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Marcus Tolson  
*College of DuPage*

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Paving Our Own Future: Problems in Human Development

by Marcus Tolson

(English 1102)

The human life can be divided into three stages: childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. According to psychologists, each stage is responsible for different aspects of cognitive development, with childhood being the stage where most of the development occurs (Burke). It is assumed that by adulthood we have been instilled with most of the qualities necessary for survival in society. However, as recent generations reach adulthood and demonstrate an inability to successfully function in the real world, a deficiency in development has been discovered in the younger generations. This revelation has reignited the constant debate as to whether we as humans are defined by our childhood experiences, or if outside factors hold some bearing on the adults we all become.

The recent influx of "boomerang kids" (adult kids who return home to live with parents) has made this theory of a deficiency more of a reality. The increase in migration, 14.2% of young adults living at home with their parents, up from 11.8% in 2007, has been blamed on the weakened economy, but census data show that the migration home started before the economic recession (Rampell A1). This would suggest that being ill-prepared for adult life, this new generation of young adults is forced to return home where they feel safe and secure. In "The Graduate", journalist and academic Louis Menand illustrates this deficiency by portraying a child's first sleepover experience. The essay makes a correlation between a parent rescuing the child from the uncomfortable feeling of being in a strange place with the child's inability to manage the stress of college life (Menand 278-280). Despite Menand's insights, the question remains whether it is the uncomfortable sleepover experience or the parent's interference that has influenced how the child deals with stress as an adult. Psychologists believe that our adult lives can be summed up by our childhood experiences; however, success or failure as an adult is not the culmination of those experiences, but is dependent on whether we allow our parents or our fear of failure to hinder us from developing the skills needed to thrive as adults.

Sigmund Freud and other famous psychologists believe that childhood experiences shaped who one became as an adult, so to them the keys to adult psychosis could be found by reliving those childhood events. If a person's childhood is filled with negative experiences or shortcomings, then that person's adult life would reflect those shortcomings, with the same rule applied for positive experiences. However, what about people who had positive childhood experiences but are having a negative or unfulfilled adult life or vice versa? This phenomenon would suggest that factors outside of the experiences themselves play a part in how we develop into adults. The theory of childhood experience is challenged by psychologists Ann and A.D.B Clarke, who state in Early Experience: Myth and Evidence, that it is infantile to assume that the first few years of life can have such a tremendous impact on a person's life, without taking into account the environmental, parental and social influences the person encounters throughout his/her life (Clarke 3-24). If we examine a person's life and the various influences that will help guide their journey, we would begin to see that childhood experiences are only one aspect of human development.

So, was Freud misguided in his interpretation of the importance of the childhood with regards to adulthood? No, not entirely, childhood is very important to development but it is not what dictates who we will become as an adult. As children, we learn many valuable life lessons needed for our survival, as well as to become valuable members of society. To children the world is a massive and

challenging educational puzzle and in this stage, our minds are extremely receptive to everything the world wants to teach. The tasks that we are met with as children are meant to be difficult in order to develop the necessary cognitive and behavioral skill set need to transform into the “ideal adult” (Lerner 1-5). The challenges of childhood teach us self-esteem, self-confidence, individuality, determination and crisis management, which are all the skills we need to survive in the world alone. If learning these skills is hard wired into everyone’s childhood, then in order to determine why some young adults assimilate into society while others have a difficult time, we must look at the external factors in our young lives.

One of the most influential factors in our young lives would be our parents. In terms of development, parental figures can have a positive or negative impact depending on the extent of parenting. Menand’s story depicts a mother picking up her son at two in the morning after the stress became overwhelming and he got sick while sleeping over at a friend’s house (Menand 278). This type of parent has been referred to as a “helicopter parent”, parents who hover over their children ready to rescue them at a moment’s notice. They believe that the protectiveness provided is beneficial to their child, but in fact, the parent’s actions are unknowingly setting the children up for failure in the future. Supporters of “helicopter parenting” note that this type of parenting is just the product of the evolution of our culture; due to the advancements in technology which allow instant contact at all times (Plante) and the increased stress that growing up in the present day entails (Aucion), it is necessary for parents to be actively involved in their children’s lives. They associate “helicopter parenting” with being concerned and involved in the aspects of their children’s lives and are unable to see the harm in wanting to be there for their children.

Being a concerned or involved parent is not the issue with child development; but when parents begin to make decisions for, and exclude their children from, character building activities, these actions transform from normal concern to pernicious obstacles to child development. By preventing children from making decisions and learning to fend for themselves in their childhood, parents inflict trauma and create neurosis in children that will persist throughout their life. Dr. Polly Young-Eisendrath, psychologist and professor of Psychology and Psychiatry at University of Vermont, and Dr. Barbara Howard, assistant professor of pediatrics at Johns Hopkins University of Medicine, agree that “helicopter parents” are like thieves, stealing from their children the ability to master self-confidence, detect dangers in life and adapting to adversity. In addition the overprotective shackles parents confine children with also transfer the parent’s fears and insecurities to the children, resulting in timid and isolated kids (Young-Eisendrath 58-72; Howard 8). Parents need to remember that their role in their children’s lives is to be a custodian, provider and guide; children are not a chance to correct the mistakes that the parent made in their own life or to relive their glory years. Until this is remembered, more and more young adults will have to be chaperoned through life by their parents because the skills necessary to make decisions and thrive as adults will be beyond them. Therefore, stories of mothers and fathers joining the child on job interviews will go from taboo to commonplace.

Parents are not the only factor that stifles childhood development, societal expectations also have an impact on how we develop in those early stages of life. We have become a competitive culture of perfectionists, who feel if they cannot be the best they will just give up. This way of thinking was brought about by the meritocratic system we employ to make our society as fair as possible (Menand 279). Even though meritocracy works well in theory, the actual practice of it produces a fear of failure in children that has adverse effects on how children approach experiences. Failure is supposed to better us as people; we are supposed to learn from these experiences to improve upon them. However, as a result of the fear of failure instilled in us, children are afraid to follow their dreams and goals; tasks that are failed are abandoned without reconsideration, and life becomes a series of tests instead of a learning experience (Menand 279). Children with a fear of failure grow into adults who struggle with regrets of an unfulfilled life. Success in life cannot be

obtained if we give fear of failure the reins of our existence. Children must be taught early in life that failure is a part of growing up; failure is not a punishment, but it is designed to grant them the ability to overcome larger failures in the future. It is only then that fear of failure will loosen its grip on human development.

Parental interference and the fear of failure not only impact human development into adulthood, but could also have an impact on the quality of health we have throughout our lives. With present-day depression rates ten times higher than those of people born after 1915, who experienced two world wars and The Great Depression (Young-Eisendrath 113-115), the number of children reliant on antidepressant medication is quite alarming. The increase in anxiety in young children proves that trauma and neurosis created by parents and fear of failure have equivalent effects as those of other adverse childhood experiences. Research shows that such trauma and neurosis forced on children in their early years leave them more prone to cardiovascular disease, osteoporosis, arthritis, type 2 diabetes and certain cancers, in fact continual exposure to the trauma could shorten the adult life by 15 years (Sharon 04d). So not only is this new generation of young people doomed to live unfulfilled lives, they are also doomed to a shorter life plagued with health problems.

Fear of failure and "helicopter parenting" is running rampant in our society, leaving our children unprepared to take their place as future leaders of this world. If we are going to survive as a civilization, we must allow the younger generation to develop the leadership qualities now before it becomes too late. Parents need to cut the umbilical cord and let their children fall and make mistakes; doing this will produce a generation of young people with the skills needed to be successful. If parents are unwilling to let their children go, then the child needs to wrest control from the parent and take control of his/her own life. Young adults already damaged by parental interference and the fear of failure must begin to face adversity now in order to change the outcome of their future. Facing and conquering adversity is the only way to undo the trauma caused from a childhood where development was hindered. As we begin to make more and more decisions for ourselves without the advice of parents, we will start to learn to trust in our own abilities. Only then will our development as humans be complete and, as a result, we will evolve from helpless children to strong, healthy adults ready to face the harsh reality the world offers.

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