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Protecting Childhood by Edward M. Hallowell, M.D.

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Childhood ought to be a time in which you find out what you love to do, what you are good at, and where you plug into the world most enthusiastically.

As tempting as it can be, no one should presume to program a childhood as if its outcome could already be envisioned. It ought to be its own unpredictable, unique time: a time of discovery, rife with surprises, mistakes, disappointments, and triumphs. Full of “Important Matters” that we adults regularly stress, it also ought to be about little things, like grasshoppers, dog biscuits, basement cobwebs, a teacher who drove a 1966 Porsche 911, a dentist who had a parrot in his office, a rumor that Mr. Hawkins never bathed, new sneakers, swamps, American Girl dolls, splinters, Aunt Ruth’s creamed onions at Thanksgiving, and all kinds of gum.

We should hope not only that our children “do well,” but that they get to have a real childhood, often in spite of our best efforts to prevent them from doing so, not to mention the efforts of society at large. Our job as adults should be to build a protective wall around childhood, so children can be safe while they do what kids ought to do: play, get into mischief, dream, believe all kinds of stories and make up some too, while also learning about making beds, taking out trash, brushing teeth, studying hard, and doing all that kind of stuff. The desired outcome of childhood ought to be described by attitudes developed along the way – like optimism, enthusiasm, and hope – not by trophies, destinations, or degrees.

Think back and ask yourself how much of what is best in you depends upon your having had that time once, a time when you were free of what traps you now, a time when you imagined everything was possible and impossible all at once, a time when days lasted so much longer than they do now. Consider how much of your capacity to conjure up new ideas depends upon your having done so as a child, and how much of your

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optimism today comes from having seen your mother smile upon you as she kissed you good night.

We adults have a hard time understanding what children truly need because we forget what being a kid was all about. We forget the sights and smells, and most of all, the way we saw our world back then. We forget because somewhere along the line the train stopped, and we got off. We graduated. We went to work. We got married. We took seriously someone's advice. We incurred bills. We got fired or betrayed, but we also had success,

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which felt good. We got hooked on achieving some goal, which led to the next goal, and the next time we stopped to notice, we were on another train heading off to quite a different destination.

This usually happens sometime in our 20's or 30's, for some people when they are 10, for others never. But most of us in our 20's or 30's do what is colloquially called "grow up." We disengage from our toys, and we renounce our carefree ways. Eagerly, we apply for jobs and feel thrilled when we get them. We put on the uniforms that are expected of us and we set about doing what people who grow up do. With luck, not too much of us dies as we do this.

The death of the parts that usually do disappear exact a price, parts like the capacity to be easily pleased or the ability to believe what is obviously false or the tendency to trust other people. When we say that experience is the best teacher, we honor experience. But we might also say that experience is the worst teacher because it can destroy so much – precious qualities like innocence, playfulness, and the love of silly stuff. We grow up because, I guess, we have to or we'll get left behind, deemed daft or worse. Still, we would do well not to let too much of us die.

One way to keep those important parts of us alive is simply to try to remember life as a child. It isn't easy. Because we have to wrestle so tenaciously with the demands of adult life, we lose touch with what it was like not to have to do so, and we forget the feel of childhood. We get so caught up in our routines that we lose our ability to break routines, to

daydream, to be silly and carefree. We get serious. We gain experience. We forget what it's like to be scared of the dark, or to listen, frozen with fear and dread, as our parents argue and come to blows, or to see a dog die and to bury it, or on the other hand, to stick a face into cotton candy, or run and do a cannonball into a cold lake, or to go to sleep really, really looking forward to the next day.

If you are taking the time to read this article you must care about children and childhood. I'm glad you do. Not enough people do. This is strange because it is safe to assume that we all were children once. And, it is worth the effort to take seriously what we knew back then.

I am turning the tables a bit on the usual prescriptive article written for adults about children. Instead of giving advice on child-rearing or reporting what I have learned about what children need and do not need, I am trying to divert you from your usual run of thought to help you discover your own advice and replenish your own heart. If you summon up the memories that are deeply embedded in your mental attic, buried under piles of bills and out-of-date appointment books and old clothes, you'll be surprised and pleased by what you see and feel.

The "inner child" unfortunately became a cliché some years ago, but the theme of what childhood has to teach us goes back much further than that. "Whither is fled the visionary gleam? Where is it now, the glory and the dream?" wrote William Wordsworth in *Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood* published in 1807. The poem begins with words that, although dated, remain haunting:

*THERE was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it hath been of yore;--
Turn whereso'er I may,
By night or day,
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.*

I, myself, try to see what I have seen but can see no more, but it is like grasping smoke. The images, the feelings, and the unusual knowledge we all once had as children transmogrify as we grow up, becoming conventional, “normal,” and, perhaps, bland. Isn’t it worth it to try to see the original shapes, to see again what we once could see?

Our children stand by ready to show us. I reclaim my childhood through my children, and without their knowing it, I improve upon my childhood. As you read this, my kids, Lucy, Jack, and Tucker are 16, 13, and 10 respectively. I’m 56 and my wife, Sue, is 49. Like all parents, I can’t stand how fast my kids are growing up. I asked Tucker some years ago to please stop growing, as he was the youngest and so represented my last hope that I would have a young child forever. Of my three kids, Tucker is the one who actually does try to do what I ask, but even he was not up to this request. Instead, he replied earnestly, “But, Dad, I can’t control my heightness.”

No, he can’t. But I can jump into his childhood with him, and I can simultaneously receive the messages my own childhood sends me every day. These messages will suddenly surround me, like a cold spot in a warm lake, and then they will pass. In the cold spot I feel exactly what it was like to walk into my first grade classroom and I see the electric clock high on the wall with its red, agonizingly slow second hand; or I see myself at bat while the sun is setting, me in shadows, the pitcher in bright light; or I feel my stepfather’s hot bourbon-scented breath on my neck as he tells me a bedtime story. In those seconds of recollection, the veil created by what I know now lifts, and I see what I see as I saw it back then.

How naïve we grown-ups become in believing that childhood is a time to brush teeth, get good grades, learn how to ski, and try to get into the best schools and colleges. How laboriously we reduce its dimensions from infinite to limited. How quickly we fall into the trap of believing that childhood runs like a mini-adulthood. How foolishly we forget how much, much more complicated and simple childhood is than any other time of life, except perhaps old age.

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Perhaps as you read this you will feel the flash of one of those cold spots on your warm, adult limbs. Perhaps you will brace when the shock of the memory hits; for a moment you will be transported to that time when you had no idea what you would do when you grew up, whom or even if you would marry, what it meant to pay taxes or even what taxes were, what abortion was and whether or not you were in favor of it, or what in the world grown-ups liked so much about sitting around sipping drinks and talking about boring stuff.

Can you remember what it was like to really, really look forward to a holiday or your birthday? Or what it was like to hug your pillow, pretending it was the first boy or girl you fell in love with? Or how appalling the changes that grown-ups called “secondary sexual characteristics” truly were? Hair? There?

Tapping those memories adds wisdom to adulthood, as if they were a rare elixir, one that even while it grows more difficult to drink, still improves with age. When we were kids, we didn’t know how special the time was, because that time was all we knew. As George Bernard Shaw said, “Youth is wasted on the young.” But we can benefit from it now if we do the work of imagination required to bring it back to life.

Being a parent makes this easier, of course, since we have daily reminders of what it means to be a child. Thank God children must be children, even if their parents don’t always want them to be. For parents who catch on to the pleasure of looking back while they also give baths, read stories, or go shopping, a time-machine mirror reflects what they see. As you go shopping with your daughter, you see yourself in that mirror shopping with your mother in a different store in a different era, and you remember for an evanescent moment exactly what it felt like to look up to your mother’s face for approval of what you’d picked out. Or, as you and your son go together to get a haircut, you see in that mirror the red and white barber’s pole that stood outside the barbershop you and your dad went to, and you remember the sound of the razor being sharpened on the razor strop in preparation for the shave your dad would get replete with hot lather, scraping strokes that left no bristle behind, and pungent bay rum after-shave, all this entering your consciousness and leaving it before you can hold it in place. But you did see it or feel it long enough to sense its difference from today, long enough to feel the panic of the passing of time, the poignancy of memory.

I have found that poignancy to be the rarest of prizes, beams of light from childhood passed through special lenses, evoking both the scene as it originally transpired, as well as what was not there then, a tingling appreciation of seeing the moment from now. It passes in a flash so it must be apprehended quickly when it appears in order to be enjoyed.

Of course, our children also give us the more straightforward and well-known pleasure and concern of imagining what will happen in their lives

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in the years to come. For example, I was sitting outside in my back yard in the June that Tucker turned 10, watching him play with a girl whom he had been friends with for years named Nিকেle, when I found

myself listening to their conversation as they jumped on our trampoline. Nিকেle was teasing Tucker in a playful way about the nicknames I call him, Tucky-toes, and Tuckerish-of-Duckerish, but she teased him in the affectionate way people can do when they like each other a lot, and he responded in kind, protesting but also smiling and blaming me saying, “Dad, look what you’ve gotten me into!” I could see in their sparring some elements of adults in love, and I found myself envisioning the two of them standing at the altar.

I loved the sight, but the experienced grown-up in me wondered what pain might also come into their lives, so I said a little prayer for them then and there, asking for safety and joy for them always.

The moment of being in the present with Tucker and Nিকেle as well as in the future with them in my mind, feeling hopes and fears based upon what I know of life but they do not – this is another unusual gift we receive from our children. I didn’t want them to know as they jumped on the trampoline what I know now about life; I just wanted them to find happiness whatever they did. Isn’t that every parent’s wish?

Childhood is a time of firsts – the first step, the first grade, the first book that gets read, the first glimpse through a microscope or telescope, the first hot dog eaten at the first ball game, the first dance, the first crush and the first kiss, the first failed business (lemonade stand?) and the first successful business (the same lemonade stand the second time around?), the first horror movie, the first sleepover, the first bout with homesickness, the

first A, the first F, the first broken bone, the first pizza, the first death, and the first dream.

Childhood ought to be about dreams. As Longfellow wrote, “A boy’s will is the wind’s will, and the thoughts of youth are long, long, thoughts.” (So is a girl’s will, I might add.)

It ought not to be a pressurized imitation of adulthood. It ought to be qualitatively different from adulthood, not a dress rehearsal for the real play. It is a mistake to believe that by teaching a child about the dangers of the adult world at age six you will better equip that child to deal with those dangers when she grows up, or that by keeping after a child to get top scores you will better equip that child to get to the top of the heap as an adult, or that by forcing a child to grow up quickly you will give him a leg up on the competition.

Just the opposite. The best way to equip a child to solve the complex problems she will encounter as an adult is to give her a protected time in childhood to develop the muscles of imagination, the beams and rafters of optimism and hope, and the bricks and mortar of confidence that will enable her to tackle those problems later on.

Many children today will not grow into the magnificent adults they might have been because they are being shoehorned into a program of forced development that forbids failure and prohibits experimentation. While of course the world is faster and more competitive than ever, and while of course children need to develop skills that they can bring into this difficult world, the most important goals a child can achieve are internal, not external.

Equipped with the right stuff on the inside – confidence, optimism, warm-heartedness, curiosity, the ability to fail and bounce back, the ability to get along well with other people, an innate playfulness and a tendency not to hold back on life out of fear – a child will do well in any world, today’s, yesterday’s, or tomorrow’s.

It takes nerve on the part of a parent to focus on the internals rather than the externals. The pressure today is to do the opposite. But ask

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yourself, what serves you best now: who you are or what you achieved? Some people destroy the best of themselves in order to achieve, while others develop the best of themselves as they achieve. The attitudes and ambitions that determine which a child will do originate in childhood.

Let me give an example from my daughter Lucy's life. When she was 14, I was worried about a friend she was hanging out with. The externals spelled danger. I was worried that this friend could lead Lucy down roads I didn't want her to go. So, one day, I brought up the subject of her friend and I said, "Lucy, you really don't need friends like her."

Lucy's reply humbled me and made me proud, just another gift children surprise us with. "Sure, Dad," she said, "but did you ever think she does need friends like me?"

In today's fast track world, with all its understandable emphasis on competition and the uncertainties that lie ahead, it is tempting to train our children for success. But I think we do far better by them – and by us – if we participate in their childhoods both by enjoying our children and by creating a connected environment for them that is low on fear and high on hope, an environment in which they can grow into who they are meant to be, not who we want them to be. The two are, of course, not mutually exclusive, but sometimes a parent operating out of fear of what the future might bring tries to secure his child's security by pushing too hard in one direction, ironically missing the direction in which the child will do best.

At its best, childhood is a gift to both parent and child. Thank God, children are blessedly resilient and can thrive despite our mistakes. But it helps for a parent to have a strategy both for raising a child and for learning from a child, deepening and developing the life of both parent and child.

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