

Nurture Shock: New Thinking About Children

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- “After three years of investigation behind us, Ashley and I now see that what we imagined were our “instincts” were instead just intelligent, informed reactions.” And so the story begins of ten counterintuitive chapters . . . or as one reviewer remarked: “Time and again, they proved conventional wisdom was anything but.”
- The central premise of this book is that many of modern society’s strategies for nurturing children are in fact backfiring because key twists in the science have been overlooked.
- Chapter One: The Inverse Power of Praise states that new research suggests if you tell your youngster he’s special you’ll ruin him. “It’s a neurobiological fact. Giving kids the label of “smart” does not prevent them from underperforming. It might actually be causing it.” New York Public School System
- Essentially we underrate the importance of EFFORT, which is a variable a child can control. Emphasizing natural intelligence takes it out of the child’s control, and it provides no good recipe for responding to a failure. In essence intelligence can be taught; those children who believed that improved both study habits and grades.
- The brain is a muscle; giving it a harder workout makes you smarter. After reviewing over 200 studies related to the importance of self-esteem, researchers have concluded that having high self-esteem didn’t improve grades or career achievement. Praise and the sincerity of praise are important, but in smaller doses. Excessive praise distorts children’s motivation and often lead to risk-averse students . . . too often they are afraid of not succeeding.
- The brain has to learn that frustrating spells can be worked through; the ability to repeatedly respond to failure by exerting more effort is a trait well studied in psychology. It’s called persistence and it can sustain their motivation through hard times.
- Chapter Two: The Lost Hour deals with the very real negative impacts of less sleep, especially on children. The costs: IQ points, emotional well-being, ADHD, and obesity. Because children’s brains are a work in progress until age 21, the lost hour of sleep appears to have an exponential impact that it simply doesn’t have on adults.
- Extensive research has demonstrated that a loss of one hour of sleep is equivalent to the loss of two years of cognitive maturation and development . . . “large academic consequences of small sleep differences.”
- Tired children can’t remember what they just learned because neurons lose their plasticity, becoming incapable of forming new synaptic connections necessary to encode a memory. Policy wise, we should be starting school much later. “Schools are scheduled for adult convenience; there is no educational reason to start schools as early as we do.”

- Sleep scientists have also discovered that children who sleep less are fatter than children who sleep more. There is a strong association between sleep apnea and diabetes.
- Chapter Three: Why White Parents Don't Talk About Race. Most parents want their kids to grow up color blind, but the vast majority of white parents never discuss race with their children. They believe that exposing their children to diverse environments will answer the questions they might have about race.
- Research has shown that putting kids of different races into a school together isn't the right way, "because they can self-segregate within the school." Sending your child to a diverse school is no guarantee they'll have better racial attitudes than children from homogenous schools; "they tend to self-segregate by race and ethnicity."
- The topic needs to be addressed openly by the parents and reinforced through both word and action.
- Chapter Four: Why Kids Lie; one take away is that most classic strategies to promote truthfulness just encourage kids to be better liars!
- Parents often fail to address early childhood lying, since the lying is almost innocent. When their child gets older and learns those distinctions, the parents believe, the lying will stop. "This is dead wrong."
- Most lies to parents are to cover up a transgression. Researchers have concluded that lying demands both advanced cognitive development and social skills that honesty simply doesn't require.
- In longitudinal studies, if lying has become a successful strategy for handling difficult social situations by age seven, they are likely to continue. Parents need to teach kids the worth of honesty just as much as they need to say that lying is wrong. The more kids hear that message, the more quickly they will take the lesson to heart.
- Chapter Five: The Search for Intelligent Life in Kindergarten – too many kids are competing for seats in gifted programs and private schools, yet, especially with the former, they are "astonishingly ineffective predictors of a young child's academic success."
- The testing process for identifying "gifted children" starts too early and is ineffective. If you picked 100 kindergartners as "gifted," by third grade only 27 of them would still deserve the categorization. The issue isn't what test is used or what the test tests; the problem is that young kid's brains just aren't done yet.
- Worse yet, those that develop and administer the tests admit they don't track those gifted students down the road; "we don't track predictive validity over time." As one senior researcher opined: "The IQ measures aren't very accurate at all. Third grade, yes, second grade, maybe. Testing younger than that, you're getting kids with good backgrounds, essentially."
- Of the top twenty school districts in America, not one requires children to score high on an achievement test or IQ test in later years to stay in gifted programs. "Kicking kids out

is not what districts prioritize – it's getting them in." Too many still believe that intelligence is both innate and stable.

- We are making long-term structural decisions over kids' lives at a point when their brains haven't even begun the radical transformations that will determine their true intelligence.
- Chapter Six: The Sibling Effect; short chapter and just a few takeaways. Research determined that kids don't have an incentive to act nicely to their siblings, compared to friends, because the siblings will be there tomorrow, no matter what.
- "Sibship is a relationship in which the boundaries of social interaction can be pushed to the limit. Rage and irritation need not be suppressed, whilst politeness and toleration can be neglected!"
- Other findings: relative to other factors age spacing is not a strong predictor of sibling interaction; nor is gender; one of the best predictors of how well two siblings get along is determined before the birth of the younger child (relationship the older child has with his/her best friend); getting what you need from a parent is easy. It's getting what you want from friends that forces a child to develop skills.
- Chapter Seven: The Science of Teen Rebellion or "why, for adolescents, arguing with adults is a sign of respect, not disrespect . . . and arguing is constructive to the relationship, not destructive."
- A major research study on this topic revealed that when the study began "I would have thought that the main reason teens would say they lie was "I want to stay out of trouble." But actually the most common reason for deception was "I'm trying to protect the relationship with my parents, I don't want them to be disappointed in me.""
- Research also revealed that permissive parents don't actually learn more about their child's lives: "Kids take the lack of rules as a sign their parents don't actually care, that their parent doesn't really want this job of being the parent."
- Finally, the type of parents who were lied to the least had rules and enforced them consistently, but they had found a way to be flexible, allowing the rule-setting process to still be respected.
- Chapter Eight: Can Self-Control be Taught? Human behavior is incredibly stubborn; we're hard to budge off our habits and proclivities, which makes it difficult for many interventions to demonstrate successful outcomes.
- The author then spends the rest of the chapter focusing on a program that *does work*. **Tools of the Mind** is an emerging curriculum for preschool and kindergarten classrooms; it requires some training of teachers "but otherwise does not cost a penny more than a traditional curriculum. Teachers merely teach differently."
- The Tools classrooms are set up differently than a typical pre-K-K classroom and children make individual "play plans" based upon the roles they have chosen in pretend scenarios. They also commonly play games like Simon Says that require restraint.

- In the Denver Public Schools, where this was implemented, the Children from the Tools classes were almost a full grade-level ahead of the national standard. To see if this could be replicated, researchers worked with a public school in Passaic New Jersey, where most children were from low-income households and English was not the primary language in 70% of the households.
- A year later, they achieved similar academic results as Denver, “but it was the kids’ behavior rating that really sold the school’s principal on the program.
- So why does the curriculum work so well? There are many inter-related factors, “but let’s start with the most distinctive elements of Tools – the written play plans and the lengthy play period that ensues.
- Kids at this age are easily distracted; Tools works because the kids are so consumed in the activities THEY HAVE CHOSEN. Also, by increasing play time, children learn basic developmental building blocks and social skills necessary for later academic success. Children also learn abstract thinking through play.
- In essence, the motivated brain, literally operates better, signal faster. When children are motivated, they learn more.
- Chapter Nine: Plays Well with Others, which highlights among other things the research that shows that children appear to be highly attuned to the quality of their parents relationship. In one study, they found that children’s emotional well-being and security are more effected by the relationship between the parents than by the direct relationship between the parent and the child.
- This same study revealed that letting a child witness not just the argument, but the resolution to the argument was important; it had a calming effect on seeing the contention get worked out. Thus, being exposed to constructive marital conflict can actually be good for children; it improves their sense of security over time and increases their prosocial behavior at school, as rated by teachers.
- Chapter Ten: Why Hannah Talks and Alyssa Doesn’t looks at different ways to jump-start infants’ language skills. One longitudinal study found that, unlike video and audiotape technology, babies’ brains are so sensitive to live human speech that researchers have been able to train American babies to recognize Mandarin phonemes from just twelve sessions. Just the opposite happened when infants were in front of a videotape or audio recording of Mandarin speech.
- Studies have repeatedly shown that seeing a person’s face makes a huge difference; babies learn to decipher speech partly by lip-reading. If babies hear speech while looking at an abstract shape, instead of a face, they can’t segment the sounds.
- “Children raised in a more robust, language-intensive home will hit developmental milestones quicker.” A fair amount of discussion was spent on the Hart and Risley longitudinal study, which compared families at three different economic strata and the resulting vocabulary levels of children within those three economic strata. The greater the exposure the greater size of the child’s vocabulary.

- The most current science suggests that the central role of the parent is not to push massive amounts of language into the baby's ears. Rather, the central role of the parent is to notice what's coming from the baby, and respond accordingly – coming from his mouth, his eyes, and his fingers.
- When there are wide variabilities in toddlers' vocabulary size at roughly the same age, the variable that best explains those gaps was how often a mom rapidly responded to her child's vocalizations and explorations. How often a mom initiated a conversation with her child was not predictive of language outcomes – “what mattered was, if the infant initiated, whether the mom responded.”

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