book review

Raising children in a socially toxic environment

James Garbarino   Jossey-Bass Inc. Publishers, San Francisco, 1995

In modern industrialised countries today, we tend to rely on several key indicators to measure the quality of our social life. Rising levels of violence, poverty and unemployment over the latter half of this century, for example, are clear signals that our social environment is deteriorating, raising concerns and fears for the well being of families, youth and children.

Although adverse social change impacts upon communities as a whole, it is children who are particularly vulnerable to transformations in the social environment, as social conditions play a powerful and important role in shaping individual development. Families that are weakened and destabilised by social forces, such as families living in poverty or in situations where there is violence in the home, for example, are often incapable of providing children their basic developmental needs, such as emotional and physical security.

While certain social influences can act to weaken families, thereby deteriorating the family context in which children grow up, major social transformations can also make the broader social environment developmentally sensitive for children. An emerging body of child development research suggests that certain features of our society place *all* children at risk.

James Garbarino's book, *Raising Children in a Socially Toxic Environment*, discusses in detail the consequences of the social environment for children's development. The term 'social toxicity', which is used throughout the book, and is analogous to the threat physical toxicity poses for human survival, reflects the author's perspective that the social world of children growing up in the United States today is poisonous to their development.

The book is separated into nine key chapters. In the middle section, each chapter highlights an important developmental requirement, such as stability, security, affirmation and acceptance. For each of these needs, the author explains why it is an important part of normal human development, often using stories from his own childhood experience, or that of other children, to enrich the explanation.

The discussion of children's developmental requirements is presented alongside the features of today's society which actually repress these needs, and the social forces which are limiting developmental opportunities for children. This juxtaposition between the social conditions which promote the developmental needs of children, and the reality of the world in which American children live, is illustrated well by the author's example of the importance of security for children.

Most of us would already be aware that security is vitally important for any child's well being. When children feel safe, they are able to relax and explore their world, inside the family first, and then outside the family and eventually on the streets as children grow older. When children perceive danger, or feel threatened, children tend to grow up lacking in confidence, or feeling uneasy about the world in which they live.

The author argues that certain toxic forces are teaching children that the world is a dangerous place. For some children, their sense of fear is grounded in fact. As the author explains, by age fifteen, more than a third of the children living in inner-city, high-crime areas have witnessed a homicide. Yet violence and terror do no always need to be present to set a tone of threat. Children today are bombarded with messages of threat via the media and

other informal sources which form a basis for a sense of insecurity even among secure children in small towns and suburbs.

Exposure to traumatic violence is but one characteristic of life today which is polluting the social world in which children grow up. The author highlights several other social factors which are also harming children: large schools exclude all but a few children from identity-enhancing activities; television consumption validates messages about violence and aggression in human interactions; the nastiness children hear and see interferes with their happiness and the future they see for themselves; the extreme demands placed on parents and the changing role of women interferes with the time parents have to spend with children and promotes discontinuity in caring for children; the absence of ties between families and the community reduces supportive relationships and undermines children's sense of social connection, and so the list goes on.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the book, however, is the author's description of how children are adapting to the toxic influences that surround them. Principles of ecological psychology are used to first explain that children (and humans generally) resemble the social environment they inhabit. Drawing on the author's own experience of children growing up in war zones and other extreme environments, and other evidence taken from the experience and findings of clinicians and researchers around the world, the author builds an increasingly disturbing picture of the consequences of various forms of social toxicity for children's social, emotional, moral and behavioural development.

To return to the earlier example, the culture of paranoia surrounding child safety has meant that for many children, their level of fright exceeds the actual dangers they face. Two key findings from research involving children in the United States provide shocking evidence that children are losing touch with reality. The first, a Harris poll of sixth to twelfth graders, shows that 35 per cent worried that they would not live to old age because they would be shot. The second, a study of elementary school children, reported that 43 per cent of children thought it was likely that they would be kidnapped at some point in their lives!

Although evidence concerning the consequences of the way we live for children's development is grave, the book offers real and practical guidance on how to protect individual children from harmful influences. This advice is directed at parents and others involved in caring for children who can influence the immediate childrearing context. Strategies to strengthen families and decrease children's exposure to aggression and violence include spending time with children, providing continuity in children's care arrangements, monitoring television and encouraging positive media experiences, positive language and positive peer relations, providing positive discipline, communicating that children are valued, providing opportunities for positive socialisation of children, and helping children build positive identities.

Possibly the best feature of the book, however, is the author's advice as how best to confront the harmful influences that exist in society, thereby reducing problems such as violence among youth and other juvenile crime, and a myriad of other social problems that are played out in the lives of children and youth. The author is confident the United States can turn back by thinking about social problems at a community level, and offers encouragement for all members of a community to lend a hand and help 'clean up' the social environment.

The author's approach to strengthening communities is a sound paradigm for addressing social ills. It emphasises social connectedness, caring for the community and people, creating opportunities for genuine interaction between classes, community responsibility for children, protecting human rights and promoting democracy, improving the quality and availability of support services such as child care, medical care and educational opportunity, providing support and involvement for parents who otherwise might be isolated, providing opportunities for youth to develop their skills and contribute to their community and, importantly, addressing the actual forces, such as shifts in the larger economy, which are responsible for the adverse social evolution communities have experienced in recent times.

By addressing social problems as they affect children and youth in the context of the broader social environment in which they grow up, the author highlights the challenges that are put before us as we attempt to prevent social problems at the community level. The author's 'whole-of-community' approach to prevention is convincing and well-informed, and should serve as an important reminder that superficial responses to social problems are unlikely to have lasting benefits.

Although the book focuses on the American experience, it has enormous value for Australian readers, or anyone concerned with the well-being of children and youth. While we have some way to go before Australian children generally are exposed to the same level of risk as children growing up in major cities of the United States, our social indicators are a warning that as a nation we are heading down a path that is threatening the social and moral development of our children.

Growing up in a socially toxic environment should raise the alarm about how far we have already come in Australia, and can be used as a guide to turning back if we are serious about confronting social problems. Parents, educators, social service staff and family workers will find it useful to understand how they can protect individual children from harmful influences. It is also essential reading for agency directors, administrators, local officials, civic leaders and citizens active in community organisations and any other group or organisation concerned with strengthening a community in which they are involved.

Reviewed by:

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