

GABOR MATÉ

# HOLDING ON TO OUR KIDS IN A PEER CULTURE



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CHILDREN ARE NOT QUITE THE SAME as we remember being. They are less likely to take their cues from adults, less afraid of getting into trouble. They also seem less innocent and naïve – lacking, it seems, the wide-eyed wonder that leads a child to be excited about the world and about exploring the wonders of nature or of human creativity. Many children seem inappropriately sophisticated, even jaded in some ways – pseudo-mature before their time. They appear to be easily bored when away from each other or when not engaged with technology. Creative, solitary play seems a vestige of the past. The lives of many adolescents are plagued by drug use, aggression, extreme and risky sports, precocious sexuality, and a general alienation from adult values. In the classroom, we see more and more kids struggling with boredom, alienated from learning, exhibiting problems with basic skills like reading, and needing high-tech machines to keep them stimulated.

In homes, in schools, in community after community, developing young people have lost their moorings. Many lack self-control and are increasingly prone to alienation, drug use, violence, or just a general aimlessness. They are less teachable and more difficult to manage than their counterparts of even just a few decades ago. Many seem unable to adapt, to learn from negative experience, and to mature. Unprecedented numbers of children and adolescents are now being prescribed medications for depression, anxiety, or a host of other diagnoses.

The crisis of the young has manifested itself ominously in the growing problem of bullying in the schools and, at its very extreme, in the murder of children by children. Such tragedies, though rare, are only the most visible eruptions of a widespread malaise, an aggressive streak rife in today's youth culture.

Committed and responsible parents and educators are frustrated. Despite our loving care, kids seem highly stressed. Parents and other elders no longer appear to be the natural mentors for the young, as always used to be the case with human beings and as is still the case with all other species living in their natural habitats. Senior generations – parents and grandparents of the baby boomer group – look at us uncomprehendingly. “We didn't need how-to manuals on parenting in our day; we just did it,” they say, with some mixture of truth and misunderstanding.

This state of affairs is ironic, given that more is known about child development than ever before.

So, what has changed? The problem, in a word, is context. Children's attachments to parents and other significant adults are no longer getting the support required from our culture and society. Even parent-child relationships that at the beginning are powerful and fully nurturing can become undermined as our children move out into a world that no longer appreciates or reinforces the attachment bond. Children are increasingly forming attachments that compete with their parents, with the result that the proper context for parenting is less and less available to us. Not a lack of love or of parenting know-how but the erosion of the attachment context is what makes parenting ineffective.

## THE IMPACT OF PEER CULTURE

The chief and most damaging of the competing attachments undermining parental and elder authority and love is the increasing bonding of our children with their peers. The disorder affecting today's young children and adolescents is rooted in their loss of orientation toward the nurturing adults in their lives. Far from seeking to establish yet one more medical-psychological disorder – the last thing today's bewildered parents need – I am using the word ‘disorder’ in its most basic sense: a disruption of the natural order of things.

For the first time in history, young people are turning for instruction, modeling, and guidance not to mothers, fathers, teachers, and other responsible adults but to people whom nature never intended to place in a parenting role – their own peers. Children are not manageable, teachable, or maturing because they no longer take their cues from us. Instead, they are being brought up by immature persons who cannot possibly guide them to maturity. They are being brought up by each other.

The term that seems to fit more than any other for this phenomenon is *peer orientation*. It is peer orientation that has muted our parenting instincts, eroded our natural authority, and caused us to parent and teach not from the heart but from the head – from manuals, the advice of ‘experts’, and the confused expectations of society.

## WHAT IS PEER ORIENTATION?

Orientation, the drive to get one's bearings and become acquainted with one's surroundings, is a fundamental human instinct and need. Disorientation is one of the least bearable of all psychological experiences. Attachment and orientation are inextricably intertwined. Humans and other creatures automatically orient themselves by seeking cues from those to whom they are attached.

This orienting instinct of humans is much like the imprinting instinct of a duckling. Hatched from the egg, the duckling immediately imprints on the mother duck – he will follow her around, heeding her example and her directions until he grows into mature independence. That is how nature would prefer it, but in the absence of mother duck, the duckling will begin to follow the nearest moving object – a human being, a dog, or even a mechanical toy. Needless to say, none of these is as well-suited as the mother duck to raise that duckling to successful adult duckhood.

Likewise, if no parenting adult is available, the human child will orient to whoever is near. Social, economic, and cultural trends in the past five or six decades have displaced adults from their intended role as the orienting influence on the child. The peer group has moved into this orienting void, with deplorable results.

In our culture the problem begins with stressed families, with too many children spending most of their days in daycares without adequate adult emotional nourishing, and with today's mania for encouraging multiple and frequent peer contacts through play dates, sleepovers, and other activities that encourage young kids to spend more time in one another's company than with nurturing parents and other adult caregivers. It is magnified by the technology that enables children to remain in virtually constant contact with one another but, mostly, by our lack of appreciation of the need for healthy adult attachments.

Children cannot be oriented to both adults and other children simultaneously. One cannot follow two sets of conflicting directions at the same time. The child's brain must automatically choose between parental values and peer values, parental guidance and peer guidance, parental culture and peer culture, whenever the two would appear to be in conflict. For many children peer bonds have come to replace relationships with adults as children's primary sources of orientation. What is unnatural is not peer contact, but that children should have become the dominant influence on each other's development.

## NORMAL BUT NOT NATURAL OR HEALTHY

So ubiquitous is peer orientation these days that it has become the norm. Many psychologists and educators, as well as the lay public, have come to see it as natural – or, more commonly, do not even recognize it as a specific phenomenon to be distinguished. It is simply taken for granted as the way things are. But what is *normal*, in the sense of conforming to a norm, is not necessarily what is *natural* or *healthy*. There is nothing either healthy or natural about peer orientation.

Peer orientation masquerades as natural or goes undetected because we have become divorced from our intuitions and because we have unwittingly become peer-oriented

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ourselves. For members of the post-war generations born in England, North America, and many other parts of the industrialized world, our own preoccupation with peers is blinding us to the seriousness of the problem.

Culture, until recently, was always handed down vertically, from generation to generation. For millennia, wrote Joseph Campbell, "the youth have been educated and the aged rendered wise" through the study, experience, and understanding of traditional cultural forms. Adults played a critical role in the transmission of culture, taking what they received from their own parents and passing it down to

their children. However, the culture our children are being introduced to is much less likely to be the culture of their parents than that of their peers. Children are generating their own culture – one that is very distinct from that of their parents and, in some ways, also very alien. Instead of culture being passed down vertically, it is being transmitted horizontally within the younger generation.

Essential to any culture are its customs, its music, its dress, its celebrations, its stories. Today, the music children listen to bears very little resemblance to the music of their grandparents. The way they look is dictated by the way other children look rather than by the parents' cultural heritage. Their birthday parties and rites of passage are influenced by the practices of other children around them, not by the customs of their parents before them. If all this seems normal to us, it's only due to our own peer orientation.

The existence of a youth culture, separate and distinct from that of adults, dates back only fifty years or so. Although half a century is a relatively short time in the history of humankind, in the life of an individual person it constitutes a whole era. Most of you reading this article have been raised in a society where the transmission of culture was already horizontal rather than vertical. In each new generation, this process – potentially corrosive to civilized society – gains new power and velocity.

Who we want to be and what we want to be like are defined by our orientation – by whom we appoint as our model of how to be, how to act, and with whom to identify. Current psychological literature emphasizes the role of peers in creating a child's sense of identity. When asked to define themselves, children often do not even refer to their parents but rather to the values and expectations of other children and of the peer groups they belong to. Something significantly systemic has shifted. For far too many children today, peers have replaced parents in creating the core of their personalities.

An even scarier thought is that, if peers have replaced us as the ones who matter most, what is missing in those peer relationships is going to have the most profound impact. Absolutely missing in peer relationships are unconditional love and acceptance, the desire to nurture, the ability to extend oneself for the sake of the other, and the willingness to sacrifice for the growth and development of the other. When we compare peer relationships with parent relationships for what is missing, parents come out looking like saints. The results spell disaster for many children.

Paralleling the increase of peer orientation in our society is a startling and dramatic increase in suicide rates among North American children: fourfold in the last fifty years for those aged ten to fourteen. Between 1980 and 1992 alone, suicide increased 120 percent. In inner cities, where peers are most likely to replace parents, suicide rates have risen even more. And what is behind the numbers is highly revealing: more and more childhood suicides triggered by

**EN BREF** Jusqu'à récemment, la culture était toujours transmise verticalement, de génération en génération. Mais pour beaucoup d'enfants, les liens entre pairs remplacent les liens avec des adultes comme principales sources d'orientation de leur croissance. Pour la première fois dans l'histoire, les jeunes se tournent non vers leurs mères, pères, enseignants et autres adultes responsables comme instructeurs, modèles et guides, mais vers des personnes que la nature n'a jamais prévu pour un rôle parental : leurs pairs. Mais il manque d'importantes caractéristiques parentales à ces relations entre pairs : l'amour et l'acceptation sans condition, le désir d'entourer de soins, la capacité de donner son maximum pour le bien d'autrui et la volonté de se sacrifier pour assurer la croissance et l'épanouissement de l'autre. Les résultats sont désastreux pour beaucoup d'enfants. Pour que nos enfants puissent s'épanouir, nous devons les reprendre en main et nous occuper de leurs besoins d'attachement.

peer rejection and bullying. The more peers matter, the more children are devastated by the insensitive relating of their peers, by failing to fit in, and by feeling rejected or ostracized.

The effects of peer orientation are most obvious in teenagers, but its early signs are visible by Grade 2 or 3. Its origins go back to even before kindergarten and need to be understood by all adults – especially those charged with the care of young children – who want to avoid the problem or to reverse it as soon as it appears.

### A WAKE-UP CALL

"But aren't we meant to let go?" many parents ask. "Aren't our children meant to become independent of us?" Absolutely, but only when our job is done and only in order for them to be themselves. Fitting in with the immature expectations of the peer group is not how the young grow to be independent, self-respecting adults. By weakening the natural lines of attachment and responsibility, peer orientation undermines healthy development.

Children may know what they want, but it is dangerous to assume that they know what they need. To the peer-oriented child, it seems only natural to prefer contact with his friends to closeness with his family, to be with peers as much as possible, and to be as much like them as possible. A child does not know best. Parenting and teaching methods that take their cues from the child's preferences can get you retired long before the job is done. To nurture our children, we must reclaim them and take charge of providing for their attachment needs.

Extreme manifestations of peer orientation catch the attention of the media: violent bullying, peer murders, childhood suicides. Although we are all shocked by such dreadful events, most of us do not feel that they concern us directly. And they are not the focus of this article. But such childhood tragedies are only the most dramatic signs of peer orientation, a phenomenon no longer limited to the concrete jungles and cultural chaos of large urbanized centers like Chicago, New York, Toronto, Los Angeles. It has hit the family neighborhoods – the communities characterized by middle-class homes and good schools. It is happening in our very own backyards.

### THE GOOD NEWS

We may not be able to reverse the social, cultural, and economic forces driving peer orientation, but there is much we can do in our homes and in our classrooms to keep ourselves from being prematurely replaced. Because our culture no longer leads our children in the right direction toward genuine independence and maturity, parents and other child-rearing adults matter more than ever before.

Nothing less will do than to place the parent-child (and adult-child) relationship back onto its natural foundation. Just as relationship is at the heart of our current parenting and teaching difficulties, it is also at the heart of the solution. Adults who ground their rearing of the young in a solid relationship with the child are acting intuitively,

whether in the home or the classroom. They do not have to resort to manuals if they act from understanding and empathy. If we know how to be with our children and who to be for them, we need much less advice on what to do. Practical approaches emerge spontaneously from our own experience once the relationship has been restored. Parenting and teaching techniques, while useful, need to be secondary to the relationship and need to flow from the relationship. They are no substitutes for it.

The good news is that nature is on our side. Our children want to belong to us, even if they don't know it or feel it, and even if their words or actions seem to signal the opposite. We can reclaim our proper role as their nurturers and mentors. **I**

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