

The Importance of Childhood

A child's goal is not to become a successful adult...A child's goal is to be a successful child.

Those words were written by Judith Rich Harris in her 1998 book, *The Nurture Assumption*, and are still worth considering some twelve years later. Much of the advice given to parents these days and much of the pressures felt by our teachers in our schools seems to focus on preparing children for the future. That future may be the next grade level, the high school sport team, the 'best' or 'right' college, or the well-paying and secure job. But in the effort to prepare for the future, the childhood of the present may be in danger.

It is often noted that of all the members of the animal kingdom, the human animal has the longest childhood. What this means is that the human child is dependent upon adult members of the species and protected from the demands of adult life longer than any other animal. There is, of course, an important corollary to this fact: the human animal progresses and develops further than any other animal. In other words, to reach our full potential as human beings, we need our somewhat lengthy childhoods. In order to reach all of our potentials - as physical, intellectual, emotional, and social human beings - we need time.

I once saw a cartoon that captures the importance of this developmental time from a child's perspective. A three-year-old boy had been behaving in a way that had exasperated his mother. No longer able to reason with him, the mother finally says something like, "I've had it with you. You are so immature!" (If we are honest with ourselves, those of us who are parents have probably uttered similar words on more than one occasion.) The little boy, clearly wise beyond his years, looks up at his mother and replies, "Of course I'm immature. I'm three."

What, then, does it mean to provide the time for a child to be a "successful child"? One key perspective is to recognize that children are on a developmental journey and, as they say, this journey is a marathon and not a sprint. It will simply take time for that immature three-year-old to become a more mature six-year-old. Notice I didn't say a "mature six-year-old." The six-year-old, after all, still has some maturing to do but that is precisely the point. Growing and maturing is always a process; it may never be the case that we can pinpoint the end result of "being mature." After all, many of us probably know some grown adults (perhaps even ourselves) who still have some maturing to do.

A second key perspective is the acceptance of who the child is at the various points along the developmental journey. Putting protectors in electrical outlets when there is an emerging toddler in the house is an example of acceptance; we recognize that toddlers like to explore with their fingers and we recognize that they are not mature enough to be reasoned with logically about the potential danger. So instead of knocking heads with them every time they approach an electrical outlet with their wet fingers, we take some preventative action. And by taking this preventative action we are working towards

creating a safe environment in which the toddler can exercise her toddler motivations to move, explore, and get into things. We can let her exercise those motivations because we are assuming our adult responsibility of determining those things that it is safe for her to get into.

The future is, of course, important. We immunize children to protect them from potential future illnesses and we open up college savings accounts to prepare for those future tuition bills. The irony, however, is that as children are working at being successful children they are, in fact, preparing themselves for the future. They are exercising their bodies, developing their language skills, whetting their curiosities, honing their problem solving skills, and learning how to form social relationships, all of which are the important foundations for that future.

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