

# From Cradle to Classroom- The hazardous leap of early childhood

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*The current ideological confusion and obsession with gadgets within the younger generation arises from deeper psycho-socio-cultural changes in society, especially within the realm of parenting, early childhood development and the gradual erosion of neighbourhoods.*

“Doctor, I’m worried that my child comes home from school crying that a couple of boys tease him and hit him. How can I make my child hit back?”

This is not an uncommon situation in a pediatrician’s clinic. While it is absolutely essential to oppose bullying, is this best done by teaching your child to be aggressive and physically hit back?

Today, parenting is largely left to ‘common sense’. As can be seen here, the latter is often times a knee jerk reaction, and not the application of intelligence but the reflexive response of the primitive or limbic brain.

As humans evolved within the animal kingdom, genetics worked on the inherited brain to go beyond the ‘fight or flight’ binary. This modification was largely in terms of what we call ‘higher functions’ like rational thought, communication, delaying gratification and, as Yuval Noah Harari popularly noted (Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind) the ability to think as and for a large group. Thus, over hundreds of centuries our brain adapted itself perfectly to settled community living. Children were born in families and reared in neighbourhoods. With 24-hour- days being squeezed more into seconds than minutes, with multi-tasking monotonous rigour, it is easy to lapse into the sordid but easy comfort of binaries- strong vs weak, right vs wrong, good vs evil, and eventually, us vs them. And this happens more than ever in the laboratory of parenting. As our children are born and develop in an increasingly binary world, fraternity, equality, social causes, morality, empathy are all beginning to get coloured with the tunnelled vision of quick-fix, poorly thought through, machismo solutions.

This makes for an interesting regression. What the binary largely does is replace higher order cortical functioning with a paradigm and pervasive shift towards short term, narrow, self-serving, emotional decision-making. The real victims of this lilt are reasoning and empathy and the gradual loss of ability to resist impulsive thinking. Parents increasingly report that their children lack empathy - this is not due to the presence of some evil gene but rather the lack of practice of reasoning and reasonable thinking in multiple social situations involving families and neighbourhoods. Increasing rates of suicides are reportedly due to a lack of resilience- an ability which develops as children are

nurtured within diverse experiences to come to terms with failure. Instant gratification and lack of human engagement at very young ages have led to altered human behaviours like poor attention span and impulsivity and abysmally poor coping skills leading to tantrums and phobias.

Amidst this, the pervasive onslaught of electronic gadgets has vitiated the environment beyond the point that existing genes can deal with, and we have a young population that proclaims itself to be Gen Z but is truly as vulnerable as never before. A mother told me that her eighteen-month old needs the screen to eat; if the network drops or the wi fi falters for a minute, the child flings herself backwards flailing her hands and feet and starts screaming. A visibly stressed father shared that his four year old son was diagnosed to be obese, but he is already habituated to directly order food over popular food apps. Parents of adolescents request help to connect with their children who represent a 'lost generation'- inhabitants of a digital world with poor adaptability and resilience in the real world. This generation, they lament, are unable to connect with others during family get-togethers, are extremely rude and seem to have no insight into their behaviour. Though we have red flagged the impact of climate change, the impact of recent environment on children's mental and behavioural development has gone relatively unnoticed.

Placing a screen before an eight month old is the easiest way to make her finish her porridge- quickly allowing the parent to return to the next work-from-home meeting. The child continues to find solace in the screen. This gradually weakens the infant's skills of interaction within the home. The isolation of children begins in the family home but is complete in the neighbourhood. A child weaned on screens is unlikely to learn social manoeuvring due to scant interaction with diverse neighbours; neither do neighbours have time to indulge little ones. In fact, the neighbourhood is prominent by its absence today. As political scientist, Ajay Gudavarthy describes it, 'living together, separately' is the reality for most of urban India's children. Parents have scant need for neighbourhoods, being focussed entirely on academic carriers. And all the social manoeuvring children should have learned in the neighbourhood is expected to be learned in a few weeks of a swank pre-school! This dangerous leap 'from cradle to classroom' bypasses the scaffolding of family and neighbourhood, hitherto essential components of human rearing over thousands of generations. Lev Vygotsky immortalised the place of both in developmental biology with his theory of the zone of proximal development- the human infant learns from those closest to herself, thus developing early skills that can be used to then connect and learn with those further away. Taking away the human scaffolding renders gaps as children are unable to connect and establish secure and nurturing relationships in the community. This reinforces their attention towards screens. In the proverbial chicken and egg situation, it is difficult to say who came first- the aggressive courting of fragile attentions by screens or the forsaking of gentle minds that were reaching out to those in their proximal environment only to be ignored.

Schools are no longer the inclusive and assimilative spaces they were for all classes and castes. Name calling and prejudice over food or clothing is now common place in classrooms. Children are bullied or boycotted over the choice of food or clothes. Busy parents underestimate and brush them off as just another 'issue that doesn't concern me' - the matter cuts far deeper. A mother complained to me once about the bullying her 7 year old was subjected to since his namesake was a notorious international terrorist. It is not only her child who is traumatised. It is important to understand that the children who

see others being bullied are equally affected - either traumatised into silence and fear, or beginning to enjoy the sadistic terrorising of a weak peer.

Parents lament they are helpless to prevent this. Stopping screens is just not practical today. You cannot deny a generation the fruits of their predecessor's toil. Post-liberalisation, the neo middle class has become the new bourgeois and refuses to give up their share for those they left behind the poverty line not long ago. Similarly, the young cannot be persuaded to give up their bright screens. It is their political inheritance that is at fault here, not just the shiny lights.

Isolation of family members to be replaced with screens, banishing neighbourhoods for the blind dash towards schooling, are sudden changes in the environment we have been exposed to over the past couple of decades- something mankind has not had time to evolve for and deal with. This provokes anxiety and opens the doors towards doubts, fears, and suspicion. Flaws in early childhood are very difficult to rectify later. It may not be apparent at an individual level or in the near term, but will certainly and inexorably lead us towards an increasingly disturbed and hostile society.

And the advice to their child 'to hit and come home, rather than be hit' is where the fault line defines itself. The middle class has been made to give up the luxury of quality time for the carrot-and-stick model of economic survival. Many parents manifest not-so-latent aggression lurking beneath a thin veneer of civility. Tough but common instances in daily life are all it takes to shatter this surface. And the lesson is not lost on the child. Thus, both sides of the parent-child equation are increasingly hostage to narratives that peddle consumerism or toxic hatred and prejudice.

Solutions may not be as impossible as they seem. The potential damage to young minds, either by poor social interaction, affects society as a whole, even trans-generationally, rather than merely harming individuals. Yet, from a developmental perspective, this battle must be fought at the individual level. Every child must be provided a nurturing scaffolding of care, acceptance and love- the only way to draw her into a trusting and conducive relationship with the world around her. Redeeming the priceless worth of families – co inhabiting with a chacha, maama, kaaki, khaala, bua, nanaji - is urgent and imperative, and is doable at least in small aliquots or temporary measures, weekends for instance.

Parents are in a perpetual rush to enrol their children in 'non-academic' classes- swimming, tennis, language, learning an instrument, etc. At New Horizons Child Development Centre, we counsel parents to realise that these may end up making the child better in performing those skills, but to be careful that the child does not end up emotionally more self-focussed and consequently, isolated. In working class families, after school hours while parents are at work, children stay glued to the screen. In order to help parents overcome their child's screen time addiction, we suggest parents in a neighbourhood form groups of five or six. Every day, all children go by rotation to one family where that parent takes that much time off from work and decides what games the children will play, what food they will eat- while the other parents are busy at work. This ensures each child stays away from the screen and at the same time experiences and builds relationships with other families. There is something different to learn and the child ends up learning empathy and self-regulation in social situations.

We advocate parents encourage the child to participate in community activities that serve others- without self-gratifying certificates of individual excellence. Interestingly, today in a busy city, these

opportunities are available in gurudwaras, mandirs, masjids and churches. Send your children here not merely to memorise verses, but to help an old uncle up the stairs, to serve at the langar, to sweep the floor or to fold the carpets. Take them to all these religious places. Let them observe that basic beliefs are similar, but practices are different. Learning to adapt to different practices in small measures helps the child develop self-regulation better.

Let these different practices be the many arms of the scaffolding. Your child will be able to grow higher and eventually look over the fence! She will have a life beyond screens. She will be able to learn patience, resist the first impulse that hits her mind, prioritize what she deciphers from many books over an inflammatory social media post, and be able to take failure in her stride. Attitude to attempt and adapt gradually and meaningfully to changes, resilience in the face of failure, collaborating with peers with care, humility and humour are vital. These timeless values and skills that sustain the child as an individual, and at the same time sustain society, cannot be developed in a tuition class or on an app. They can only be developed safely in a thriving, secure diversity. And it is essential that parents take a pause, think beyond binaries and quick machoism and go on to mirror and role model these timeless values and practices.

A proverb tells us that it takes a village to raise a child. It is time to add that it takes a neighbourhood to raise a citizen.