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Susan M. Sheridan
University of Nebraska - Lincoln, ssheridan2@unl.edu

Richard Cowan
University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Tanya Meegan
University of Utah

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BOOK REVIEW

The Times, They Are A Changing: A Review of *Raising Children in a Socially Toxic Environment*

Susan M. Sheridan and Richard Cowan
University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Tanya Meegan
University of Utah

Corresponding author: Susan M. Sheridan, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Department of Educational Psychology, 220 Bancroft Hall, Lincoln, NE 68588-0345.

J. Gabarino (1995). *Raising Children in a Socially Toxic Environment.* San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 199 pages, $27.95 (softcover, $16.00).

Rarely does a book come along that we believe to be essential reading for all psychologists, educators, child care workers, physicians, clergy, and concerned community members. Garbarino's *Raising Children in a Socially Toxic Environment* is one such book. In this book, Garbarino sets out to offer his views on what childhood ought to be, how children map their own worlds (thus define, themselves), what their basic needs are, the levels in which those needs are being met, as well as offer suggestions for ways in which readers can change the "toxic environment" to aid in the healthy development of children and youth.

The concept of "social toxicity" is intriguing. Garbarino attests that "the mere act of living in our society today is dangerous to the health and well-being of children and adolescents.. .the social world of children, the social context in which they grow up, has become poisonous to their development" (pp. ix, 4). According to Garbarino, "the elements of social toxicity...are easy enough to identify: violence, poverty and other economic pressures on parents and their children, disruption of relationships, nastiness, despair, depression, paranoia, alienation—all the things that demoralize families and communities. These are the forces in the land that pollute the environment of children and youth" (pp. 4–5).

Admittedly, this is a difficult book to read. But its message is powerful and cannot be ignored any longer—the construct of childhood is nearly extinct in American society, and we (you and I as individuals, and as members of the various groups and communities to which we belong) must reevaluate the basic mores and practices that define "normal" life for kids. Beyond that, we must become proactive in taking back the control of values that are important to humanity.

The book is challenging to read because it is true. Although the pages are not replete with "hard data," they are filled with factual accounts that paint a discouraging, in fact depressing picture of the life of children in our communities. The book is powerful because, if successful, we are forced to accept the fact that *this* is American society today. There is no question that the issues articulated by Garbarino in this book, such as teenage homicide, gang warfare, domestic violence, and child abuse, are real. It is also true that many of us are shielded and protected from these social realities. However, those of us who are shielded are becoming a minority. For example, the U.S. Department of Education recently reported that many children do not feel safe in school. In this book, readers are forced to look long and hard at these issues, as Garbarino uncovers them in their stark realism.

The influences of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1977) and ecological systems theory provide the conceptual framework for this book. Accordingly, development is the result of complex interactions among child and family systems and the social environment in which they function. When one (or more) parts of the system is amiss (or toxic), all others are affected. The result is increased risk for unhealthy development. Toxins are present at every level. In the immediate setting of the home, some children are exposed to toxins such as domestic violence and strained parent-child relations. One step removed are influences that affect children and youth indirectly, such as inflexible parental work schedules. At the broadest levels are society's proliferation of TV and media violence, inadequate health care, and political decisions that negatively effect housing and education, for example. The analogy of the effects of physical toxins (e.g., air pollution) on young children is presented to remind the reader that children are the first (and most vulnerable) victims of environmental toxins (physical or social) and that their protection is the responsibility of all adults.

Related to the ecological orientation is the notion that "it takes a village" to effect change. In other words, there is an implicit message that successful, healthy childrearing is the shared responsibility of individuals, groups, communities, external forces, and broad-based sanctions and regulations. As such, readers who take this book seriously will be forced to look at it not only as a professional resource with "good information," but as a call to accept a role for working within their individual and community contexts to influence change. They will be inclined to accept Garbarino's message as not only a sad commentary on the prognosis for American youth, but as one that provides an opportunity for society to redefine what childhood "ought to be" and make valiant efforts to recapture youth for our children. We can accept that challenge individually and societally, or we can return to our safer, more comfortable mindsets such as "it doesn't happen here." Rather than allowing ourselves to lower our societal expectations, Garbarino calls us to be proactive toward change.

Garbarino' s purpose in the book is admittedly ambitious. Specifically, he "hopes to help individuals and groups throughout North America work together to detoxify the social environment and to strengthen kids and parents to resist those toxic influences that cannot be changed in the short run" (p. x). He optimistically adds that he has "great confidence in the human capacity for action" (p. x).

Whereas we, too, would like to be so optimistic, few concrete strategies are presented to allow any of the intended audiences (i.e., professionals, policy makers, parents, teachers, clergy members, and concerned citizens) to make such sweeping changes. In fact, his original optimism seems lost in the chapters that follow his introductory pages. As readers are made painstakingly aware of the horrific conditions of many children's lives, they are left wanting specific courses of action that may be taken. Therein may lie the true issue behind the dilemma: there are no "easy" answers. Indeed, the problems uncovered by Garbarino are complex, as must be the solutions. Readers preferring a "cookbook" approach to dealing with troubled children and youth (e.g., the solution for working with a violent adolescent is X; for a 14-year-old pregnant girl is Y; etc.) will not find this book helpful. Readers yearning for a book that crystallizes the multidimensional and broad, systemic issues surrounding these realities will find it essential.

Consistent with other notable theorists, Garbarino places heavy emphasis on the social environment in shaping children's learning. Akin to Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural perspective, he emphasizes the interpersonal context as central to child development. Similar to Comer's (1980) main thesis, he implies that children are reflections of their environments. Therefore, to change the lives of children, it is imperative that we change the elements and interactions that comprise the environments within which children participate every day.

Garbarino defines childhood as "about being free to play and learn and love, being safe from the pressures of adult economic and sexual forces, and being accepted for who you are and not what you do" (p. 15). In Vygotskian tradition, he points out that playtime is not a waste of time for children; rather, it is a time in which they can express creativity, explore their environment, and develop as human beings. His focus on the importance of play in a child's life calls for community members, policy makers, and others to create and ensure safe social environments for children. Throughout the book, he warns adults not to set extreme limits on how often children play and how they use their playtime. He further indicates that although structured activities (such as music or dance lessons) may foster creativity and skill development, they are *no more important than* time to play. In our view, benefits can be accrued from such activities if a happy medium can be reached.

The book's organization is also important. Rather than presenting readers with chapters that outline societal problems (e.g., drug use among youth) or risk factors contributing to their occurrence (e.g., divorce, abuse), Garbarino frames his thesis around children's needs that are basic to healthy development: stability, security, affirmation and acceptance, time together, community values, and access to basic resources. Implicit in his message is an emphasis on prevention. Specifically, he seems to be saying that if a child's basic needs can be met, some social toxins, or at least their impact, will be diminished. Only then can children, families, and communities go forward building and strengthening positive childhood experiences rather than precluding them.

Each chapter that addresses basic developmental needs raises interesting points and important concepts. At the core of each is the importance of *family* in suc-

cessful childrearing. As such, it is implicitly suggested that parents are foremost responsible for providing a safe and secure harbor that allows and fosters healthy social and interpersonal experiences. Characteristics of strong families are described, including appreciation for one another, spending time together, good communication patterns, commitment to the family as a unit, religious orientation (or belief in a greater purpose), and ability to deal with crises and cope with change in a positive manner. Sections such as this are refreshing in an otherwise grim description of societal influences on children. This book could benefit from more examples of positive influences on children's lives, such as characteristics of effective educational programs and community and social services.

Throughout the book, Garbarino nostalgically attests that children would be better off if American families of the 1990s were more like those of the 1950s. Whereas this may seem naïve, he is essentially challenging parents to reconsider what is truly important in life and revert "back to the basics" (e.g., spend more time and energy in quality interactions rather than more money for material goods and opportunities). The important message is that as a society, we cannot simply adjust to and accept the cumulative toxins infecting our youth. There is simply too much at stake.

Garbarino reminds us of the importance of the messages that children receive, either implicitly or explicitly, from their primary adult caregivers. Exposure to violence provides the message that the body is vulnerable, and adults cannot protect children from many of the worst acts of inhumanity. It also informs children that they are alone, even when parents or other adults are nearby. And it suggests that virtually anything is possible. Alternatively, affirming and accepting children for who they are by communicating the message clearly and expecting them to behave as persons of worth sends the message that they are valued and empowered to succeed in life.

In a powerful sentiment, Garbarino states that "thriving is more than just coping" (p. 155). That is, children faced with risk factors (e.g., poverty, parental absence, low parental education, etc.) must be provided with ongoing, systematic resilience mechanisms (e.g., personal anchors, cognitive acceptance, opportunities to succeed, and additional support) to thrive and develop successfully and appropriately. The keys to resilience and recovery are identified as intelligence, self-worth, meaningful activity, attachment, social support, and education. As for positive inputs from the environment, he states that the home can serve as a means for messages of affirmation and the school as a means of instilling a planful (proactive) approach to life.

Garbarino further attempts to answer the question: "What can we do?" Some recommendations are general and even simplistic. For example, to address stability needs, it is recommended that we "avoid unnecessary separation and divorce" (p. 61); to increase time together, he suggests flexible work schedules and "cafeteria-style benefit plans" (p. 120). Whereas these may be options for some middle-class workers, they are not possible for many. Indeed, much of the change process is a change in attitude by adults who must assimilate essential values. Each chapter provides ideas and opportunities for those concerned about directions to begin the change process.

Importantly, Garbarino concludes the book with a list of resources from A to Z with ideas, guides, recommendations, and in some cases, addresses and phone numbers are provided. Some are simple and some are complex: for example, he states that "conflict-resolution skills are essential to our efforts to detoxify the social environment" (p. 168). This message is followed by the names and addresses of specific organizations to assist in the teaching of these skills. Garbarino also points out that taking walks with children, reducing the amount of television they watch, and spending more quality time with them will assist in their healthy development. His message is certainly a call for parents and other adults to seize the responsibility for youth, and for reconsidering their priorities related to time, money, and other expendable resources. Whereas some helpful reminders are provided for the parent, teacher, and other persons responsible for a child's well-being, some suggestions are much less concrete and useful. For example, a statement such as "the guiding principle for social policy and family decision making must be that children come first" (p. 166) raises more questions than solutions.

In sum, *Raising Children in a Socially Toxic Environment* does an excellent job of raising the reader's awareness of toxins that exist in the environment and how they impede the healthy development of children. In determining its overall usefulness, it is important to consider the intended audience. Although the author provides some good advice for parents (e.g., spend more quality time with children), the book may be more overwhelming than helpful for this audience. As a book for parents, more straightforward, friendly recommendations for making the most of time and opportunities with children would go much further. Alternatively, although other intended audiences (professionals, administrators, clergy, teachers, policy makers) can gain important knowledge about the dismal state of affairs in relation to American children and youth and what is important for healthy development, more complex solutions are necessary.

Although the book falls short in providing concrete directives for change, it sends a strong message that we are all responsible, and a more subtle message that change *is* possible. If each and every reader could make one or two changes in their own behaviors and priorities as an outcome of reading this book, it will have served an invaluable service.

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