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Essential Articles on Parenting and Education

Preparing Children to Solve the World's Problems

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No matter where in the world I have travelled—to a major city in an industrialized nation or to a small village in a developing country—I have found three things to be constant:

1. There are always children playing with a ball. Sometimes the ball is made of rubber, sometimes plastic, often just rags held together with twine—but where there are children, you will find a ball. Either one kid is throwing it while another catches it, or an entire group is kicking it with their feet. But regardless of the location's economy, children will make, find or buy a ball and will play with it.
2. My lap is not my personal property. I have found that if I plop myself down on the ground and sit there long enough, some child will eventually find a way onto my lap. He or she will rarely ask for permission but will somehow just know that it is a safe place to sit and will rightly assume that it is okay with me to do so.
3. Most of us who are parents want the same things for our children. We want them to be healthy. We want them to feel loved. We want them to be educated. We want them to be safe, and we want them to be given the opportunity for success and happiness, however we may each define those

words. We wish for them to have their dreams fulfilled. These desires are not correlated to the levels of education or affluence of the parents but are instead reflective of the love we each feel for the child we have brought into this world.

Not All Children are Created Equal

And yet, despite these similarities, the differences are dramatic. This is best seen in the reality that each and every day, as we in the developed world go about our business—going to work, cleaning our homes, taking our turns in the school car pool, selecting what we will serve for dinner—22,000 children will die of completely preventable causes: 22,000. They'll die from causes we already know how to correct: not from the diseases we still have no cures for or from the emergency we cannot foresee coming, but from such things as diarrhea or tetanus or lack of access to good clean healthy water or from a disease transmitted to them by a mom who caught it long before they were even conceived, or from being trafficked for sex or forced into child soldiering. And with them die our wants for them and their dreams for themselves.

As the President and CEO of the U.S. Fund for UNICEF, I have born witness to this tragic reality. From the camps in Darfur, to the rice paddies in Asia, to the bush in Africa, to the shores of the Amazon River's remote villages, I have been forced to see children suffer, to see some of them die, for want of something we take for granted here in the United States. For example, that glass of water offered up for free at any American restaurant. Or that vaccination against the major killers of children that are considered things of the past here in our communities. As a mother, I shudder when I look into the faces of women whose children live in a world of nightmares, knowing that soon I will jump on

a plane and fly home to my own kids, tucked warmly into their beds and awaiting my kiss goodnight before they fall off into sweet dreams. I struggle to find a place in my brain that makes it okay for my sons to have been given “good seats at the table” when the children I meet through my work have been given no seats at all. No one asks to be born into poverty and yet this is where millions of children find themselves, looking to us—the grown-ups of the world—to help sustain them and lead them to the path that will take them out of it.

We Must All be Part of the Global Village

And lead we can. We can commit to raising our own children to see themselves as integral parts of our global village. They must know that the village exists: show them the globe, make use of one in your home. Use books, reading stories about diverse places around the world, pointing them out on the globe. Work with your children to surf the internet for pictures of those places and hang them up in your home. And then, be sure your children understand their own roots, their own culture. Share traditions and take time to explain their meanings. Teach your children to respectfully question the things they encounter that they do not understand. Practice these skills with them.

Don't just recite the golden rule—explore with your children what it means. Encourage them to consider not only what they might want “done unto themselves” but even more importantly, what those “other” people might want. Culture can make a difference, especially when it comes to recognition and modesty. Help your children to understand this by exposing them to various customs and events. Instill that they can—perhaps even must—be part of finding solutions to the problems that plague children in the developing world.

Insist that our schools teach our children what it means to be good global citizens, as well as what the value of philanthropy is, not just on one day a year, but as an integral piece of the ongoing curriculum. Ask the teachers of your children to share with you how they integrate these concepts into their lesson plans and offer to help. Identify good resource materials and share them.

Teach Children to Make a Difference

We can build on our children's formal education by providing opportunities to give back and to volunteer, perhaps even to donate. We can also point their eyes to stories in the newspaper and their ears to newscasters bold enough to tell the stories of what other children live with each day, recognizing that if children in other parts of the world can face the life they've been given, our children can face seeing and hearing about it. We can instill in our children the notion that one person can make a difference; we can tell them stories of those who have done just that, and point out that, one day, that one person could be them.

Equally important, we can model the behaviors and actions we hope for them to emulate by standing up to inequities instead of staying silent, by speaking our conscience even when it may be difficult to do so, and by giving voice to those who may otherwise not be heard. And we can take action—with our voices, with our wallets, with our influence, and with our votes. After all, we are the grown-ups.

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