicide rate than other Western nations and has the highest incarceration rate in the world.¹² USA also has one of the most dramatic rates of inequality. While 15% of Americans—46 million people—live in poverty, an average CEO remuneration tops 500 times the *average* wage, and 800 times the *minimum* wage. Compare this to the British CEO-to-average-wage ratio of 25:1, Australia’s ratio of 22:1, France’s 16:1 and Japan’s 11:1.

Modern advances in child developmental sciences make it quite clear that the above social ills, and many more, would be greatly alleviated in the wake of strong policy shifts towards more support for parents, and the securing of a non-violent upbringing for children.

There is a bright side

On the other hand, the United States has produced some of the world’s most innovative movements and organizations for childrearing reform.

- 中 The United States is a powerful center for promoting natural childbirth, led by organizations such as:
 - bradlybirth.com
 - cappa.net
 - Lamaze.org
 - motherfriendly.org
 - birthpsychology.com
- 中 The La Leche League was formed in the late 1950s in the United States to combat the displacement of breastfeeding by big business (manufacturers of artificial baby formula). The organization helped bring breastfeeding back from the brink of extinction, and today it has branches in more than sixty nations.¹³
- 中 The Alliance for Transforming the Lives of Children¹⁴ created the Proclamation and Blueprint for Transforming the Lives of Children—what some have called the “missing instruction manual”—outlining infants’ and babies’ needs for optimal development.
- 中 The most groundbreaking discoveries in brain development research and emotional intelligence have occurred at American universities. This exciting new body of knowledge is revolutionizing approaches to parenting, education and child health around the world.¹⁵
- 中 The “attachment parenting” movement is the brainchild (or should I say “heartchild”?) of American pediatrician, William Sears, MD, and his wife Martha, who interpreted for parents the results of attachment research. A vibrant and fast-growing international movement has emerged to provide supportive communities for parents and to inform them about leading-edge child development science. Attachment Parenting International has support groups in most states.¹⁶

A number of remarkable, social-evolutionary movements for child-rearing reform thrive on American soil and from here have radiated outward to strengthen similar movements abroad. For instance, many nations’ governments are starting to fund early intervention and home visitation programs to support new parents, and the outcomes so far are very promising. The bulk of the research and development of such early intervention strategies emerged in the United States. As well, the most unequivocal research damning the use of corporal punishment was produced by American researchers. The openness of American society has permitted a broad proliferation of the ‘democratic education’ movement; a modern educational approach that produces the highest academic standards while reducing school violence and enhancing children’s emotional and social

¹². Steven Pinker 2011, *The Better Angels of our Nature —the Decline of Violence in History and its Causes*, Allen Lane, New York, pp. 91-106

¹³. lli.org

¹⁴. aTLC.org

¹⁵. mindgains.org

¹⁶. attachmentparenting.org

intelligence.¹⁷ The United States has the resources—in terms of its scientists, its culture of openness, and its wealth—to become a world leader in enacting child-rearing reforms instead of trailing the world’s industrialized democracies.

America can become the most peaceful, sustainable, and equitable society on earth, if policy makers simply catch up with what American child development scientists—and a growing number of parents—are so clearly saying.

What can be done?

When confronted with the realities of a social dilemma of great magnitude, it is not unusual to feel a sense of helplessness at first. The problems I have listed here may strike you as overwhelming, and you might be asking yourself, “What can I possibly do about all this?” Good news: there is in fact a number of ways in which you can lend as little or as much support as you would like to the many childrearing reform efforts. Many of the websites I refer to herein are entry points to organizations that you can join or give your support to if you feel strongly about the wellbeing of children.

No society can legislate for good parenting. But there are many policies that can be put in place to provide the kinds of social conditions that enable parents to give their best. Many of these policies have already been tried and tested in many nations, including in the United States. They are proven to be cost effective, and they have resulted in profound increases in childhood wellbeing. Government initiatives that support families have a proven track record for increasing school attendance and reducing youth violence, substance abuse, crime rates, and rates of depression.¹⁸

The following are a few examples of effective parent-supportive policies:

- ☞ Government-funded early intervention (home visits) programs that support healthy parent-baby attachment.
- ☞ Legislation that bans all corporal punishment of children at school and at home.
- ☞ Generous parental leave provisions.
- ☞ More support for democratic and progressive styles of education.

To this end, Kelly Wendorf,¹⁹ Anne Manne,²⁰ and I have compiled a Children’s Wellbeing Manifesto.

Our Manifesto is a proposal for fifteen family-supportive policies, most of which have already proved highly successful in numerous countries. You can read the full text of the Manifesto at our-emotional-health.com/manifesto.html.

There are so many child-rearing reform movements you can tap into if you wish—we live in an exciting era of change. If you feel moved by the idea of participating directly in some aspect of the child-rearing reform movement, there are many established organizations that can be effective vehicles for your contribution. The organizations I have mentioned here are but a small fraction of a growing international movement devoted to children’s emotional health and wellbeing. If you are not drawn to joining or supporting groups that work for change, that’s fine. Do not underestimate the gift you bring to the whole world each time you simply offer a child your most heartfelt empathy.

¹⁷. educationrevolution.org

¹⁸. Robin Grille 2005, *Parenting for a Peaceful World*, Longueville Media, Sydney, Chapter 31

¹⁹. Kali Wendorf 2009, *Stories of Belonging: Finding Where Your True Self Lives*, Finch, Melbourne.

²⁰. Anne Manne 2005, *Motherhood: How Should We Care for Our Children?* Allen & Unwin, Sydney.

World peace begins at home and at school

Childrearing reform is one of the most powerful forms of social change activism. It is entirely nonviolent; in fact, it is loving and politically neutral.

America finds itself restlessly striving for fundamental change. But unless there are enduring changes to childhood, changes in the politics of a nation may come and go without leaving a lasting legacy—the most exciting new initiatives can easily be overturned by the next administration. As my friend and colleague Kelly Wendorf once said, “We can save a forest today, but if children are not brought up feeling love, connection, and empathy, then that same forest will be cut down tomorrow.”

As adults, we tend to behave toward others as we have been treated. It follows that the way a nation treats its children is a blueprint for the future health of its society and the driving force of its prosperity. The future of any nation is determined by the happiness of its children more than by any other single variable. Even the foreign policy of a nation is, to a considerable degree, a reflection of its prevailing child-rearing customs.

International studies have repeatedly found that when any nation invests in its parents, so that they have enough *time* with their children, and in its children’s emotional health and education; the social dividends will by far exceed the investment.²¹

Conversely, the research shows that sparing investment in childhood is false economy; it creates a costly spread of social dysfunction that bleeds the economy and generates waves of unhappiness through populations. In other words, an economic recession is *not* an excuse to delay investment in families; it is in fact an argument for the opposite. The greatest relief to the national budget, in areas of health, crime, and social dysfunction, will come from diverting more funds toward parents and children.

The world is fraught with violence—in the streets, in schools, across national borders—and our violence toward nature is jeopardizing the viability of this planet. An urgent imperative confronts us all—we must come to grips with the new realizations made abundantly clear by modern neuroscience and child-development experts—*no person anywhere was born to be violent. No gene exists that makes a person unloving.* Think about what this means for a moment; think about the implications! A great leap forward from our collective history of violence is entirely possible and well within our grasp. The way forward at this critical moment in history involves worldwide child-rearing reforms. Driven by a new scientific orthodoxy that has aligned itself with the human heart, this reform movement has already begun, and it is gathering speed.

A new society is eminently possible—one that is driven by love rather than greed, fear, or suspicion. All that is needed is a collective commitment to giving more children an emotionally healthy environment in which to grow, play, love, learn, and feel secure. This requires giving all parents a chance, support and enough time—that increasingly rare commodity—to enjoy their children.

The great family of humanity strives to create a more joyous childhood for all. I dream that this book may inspire you to add your gifts to this universal striving as well as empower you to know the strength of your heart and the role you can play in our collective evolution.

It is my fervent hope that the pleasure of parenting can be multiplied for all parents, and that children everywhere can thrive in a loving world, with the promise of a healthy and peaceful planet. Whether you know it or not, you are an integral part of this awakening. From my heart to yours, I thank you for having undertaken your journey through these pages.

中 hearttoheartparenting.org

中 our-emotional-health.com

²¹. Robin Grille 2005, *Parenting for a Peaceful World*, Longueville Media, Sydney**