

Stop Over-pathologising our Children

There was a very interesting article in the Weekend Australian 15-16th August 2009 that I want to share with you. It was written by Frank Furedi a professor of sociology at the University of Kent in England. It's based on his book "Wasted: Why Education is not Educating."

He is a man of my own heart! He argues that the rapidly increasing figures of children being diagnosed with psychological and emotional disorders in Australia and every Anglo-Saxon society is the result of the practice of treating routine troubles of childhood as a mental health issue.

"These days confused and insecure children are likely to be diagnosed as depressed or traumatised." And "Virtually any energetic or disruptive youngster can acquire the label of ADHD or if you give your teachers a hard time you are suffering from oppositional defiant disorder." The shy kids don't miss out – they can get diagnosed with social phobia and if they don't like school, school phobia!" My boys only ever went to school for recess and lunch time – and to be with their friends! What child leaps out of bed and says "you beauty – school today – more learning!"

Frank argues that we have had a serious change of perception around children. What was once considered "normal" is now seen pathologically, as an abnormal condition, often requiring treatment that often comes in the form of medication.

"The number of psychiatric diagnoses for childhood conditions has soared in the last two decades, increasing from about 70 conditions to more than 400. What this means is that "what was once considered within the bounds of normal is now treated as an illness requiring a cure, which more often than not comes in the form of medication".

Dr George Halasz is a Melbourne child psychiatrist

I reassure parents everywhere I go that if you have a child I label a "rooster" you will find them hard to parent. They are strong personalities, they question, they argue, they fight for independence, often need less sleep and they will be explorers and conquerors. They also have enormous amounts of energy and they will push you to the limits of your patience. No matter how wonderful your parenting, there will be times you will have meltdowns and conflicts with these children. They seem to push all our buttons about "power" and unless we learn to relax, we can feel out of control. You are not at fault and neither is your child – they are merely learning how to manage the world, and how to relate with themselves and others – and they are often in a hurry!! This is why spending time in a loving, caring consistent way helps these children slowly build the social and emotional skills they need to mix with others in settings like kindy and school. These children will be our leaders, our explorers, our inventors and probably our world class athletes. They will need to find career pathways that best need lots of energy, freedom and flexibility.

Professor Furedi went on to write about his concern: *"The most insidious consequence of the diseasing of childhood is that it directly threatens young people's sense of adventure, independence and well being. The narrative of illness does not simply frame the way children are expected to feel and experience problems, it constitutes an invitation to infirmity."*

Labels can become self fulfilling prophecies that shape the way children see themselves. "I am bad. I am a pain! I am helpless." We must avoid labelling our children except to tell them they are unique and valued, no matter what! Yes there are times they are too noisy, messy, whingy, crabby, uncooperative and stubborn. You were the same as a child. It's normal. Children struggle with managing the emotional, social and physical dimensions to their being. We can help them to find their strengths and to help them recognise their flaws, or weaknesses – remind them there is no perfect! Use language carefully when you chat about their flaws –

" Babe you know that sometimes your enormous energy can be too much for people or other children – or you know how you love to chatter – well sometimes people and children need quiet time or sweet daughter of mine – there are times when your confidence can seem like you are just being bossy – be careful to think of others – OK?"

I still exhaust my husband with my energy, my enthusiasm and my ability to embarrass him by spontaneous dancing and laughing too loud. Fortunately, I have a few gifts and talents that balance out my flaws!!! Everyone matters – everyone has something to offer our world and that includes all children including those with special needs, and those that wear us out! Help them find both sides of who they are!!

A great book to read if you have "roosters" is called "Raising Your Spirited Child: A Guide for Parents whose child is more." By Mary Sheedy Kurcinka, (1991)USA, Harper Collins. She gives different ways to acknowledge the sometimes challenging behaviour of our roosters...I especially like highly spirited rather than domineering pushy pest!!! Our language when repeated often can imprint into beliefs in our children's brains. That is why they have to behave in accordance with their belief system. One of my roosters came to me when he was about 9 and he was quite a confident, loud wee lad – and he told me that I call him a "pain in the neck" quite often – and he thought that I should change my language because he could start to believe me!!! He was so right! It took some conscious thought to call him wonderful, friendly and highly spirited but I did. Soon his behaviour at school improved and he was less demanding. I am a firm believer that our thought fields also influence our children. There is plenty of research out there that shows that teacher's expectation of students, influence their performance.

Thought Fields

1. The Oak experiment when Robert Rosenthal of Harvard University did a study of 650 students and 18 female teachers. IQ test would identify that 20% of students who not only rated with highest IQ but also would make rapid and superior progress throughout the year. The gifted students did perform superiorly and did perform REAL above average increases in their IQ's over the year BUT the top 20% were chosen **randomly!**
2. Rosenthal did an earlier experience on rats where students were told that certain rats had been genetically bred to be superior in performance. Two groups were given 30 rats group A told they had the superior stock group B the inferior stock. The rats were trained in the same ways, same environments and yet the ones believed to be smarter "achieved achievement scores far above the supposed unintelligent rats. The rats came from exactly the same gene pool and stock base? Rosenthal's conclusion was simply that: The minds of the experimenters' influenced the performance of the rats and the students... positively or negatively.

So as parents and those who care for children – WE CAN BE INFLUENCING HOW CHILDREN BEHAVE BY HOW WE THINK!!!! Also how we speak about our children to others strengthens this thought pattern – so please take charge of your mind and your voice as often as you can, and focus on the strengths of your children, rather than their weaknesses.

Relax and let kids be kids and learn to run with the flow of their amazing way of seeing and exploring our world. They need “our guidance, inspiration and understanding. It is time to stop the medicalisation of children’s lives.”

Help children to know that they too are on a unique once off journey, just like each of the adults they meet. There are some moments that are brilliant and wonderful and there are also times when life sucks and things hurt. Embrace that children can be competent, capable and confident if we allow them to grow in alignment with their personality and abilities. Relax. Slow down and enjoy those little ones – before you know it, they will grow hairy and want to leave home and live with someone who is covered in gorgeous tattoos and body piercings!.

Enjoy the sacred ride of parenting

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