

# Growing Your Own Kids Today

***Martin Brokenleg***

Cultures exist so groups can function harmoniously and socialize the young. What is the state of contemporary culture and its approach to children?



## ***The Wisdom of the Buffalo***

When we Lakota came to live in this world, we survived only because of the help of the *Pte Oyate*, The Female Buffalo Nation. She supplied everything we needed to live in this world. For many reasons, we use a buffalo skull in the center of our ceremonial areas and feature this in our art.

When the buffalo are under threat they organize themselves into a protective formation that is the most likely to guarantee the survival of the herd. The buffalo bulls form the outside perimeter of the protecting circle. They are the strongest ones in the herd and, as the males, they are not the most necessary for the herd to survive. Inside that perimeter is the circle of the buffalo cows. They are the next strongest members of the herd. As adult females, they are next in importance for the herd to survive so they are protected by the bulls. Should the danger get past the males, then the females will still be present to protect that which is the most necessary for the survival of the herd—the young, the buffalo calves.

When danger arises, the herd encircles the young since they are the future of the herd. The major task of the adult buffalo is to protect the young by enveloping them with care and protection. If the young survive, the herd will continue. Are we human beings living in the 21st century this wise? Without any perceived communication, the buffalo herd uses its cultural behavior to respond to a threat. Animals have cultural patterns, but so do communities of humans.

## ***Cultural Wisdom***

Consider the state of our contemporary culture and its attitudes toward children. I have developed this working definition of culture:

*A culture is a pattern of group behavior exemplified in thought, speech, actions, and artifacts in a form that can be taught and learned.*

Culture defined in this way can be applied to the ethnic culture of any community. The definition can also explain the differences between youth culture and adult culture. This definition can describe the nature of sub-cultures defined by their interests such as those who ride motorcycles or

those who follow soccer. We can even use this framework of culture to explore gender differences in a community. Each gender may have distinctive patterns that define behavior and values. This is the model in mind as we consider the culture we provide for children in our own time.

An ongoing complication in working with any culture is that it functions unconsciously. We are not conscious of cultural factors when they are at work in us since culture functions below our level of awareness. Culture is a powerful controlling dynamic even though it works when we are unaware that it is present. Consequently, we must be culture conscious if we are going to understand its power

and make use of it in intentional ways. Consider this behavioral fact: When you get on an elevator, which direction are you supposed to face? Probably no one has ever given you specific instructions on which direction to face but you know the appropriate direction. Should you doubt the power of cultural teachings, some time when you are in a place where no one knows you, get on an elevator and face everyone else and watch what happens. Everyone will be nervous and no one will know why, except you.

Cultures consist of layers of patterns, and identifying them might seem easy but it is not. This is in large part because we are each limited by our own cultural patterns. If something is consistent to what we have learned, we take this for granted. But if a pattern is different from our own culture, we may see the dynamic, but our mind will tell us it is insignificant and will ignore the dynamic or not even be aware of it. If the pattern is made conscious for us, we may then see it manifested in many different levels. For example, one learns that Native American cultures from the prairies are absolute democracies. Even the chief has no authority to tell anyone else what to do. Once this level of democracy is understood, it will become normal to see that a Native American parent is genuinely asking a child if she is going to school today. It is a real question since the parent has understood that he has no innate right to order a child to do anything. Absolute democracy is the cultural norm in Native cultures from the prairies.

Culture exists so a group can function harmoniously. Culture is a group dynamic manifested in diverse ways. From the time of medieval Europe,

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children were regarded as almost unimportant and more like property than persons. Children were not valued except for their ability to work and accomplish chores. Most children in those times lived with physical poverty and so would have only the barest of physical goods such as clothing, housing, or the arts. As beings of little value, they were beaten, barely fed, and sometimes sold and purchased. The value of being a child was not high even though religious teaching might have said adults should become like little children. This inferior status still haunts the English word, *child*. To be told one is “acting like a child” is not a compliment. Contrast this to another cultural system. The Lakota word for child is wakan’heja. The etymology of this word comes from wakan which means sacred and heja to stand. “Standing Sacred” is the Lakota concept of a child. A culture with this concept would demonstrate high respect and honour for a child.

**Artifacts.** One of the four major areas in which culture is manifested is at the level of artifacts, the physical manifestation of a culture. Included in this category are clothing, food, architecture, technology, and the arts. In North America, held in very high value, technology is probably more advanced than most other places in the world. Certainly the average child in North America would have adequate clothing, shelter, food, and surrounding architecture. Many adults would consider their children well-tended if they are fed, dressed, and sheltered.

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There is a contemporary issue that is an increasing risk factor: the presence of technology. Technology allows for new and vital experiences and learning for children. The risk comes when technology replaces human interaction, an increasing issue for all children. Television becomes a child minder so busy parents can tend other tasks. It can entertain children who are tired and in need of activity after school. Computer time and digitally recorded music replaces conversation and sounds of nature. The risk factor comes if time with technology replaces face-to-face time with adults. Human relationships should not be

sacrificed in favour of technology. When technology replaces human conversation the child is at risk of losing the emotional support necessary for confidence and growth in responsibility.

***The kind of language we use to refer to children and youth may define and limit youth in ways which we are not conscious.***

Some primary teachers now report students not knowing how to use their faces to communicate, perhaps because they have spent too much time in front of screens. We have seen studies that report adolescents and youth showing increasing rates of loneliness and depression with increased time with technology. What is crucial for youth development is human contact, and our current cultural patterns display a willingness to surrender relationship time for time with technology, putting youth at risk. The antidote is for adults to set parameters and limits to technology so life for youth is designed with their best interests in mind. There is a place for technology, but it is not every place.

**Speech.** Anthropologists say that speech is the carrier of culture. In our increasingly multilingual society, we may still proclaim an official language but the reality of many languages exists in cities and towns everywhere.

More importantly, one’s reality exists in language. We see only what we have words for, and we see reality only the way our language permits us to see it. A complex example comes from the way people who think in a European language believe that time exists. This is not an objective reality but is rather a function of European verb systems which always come in a time tense for past, present, or future. If one thinks with those very systems, eventually that person will believe time is real. Reality exists in language.

When I began to study German in high school, I was bewildered by the notion of objects having gender and that this was woven into the language. I memorized gender articles but the reality of objects with gender still eludes me. Imagine a Lakota speaker trying to accept the notion that English pronouns come with gender. Lakota pronouns are all gender neutral.

Consider how we use language to speak about children and youth. What terms do we have? How old is the term *teenager*, for example? The term did not exist in the 1800s, and society consisted of adults and children until the 1920s when the word *teenager* began to be used. We commonly use the term *kid* to refer to a child but no one before the mid-19th century would have understood our meaning. Similarly, we should ask about pejorative terms such as *the terrible twos*, *rug-rat*, *crumb-grabber*. Is the word *child* still a pejorative term? Adults use *adolescence* almost as a term for a pathological condition. The kind of language we use to refer to children and youth may define and limit youth in ways which we are not conscious.

**Actions.** Every culture has ways of communicating using gestures, eye behavior, and hand or head signals. These smaller forms of communication are a set of daily ceremonies. A culture will also have a series of complex ceremonies that may add a person to a group, initiate a youth into adulthood, announce the relationship of two persons, and celebrate birth and death.

### ***Culture is learned. It must be taught if it is to continue.***

For our purpose, we can contemplate the daily ceremonies by which we greet a child, acknowledge her worth, add her to our group, or communicate her status. Each school building will have daily rituals that communicate to the students information, directions, or the value they have in the adults' eyes. Families mark birthdays, holidays, and family anniversaries with ceremonies, cakes, foods, and house decorations. Youth's positive environments develop ceremonies that include the young people, address their psychological needs, and affirm their role in that community. This is a welcome development since society in general has lost many traditional ceremonies.

**Thought.** A culture will have a set of intentionally held values and attitudes. These are spoken of through teaching, story, and song. A vibrant community will instruct their youth in the ethics of the group. If the group values bravery, youth will be taught about bravery and will be admonished to act bravely in the face of doubt or fear. The group's values and ethics may be supported by a religious system that defines the important aspects of life, provides instruction in how to live by those

values, and uses ceremony and ritual to support the values of the group. Instruction or perhaps the religious system will define the metaphysical definitions of the group.

Culture is learned. A defining aspect of culture is that it is not innate. It must be taught if it is to continue. This is the dynamic of enculturation, learning one's own culture. I believe all youth are at risk of not learning the culture of their adults since the adults may not systematically teach their traditions. If one does not learn his own culture, he will learn that of another culture, which we define as acculturation. Media culture is probably the most influential force in teaching youth today, if adults are not intentional about teaching their own cultural system.

In sum, as adults intending to create resilient youth, we can make evident our cultural patterns about young people so we can examine them. Cultural assessment will help us become aware of the true message we use to relate to youth. A youth respecting culture will consistently send positive value messages by language, behavior, policy, and practice.

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