

Interview with Jesper Juul

Interview was prepared by Ivana Gradisnik and Anja Cotic Svetina

1. One of your main ideas is that children are competent. What do you mean by that?

The fact, that children are competent is actually a very important discovery done by the American psychoanalyst Daniel N. Stern and his associates in the eighties, when they studied the early relationship between mother and child. His findings corresponded with my own experiences as a family therapist and I chose the title "Your competent child" because I wanted to underline that children are not "half-competent" as earlier developmental psychology had taught us.

What we found was among other things that the reactions/behavior of children always are meaningful - i.e. they are to be understood as valid feedback to the adults; That children are born with the ability to be emphatic and the ability to take responsibility for their own person. These are the most interesting competencies as they are completely opposite from what I learned in my education and as a father 35 years ago. It means that there is good reason to regard upbringing and education of children as a mutual process where parents can and must learn along with the child. As the child is learning about the world, his family and himself the parents are learning about their child and themselves as human beings. It also means that raising children is no more a one-way-street, where adults are doing something to children, but a mutual process of personal growth and development.

2. So, children are competent, parents are competent - why do we then need so much »professional advice«, so many books on parenting, parenting manuals etc... When one reads through your work one of the things that become immediately apparent is that you don't fall into that »method« trap - giving »cook-book recipes« that are supposed to work for anyone. How come?

I think there are two reasons. The first is that this new insight creates a whole new perspective on children and their personal and social development for which we have not yet developed a corresponding adult behavior. The second is that the world and our societies have changed tremendously over the past generation so that young parents actually are faced with the challenge of re-inventing not only partnership but also how to raise children with respect for their personal integrity. The fact that children are competent does not mean that they know or are able to do everything. They still need adult leadership, but a very different kind of leadership that respects their individual existence and personal integrity instead of just forcing or manipulating them into copies of their parents or to adapt to society as it is.

Children are just as different as "real people" and the ideas that there are techniques or methods that work with all children is simply outdated. Family life must be based much more on dialogue in the future and we must learn to regard also the behavior of children and adolescents as valuable feedback instead of as insubordination.

3. What you are proposing is »the third way« - the way that is neither autocratic nor so called permissive. How would you describe this alternative way and why do we need it?

It is actually a lot like the way we now regard the relationship between men and women. Women might not yet be politically, socially and economically equal to men but they deserve

(and demand) to be regarded as independent, autonomous human beings. My own generation was the first to face this enormous challenge and we are still learning every day.

My term "Equal dignity", when used about children, does not mean equality in a political sense. It means that parents (as well as pedagogues and teachers) must regard the emotions, reactions, thoughts and dreams of children and young people as just as important and valuable to the fellowship as those of adults and that they should be included .

4. But contemporary families have been actually trying to base their family life on democratic principles. Democracy is supposed to be good, but you say that it just doesn't work in the context of family relations. Why is democracy in family life not enough or better said not good enough?

The principles of democracy are very important also within families. What I have said is that they are not enough to form the basis of values. It has to do with the fact, that adults are and must be responsible for the quality of the relationship between adults and children. Children are simple not able to responsible for that. (This is a competence they do not have).

Let's take an example: parents can discuss the plans for the summer holidays with their children and the decision can be shared or democratic in nature. But how the family is functioning and how everybody is feeling during the holidays depends solely on the quality of the parental leadership.

Or to put it in another way: the wellbeing of each family member is far too important to vote about. The decision-process in families cannot be based on opinions and attitudes alone. It must include mutual empathy and a desire to be of value to each others lives.

5. All through history children were seen and treated as some kind of antisocial semi-beings that need to be subjected to great influence and manipulation from parents in order to learn to behave like real (adult) human beings; as objects in need of special »parenting methods«. You are saying that this is not the case and one of the arguments in favour of that basic notion is your claim that children cooperate. Even more: that they cooperate willingly and competently and that faced with a choice between cooperating and saving their integrity they inevitably choose cooperation. Tell us more about that, how and why that happens?

The conflict between our personal integrity (needs, values and boundaries) and our desire to cooperate (adapt, copy) is a fundamental existential conflict that has always been know to man. It can also be described as a conflict between individuality and conformity or between the individual and society. It is a lifelong and daily challenge to find the right balance because the individual depends on the group just as much as the group depends on the individual. The question we ask ourselves today is how we can raise children in a non-authoritarian and non-violent way. How can we teach them genuine respect for other people based on good experiences and trust instead of and fear or anxiety. In our fifty years of working with families we have learned that children are not born "egocentric" as S. Freud thought. They are more than willing to cooperate and copy their parents when treated with respect. Just watch any infant and you will see how eager they are to please and to learn the ways of their parents. This means that our task as adults has been redefined. We must now develop a way to be with our children that protects their personal integrity and help them when they cooperate too much for their own good. This is not a romantic notion suggesting that we should be "nice and sweet" all the time but that we develop ways of exercising our authority and power.

6. But still, parents are obsessed with the idea that they need to yield and retain power in the parent-child relationship. Why are we so stuck with the idea that power is important in any relationship?

I believe that this idea has very little to do with how to raise children. It has been a reflection of autocratic political systems, where adults were suffering as much as children but could not see any other way. Power is a reality - also in relationships. The question is how we can administrate our power on the personal level in a way that helps our loved ones to grow and become healthy instead of harming them and damage their vitality. How can we raise children that are mentally healthy and not either violent/abusive or self destructive? Over the past two decades we have found many answers to this question, but many are still unanswered.

7. The other point that seems to preoccupy parents is the necessity to set limits to the child. What's your view on setting the limits?

I don't believe in setting limits for children in the sense that we create fences of rules and prohibitions around them. I do believe that is important that parents are well-defined - i.e. that they are clear about what they want and don't want. If a small child wants to cross the street when there is a red light you should of course hold him back, but when it comes to the child's development of respect and understanding for your values and boundaries it happens through interaction and dialogue and it takes app. five years for a child to integrate this knowledge. (This is - by the way - much faster than most adults learn about the values and boundaries of their partner)

8. The most straightforward and authentic way to communicate to others about yourself, your limits, your feelings, emotions is by what you call personal language. Could you describe what is personal language and what isn't?

Yesterday my grandson (17 months) took a piece of food from his plate, tried to bite it in half and when he was unable he placed it on the table next to his plate. If you don't like that (which I don't) it is easy to teach him if you follow a few basic rules: Create contact - i.e. get his attention and establish eye contact. Then tell him in a friendly voice (as to a good adult friend), "I don't like that you put your food on the table. I want you to put it back on the plate." This is personal language, that tells him about his grandfather. His is not being criticized, blamed or ordered. I tell him who I am and what I want, and most of the time he gives it to me - willingly and happily. And "most of the time" is all you can hope for - from any other human being.

9. You point to an important distinction between self-esteem and self-confidence. The terms are often confused or used as synonyms, although they mean something quite different. As a result we often set to strengthen the child's self-esteem but end up boosting his self-confidence only, at the most. Why is that a problem and what do we gain by being conscious about the distinction?

The lack of self esteem is probably the one factor that causes most pain in people and in their relationships. It causes many people to become victims or bullies. It causes a lot of substance abuse, a lot of guilt and bad conscience. In the relationship between parents and their children it causes a lot of violence which in turn makes it impossible for children to develop a healthy self esteem. A healthy self esteem is a deep existential quality that enriches people's lives and makes it possible for them to enrich the lives of other people. Self confidence is a very good thing when it comes to our development of skills - practical, personal, academic, sport and so on. But a strong self confidence does not give you more self esteem. The current trend among European parents is to constantly praise children - no matter what and how

they do. This does not strengthen their self esteem it only pumps up their ego's. Personal feedback is much better - for both parents and children - and it strengthens the self esteem on both sides.

10. Regardless of the time and society we live in we seem to always agree that the current generation of children and youth is just terrible, so much worse than ours was. How can that be? Are we not progressing socially and psychologically? What do you think of today's children?

The most simple answer is: we were cooperating with our own parents and learned specific ways of being of value to them. We convinced ourselves that our way was the "right" way - not matter how painful it might have been. When a new generation is behaving differently is makes us question our own way but instead of reflecting about our own way, we condemn theirs. It is not very intelligent but very common as you say. When I look at today European children I have a few worries, but mostly I enjoy that more and more of them are able to grow up without fear and with a lot of freedom to become who they are.