

On (Preschool) Education

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Many of our acquaintances ask us *when* we are going to send our daughter, Anna, to a school (i.e., preschool). Our answer is, “Probably, never.” We qualify our answer both to soften our position and to remain open-minded. But our current plan is indeed not to send Anna to preschool (until kindergarten). Many of our acquaintances are also concerned with their children’s “learning,” and that is one reason why they want their children to attend (pre)school, i.e., to “learn.” We are not concerned at all, as long as “learning” refers to what most other people think of: e.g., remembering the alphabet, ability to count, knowing color terms and shapes, etc. We do not discourage Anna to get used to such concepts, but we do not make much effort to teach them to her. She will learn all of those, when the time comes. But we believe that there are more important things she needs to learn before going to school. What are they?

In order to think about Anna’s toddler/preschool years, we need to consider a longer-term plan, as any other parents would do. First, let us consider the following assumption, held by most people in this and many other cultures:

Good-Life Assumption (in four connecting stages):

1. A good life requires a prestigious job.
2. A prestigious job requires a college degree from a prestigious institution.
3. A prestigious college degree requires good grades and test scores.
4. Good grades and test scores require so-called “learning” experience from early on (i.e., preschool, toddler, infant, and even prenatal days).

Especially after the conception of Anna, we discussed the assumption and read relevant literature. Sure, there are many supports for the assumption, e.g., statistics relating income and college degree. The whole society seems to promote the idea. However, we came to think that the assumption is not at all true; so, we would rather call it **Good-Life Myth**. Now, we even believe that the myth has huge negative impacts on our society. Our society is full of unfair competitions (miserable rat races). We actually believe that all competitions are unfair and unhealthy (Kohn, 1986). Unfair competitions and people’s effort to win at any cost are the source of moral problems (Guthrie and Matthews, 2002), leading to excessive cheating (Callahan, 2004). The myth may be driving many people into economic turmoil (Warren and Tyagi, 2003). Furthermore, the myth may be one of the main causes of psychological issues, including stress, in modern society (Rosenau, 2003). There even is an argument that the privileged class suffers more from the myth (Levine, 2006). Children are in general raised to be able to feel that “I’m a great kid” (excessive “self-esteem”), instead of realizing “it’s a great world (out there)” (Medved and Medved, 1998). Actually, some people have been warning about the myth, esp. Stage 4, for some time (e.g., Corwin, 2003; Crain, 2003; Elkind, 1981; 1987; Moore and Moore, 1975).

Why do we consider the assumption as a myth? First, the definition of good life is subjective. For us, a good life is possible if one can *make sense of one's life*. That is what we want Anna to be able to attain (of course, when she is old enough to be able to think about it). Naturally, it is a vague idea. We explored some part of it, i.e., the connection between meaningful life and close relationships, in our book (Komagata and Komagata, 2008). In general, the notion of “prestigious” job is defined by a certain class of people referring to superficial figures, such as income. Then, making sense of one's life and having a prestigious job are quite different things. Thus, the first stage of the assumption falls apart. Then, the subsequent stages are irrelevant. In addition, there is a strong argument against the connection between Stages 3 and 4 (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2003). That is, it has been argued that a prestigious college degree does not require so-called “learning” experience during preschool years. Some authors also warn of the disappearing childhood (Corwin, 2003; Crain, 2003; Elkind, 1981; Furedi, 2002). At this point, we do not intend to argue against Stages 2 and 3 themselves. We simply consider them irrelevant to our parenting practice. In fact, we are not even assuming that college education is necessary for making sense. In the future, we will consider discussing other stages of the myth.

Then, what kind of parenting practice should we adopt in order to promote Anna's ability to make sense? Pursuit of an answer to this question and practice according to it is our main goal of parenting. After a few years of thinking, we identified the following four core areas:

Our Parenting Foci:

- (1) Child-parent attachment (e.g., Karen, 1994; Siegel, 1999)
- (2) Self-regulation (e.g., Grolnick, 2003; Schore, 1994)
- (3) Moral development (e.g., Hoffman, 2000)
- (4) Complex systems idea (e.g., Corning, 2003; Smuts, 1961; Varela et al., 1991)

We believe that secure child-parent attachment is essential for a meaningful life (Komagata and Komagata, 2008). However, the process of making sense is not limited to interaction with one's family and acquaintances. We all live in a society broader than that. So, we also believe that one needs to be able to self-regulate and behave morally. Furthermore, when we look at almost everything around us from a sand pile to our society, we encounter a variety of complexities. Without understanding and appreciating the complexity observed in physical, biological, psychological, and social domains, we would not be able to fully make sense of our lives. Note that we consider these areas broadly. For example, complex systems ideas would also include mindfulness (see, e.g., Siegel, 2007; Varela et al., 1991). Although our areas are broad and non-specific, they seem to be consistent with certain more specific approaches (e.g., Berk, 2001; Borba, 2001; Kohn, 2005; Leo, 2005; Rosenberg, 1999). Below, we briefly discuss areas (2) through (4) in connection to our response to the questions posed at the beginning of this essay. However, more details about these topics are left for future.

We now move on to our understanding of “learning.” Once we set out the four core areas, it is relatively straightforward for us to characterize learning as a notion encompassing all of the four core areas. We believe that Anna is learning attachment all right. This is important because secure

attachment would be the basis for the other core areas, esp. self-regulation and moral development (e.g., Calkins and Hill, 2007; Davies, 2004; Sroufe, 1996; Thompson and Meyer, 2007). As Anna develops her own desires, some of which are unacceptable from our point of view, we parents need to guide her so that she will eventually be able to self-regulate her desires/behaviors. However, this is a difficult task, esp. for a toddler/preschooler. For the coming couple of years, she will need to learn this with the help of responsible caregivers. We believe that we parents need to do it. When some of her desires are not met, Anna will feel bad that she would cry and protest. At such a moment, we parents must be able to console her so that she can regulate herself with us. Our approach would be in contrast with controlling with rewards and/or punishments (for the negative impacts of these, see Kohn, 1993). We believe that children must be able to feel that they are loved by their caregivers (as discussed in Kohn, 2005). However, we also think that this is rather difficult, depending on the types of child-parent attachment. If a toddler has an insecure attachment, parents may not be able to provide the safe haven necessary for this purpose. Once Anna learns how to regulate herself with us, she will internalize the experience and learn to do it on her own (i.e., transition from dyadic regulation to true self-regulation). In this connection, it is important that we parents distinguish between providing appropriate structures and controlling (Grolnick, 2003). The former is necessary for a child to learn self-regulation. The latter, e.g., micromanagement, is a source of attachment insecurity. Securely attached children have other advantages. While they do experience negative feelings as much as insecurely-attached children, they can generally regulate themselves well. In addition, securely-attached children tend to have a greater window of tolerance. Self-regulation would involve both emotional and cognitive aspects. What needs to be regulated is basically emotions (see, e.g., Goleman, 1995; Greenspan and Benderly, 1997). However, one needs to do it with the help of cognition. That is, without reflectiveness, one cannot do it well. This requires balanced development of emotion and cognition (Siegel, 1999). So, when we co-regulate with Anna, we should refer to what is happening. Mastering self-regulation is such an important and difficult task, even many adults seem to have major problem with it. We try our best so that Anna learns the basics in a timely manner.

The connection between attachment and moral development is analogous. Moral development is closely related to empathy, which involves both emotional and cognitive aspects. The emotional aspects have been available even to infants. However, the cognitive aspect becomes available only at around the age of three (Hoffman, 2000). We believe that Anna is now capable of consciously understanding various situations and other people's feelings. This is the basis for guiding Anna to avoid anti-social behaviors. Again, we need to rely on secure attachment while Anna learns to contain herself through our guidance. Although Anna started to learn self-regulation and moral development, she still needs to go a long way. Since the need for self-regulation and moral development can occur at any moment, we feel that at least one of us be monitoring Anna all the time (for the time being). It will most likely take a few more years, before Anna masters the basics of self-regulation and moral development. We believe that this is an important job of parents. It would be virtually impossible for caregivers at center-based child care to do the same.

On the other hand, we believe that our fourth core, complex systems ideas, is a prime topic that can be learned at school. For example, more at school, Anna can learn social complexity, including social skills. However, this requires self-regulation and moral development, which is still under development. So, it makes sense to wait a few more years before Anna goes to school (on her own). If Anna can understand and appreciate all sorts of complexities involved in a school environment (obviously, not at the beginning of her schooling), we would be satisfied. Actually, the ability to understand and appreciate complexity must be far more advanced than just accumulating knowledge and gaining skills. For example, when would a child distinguish between reductionism and holism (e.g., the whole is more than the sum of its parts)? What about emergence of unpredictable properties out of complexities and the impact of small change on complex systems? Since we do not think that most schools emphasize these concepts, we will need to help Anna on these points. However, we believe that learning about complexity is much more realistic and fun than accumulating testable knowledge and skills. In fact, unless children are not motivated to learn on their own, learning has no meaning at all. For now, what Anna is motivated is to play. And we believe that play is enough, no need for so-called “learning” (e.g., Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2003). Well, Anna may not currently be motivated to learn self-regulation and moral development to the same degree. We will need to find a way to motivate her better. Our position must be in a striking contrast with most parents’ view of “learning” (also routinely emphasized in most schools). However, we believe that we are on the right track.

Turning to our practice for the coming years, here is a preview of what we will be doing. Before kindergarten, we will continue to focus on self-regulation and moral development. Unfortunately, we notice that there are children who have problem with self-regulation and/or moral development. Some children would hit others and snatch things from others. Anna will certainly encounter these children. How should she understand such situations? Anna needs to learn not only her own self-regulation and moral development but also making sense of other people’s behavior in connection to our core areas. This is an extremely challenging task for a toddler/preschooler, who is for the most part concerned more with herself. This involves both emotions and cognition and must be far more intellectually challenging than so-called “learning.” However, we will try to do it, little by little. For now, we will closely monitor her all the time. This way, we will be able to intervene right away and explain the situation if necessary. Once Anna develops further and we are comfortable with her ability to deal on her own with a variety of situations, including potentially aggressive environments, we will gradually increase the time Anna spends away from us. But we are not at all in a hurry. One opportunity for Anna to be alone would be our local library’s story time some of which is designed for preschoolers with no caregivers. If necessary, we will consider additional opportunities for Anna to be away from us.

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