

Raising Respectful Children

Martin Brokenleg

In contemporary cultures, large numbers of youth are disconnected from adults. The author contends that we will be able to raise responsible children only by rediscovering long understood truths about the deep respect that must exist between elders and youth. This requires a return to traditional values where all children have opportunities to develop Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity. These universal needs are called the Circle of Courage.

The Problem of Disrespect

Children are not born responsible but must learn this from persons with greater maturity and wisdom. Unfortunately, contemporary culture is one in which many adults and youth are blatantly disrespectful toward one another. Disrespect toward children is so commonplace, we seldom question it.

A young, upwardly mobile couple can easily be recognized by their trendy haircuts. Between them as they walk in the shopping mall is their 4- or 5-year-old child, clearly tired and bored with all the shopping. The mother periodically yanks on the lagging child's arms. It is obvious the mother does not take the child's interests seriously. When the child wants to look in a shop window, the mother jerks him away. The curious child's requests to look over there are ignored or angrily opposed.

One wonders if the mother uses such pulling and shoving in her work with colleagues. If not, why treat her own child in this way? Is it perhaps because this child is hers, like some kind of property or possession?

Farther down the mall, the father stoops down so his face is inches from his child's. In a threatening voice, the father shocks the child. "If you don't stop that whining, I'll give you something to cry about." The father's face is contorted with anger.

Does the man regularly use that tone of voice with his friends and co-workers? And if not, why use it with his own child? Perhaps the father's attitude is something like the following: "This is only a child—certainly not an adult or a real person." He acts as if the child has no feelings or memory.

Such scenes are common in Western society, showing a cultural devaluation of children. Such treatment is hardly noticed since it is deeply imbedded in our "cultural tail" that we drag behind us a thousand years long.

Cultures of Respect

A culture that is advanced in one area is not necessarily progressive in other realms. For example, to function socially in some Aboriginal cultures of Australia, one must know more than 500 kinship terms, which shows the highly developed complexity of those societies. Their technological level, on the other hand, has been labeled as stone age. By contrast, Western society is an advanced technological culture, but—I believe—lags in spiritual development. For example, the language of my Lakota (Sioux) culture has many more words for spiritual, emotional, and intellectual states than does English. Negotiating Lakota society requires an advanced social intelligence.

Traditional Native American culture placed a high value on individual freedom. In contrast to obedience models of discipline, the goal was to build respect by inner discipline. Children were encouraged to make decisions, solve problems, and show personal responsibility. In turn, adults shared stories, modeled values, and provided respectful guidance if children erred. In this environment, children learn to make responsible choices without coercion.

Mutual respect permeated Native cultures. Children and elders held each other in awe. In the Lakota language, children are “sacred beings.” The term “old man,” which is a put-down in English, is rendered in Lakota as “real man.” Women also had power; in many tribes, the grandmothers decided who was worthy of becoming a chief. Their selection depended on how a boy had treated others as he was growing up, because the worst possible leader would be one who might try to impose his will on others. A leader existed to serve.

Circles of Courage

To raise respectful and responsible children, adults must create environments that meet universal growth needs for belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity. We describe these “four directions” as the Circle of Courage. There is strong evidence that the Circle of Courage needs are grounded in universal values, and probably in the human DNA as well:

1. Belonging: The child’s longing for human bonds is nurtured in relationships of trust, so the child can believe “I am loved.”
2. Mastery: The child’s inborn thirst for learning is nurtured by learning to cope with the world, so the child can believe “I can succeed.”
3. Independence: The child’s free will is nurtured by increased responsibility so that the child can believe “I am in charge of my life.”
4. Generosity: The child’s character is nurtured by concern for others so that the child can believe “I have a purpose for my life.”

In my childhood, I knew Lakota elders who were at the Battle of Little Big Horn when Custer was killed. My mother and father were both stolen from the embrace of their families and sent to residential schools. There they were treated as inferiors to be trained rather than as sacred beings to be loved.

Repulsed by these experiences, my parents made certain their children were raised according to our traditional Lakota ways.

Though poor in possessions, we were rich in personal relationships. My many uncles were my fathers and my aunts were my mothers. Surrounded by relatives, I experienced *Belonging*. Elders told me of our traditions and guided me in *Mastery*. I was cautioned to use wisely the power that gave me *Independence*. Under all circumstances, I was to know that *Generosity* would require work and selflessness but was always the right response. Literally, I was surrounded by the Circle of Courage.

Conclusion

Across centuries of Western culture, adults tried to rear respectful youth by training them to be obedient. Measured by the standard of respect, adults who demand obedience may be setting very low expectations. All children need loving, caring, committed, and consistent adults around them if they are to bloom fully. We must become the extended family of elders and parents who once surrounded every child.

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