

Your competent child

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INTRODUCTION

Like so many people my age, I knew when I was in my twenties that there was something wrong with the way in which my parents' generation (and the generations before them) looked upon the structure of the family and the raising of children.

In the course of the decade that followed, as I trained to become a family therapist – working with so-called maladjusted children and young people, and with groups of single mothers -- I realized that my attitudes about families and childrearing were neither better nor worse than those of my parents. In fact, our thoughts had the same fundamental weaknesses. First, they lacked ethical substance. Second, they were formulated according to an arrogant and polarizing assumption: some people are right, because they act in accordance with the right attitudes, and other people are wrong, because they act in accordance with the wrong attitudes.

This tendency to polarize was also inherent in the feedback I received from my colleagues and clients. Some of them thought that I was good at what I was doing; others didn't. In my naivete I thought that as long as the first group was in the majority, I was safe. It took some time before I realized that I should have listened to those from the dissenting group. This didn't happen until I became a father, and experienced my own lack of competence. That's when my education began. Until then, I'd only been in training.

Before I became a father, I believed that families should be characterized by understanding and tolerance, and that relationships between parents and children should be democratic. This was in direct contrast with the moralizing, intolerant and controlling type of upbringing which I knew was destructive for children's self-esteem and vitality.

But as I spent time with my son, and through my everyday work with families with children, I began to realize how superficial my attitudes were. Granted, the our understanding of role of children in family and society has changed in many ways from how it was when I was growing up. Our grasp of human nature, our means of punishment, and our attitudes toward educational and public morality have all become more humane and less restrictive. However, I became aware of two factors that challenged and pained me both professionally and personally.

As a teacher and supervisor, I saw first-hand, all too often, that parents were struggling. They would meet with therapists to discuss their children, and leave the meetings feeling like losers -- less able to take action and more inadequate than when they arrived.

And the therapists with whom they met left these meetings feeling helpless and incompetent. Yet bound by duty, they clung to traditional psychology, which is more concerned with finding fault than it is with identifying possibilities.

As a family therapist, I saw that children and young people still had to bear the brunt of this disconnection. We still saddle children with a responsibility that few parents, politicians, educators, teachers or therapists are willing to take upon themselves. We are not motivated by ill will; on the contrary, we love our children, and believe that they need to shoulder this responsibility in order to grow. But our logic is flawed. Our fundamental understanding of what kind of beings children are is mistaken.

The Swedish psychologist, Margaretha Berg Brodén, has expressed this idea in a single sentence that has provided the inspiration for the title of this book: "Perhaps we have been mistaken; perhaps children are competent" (M.B.B. "Mor og barn i Ingenmandsland"/"Mother and child in no man's land", Copenhagen 1992).

Brodén's insight arises from the scientific context of her work and from her special interest in the early interaction between infants and their parents. Because I am a practitioner and not a research worker, and because my area of experience is the interaction between children and adults in the broadest terms, I have a slightly different perspective on her observation.

In my view, we have made a decisive mistake by assuming that children are not real people from birth. Both in the scientific and popular literature, we tend to regard children as potential rather than actual beings, as anti-social "semi-beings." As a result, we assume, first, that they need to be subjected to massive influence and manipulation from adults and second, that they have to reach a particular age before they can be regarded as equals and real people.

In other words, adults have to find ways in which to bring up children so that they learn how to behave like real (i.e. adult) human beings. We have identified certain methods of upbringing, and labeled them along a spectrum, ranging from "permissive" to "authoritarian." Yet we have never really stopped to question the validity of the assumption.

This book questions this assumption. I believe most of what we understand by the term "upbringing" is both superfluous and directly harmful. Not only is it unhealthy for children, but it also hinders adults, precluding their growth and development. Furthermore, it has a destructive influence on the quality of relationships between children and adults. By perpetuating instead of questioning this principle, we create a vicious circle which also interferes with our understanding of education, rehabilitation, and social policy regarding children and families.

Twenty-five years ago, my generation played a part in creating an illusionary distance between "me" and "society." This was a logical extension of our clash with authority. Yet it has persisted over the years, and has become increasingly dangerous, particularly when coupled with the fact that politics have been reduced to economics.

It is perhaps more true now than ever before that the way in which we behave towards our children will determine the future of the world. Access to information has increased to such an extent that we cannot assume that our two-faced attitude regarding raising children will remain undetected. That is, though we preach ecology, humanitarianism and non-violence when it comes to world politics, we treat children and young people violently.

For several years now, I have had the privilege of travelling and working in different cultures. My travels have convinced me ways in which the relationship between children and adults has changed in the Scandinavian countries might serve as a model for other countries.

Visitors to these countries may see adults acting toward children in ways which, on the surface, seem spineless, confused, and irresolute. But beneath the surface, these relationships contain the germ of what can only be described as a quantum leap in human development. For the first time in the modern age, adults are seriously considering the inalienable right of the individual to personal growth from a non-dogmatic and non-authoritarian standpoint. For the first time, we have a basis for believing that each individual's existential freedom does not constitute a threat towards the community, but is rather vital to the continued health of the community as a whole.

The way adults and children relate to each other varies greatly. Not only are there huge differences between families in Europe and America, but also within each of these continents as well: families in northern Europe differ from those in the south, and those in the former Eastern Bloc. There are even distinct differences between regions in the same country as well. Naturally, a country's culture, political history and religious beliefs play an important role in a nation's self-awareness. Foreign visitors tend to notice these beliefs. I overhear immigrants in Denmark say that they do not want their children to be like Danish children, yet Danes are easily outraged to see how physical southern Europeans are with their families.

These differences are difficult enough to deal with on their own, but the trend, particularly in the US and in many European countries, is toward the creation of multi-ethnic, multinational societies. I believe that it is important to be able to see beneath these culturally determined styles. The social importance of the family varies from one culture to another, but its existential importance is the same. The pleasure we derive from constructive and healthy interaction – and the pain caused by destructive relationships -- is identical no matter where we live, even though it may be expressed in different ways.

Throughout this book, I will contrast the “old” with the “new,” not to criticize the old, but to identify concrete possibilities for action. In my everyday work with families and mental health professionals, I have seen that many parents are very open about their attitudes. Deep down, they know when they act inappropriately, but they are unable to change because they need tangible suggestions. Yet because the type of interaction I am proposing is so new, there are as yet no role models.

Traditional psychology often questions peoples’ emotions: How much do parents love their child? How much does a son hate his father? How angry is a daughter with her mother? These questions are important in that they allow people to express real pain. But I would like to underscore the fact that I have never met parents who have not loved their children, or children who have not been attached to their parents. I have, however, met many parents and children who are unable to convert the loving feelings they have for each other into loving behavior.

For the first time, we are ready to create genuine relationships that bestow equality dignity on men and women, and on adults and children. Never before in the history of mankind has this happened on such a large scale. The demand for equal dignity also means openness and respect for differences, which in turn means that we must abandon many of our impressions about what is generally right and wrong. We can no longer just replace one “parenting” method with another; we can no longer continue merely to modernize our mistaken assumptions. Together with our children and our grandchildren, we are literally staking out new territory.

The anecdotes and examples suggested in these pages are meant to inspire individual experimentation. In other words, they are not meant to be slavishly copied. Parents are not just people of different gender; they are human beings who have joined together having had completely different experiences from their family-of-origin. Yet they also have much in common. We have all learned, as children, that there are different ways of entering into relationships with other people, only some of which are fruitful. As we come together to create a new family, we have the potential to learn what we could not learn in our first family.

When I say that children are competent, I mean that they are in a position to teach us what we need to learn. They give us the feedback that makes it possible for us to regain our own lost competence and help us to discard our unfruitful, unloving and self-destructive patterns of behavior. To learn from our children in this way demands much more than that we speak democratically with them. It means that we must develop a kind of dialogue that many adults are unable to establish even with other adults: that is to say, a personal dialogue based on equal dignity.

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I would like to clarify my position on a few key points before beginning. First, the fact that each and everyone of us must find our own way of doing things – a way that is most fruitful for both ourselves and our children -- does not mean that everything is equally good or that “anything goes.” Throughout this book, I will refer to specific central principles, which individually and collectively form the criteria by which we can all judge our own actions.

I often refer to historical practices because I believe that the best way for most people to understand themselves and their actions is by using history as a mirror.

Finally, I am concerned that some readers will feel criticized by the ideas contained in this book. We live in an era when we are quick to identify victims and assign guilt; consequently, many of us have a tendency to feel criticized. But this is not my intent.

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My thanks are also due to the many families from all over the world who let me into their personal and private lives. I recall with embarrassing clarity my attitudes and prejudices upon meeting many of them for the first time – those from Japan and Muslim countries, families of mixed ethnic origins in the Croatian refugee camps, and American families ravaged by alcoholism, to name a few.

My grownup son, now 26, has helped me to integrate my experiences in a way that can only be done by someone who is openly and honestly searching for his own life. The same applies to my wife, whose very existence confronts me with what I hope each time are the last remnants of my childish self-centeredness.

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