

# Moths in the Family Fabric: Stitching up Children's Rights

*I am deeply distressed by the way our babies, toddlers, young children and their families are being treated by decision makers and policy makers. This has led me to reading in fields formerly foreign to me in an attempt to understand what is underpinning the increase of - what I consider to be - formalised child and family abuse. Thinking out loud, and briefly...*



Daryl Zang



Artist unknown

## From small beginnings

My favourite Kaffe Fassett jersey began with a few little moth holes. The few little holes unravelled into a few bigger holes, and then my beloved garment quickly exceeded my darning ability. The Fabric of Family in Western cultures is fast heading towards exceeding our collective darning ability, and should that happen, the fabric of society is going to unravel as well. The family is the seedbed of any society and we cannot afford to stand by any longer and watch the Fabric of Family disintegrate.

## Change is as sure as the sunrise

As Robin Grille's fabulous book "Parenting for a Peaceful World" so shockingly and graphically points out, historically families have always adjusted to earthly circumstances to survive. Women and children have had to adjust to what the blokes have 'wrought upon them'; so what is different this time? Well, gender roles have been up for a comprehensive review in my life-time, and about time too. The concepts and values around 'the economy' have also undergone an extreme make-over. As with any rapid change, there can be accompanying speed wobbles, and I think we are experiencing speed wobbles that could cause a fatal crash for humanity if we aren't darned careful. I believe the steadying influence is centred in the question of rights and responsibilities within our social fabric.

## Human rights

Last century was the first time that large numbers of the human family began talking and focusing on the idea that each human being has rights. (And here I acknowledge the Quakers who began earlier than that and who probably kicked the discussion off.) Although many cultures are familiar with the biblical New Testament injunction, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you", the *idea of universal human rights* is very new idea in many cultures, Western culture included. In my own community there has just been a concerted campaign around family violence and child sexual abuse: the message being, "It is not OK". And there is still ongoing whinging from the people who 'lost' in the successful campaign to legislate against the use of force on one's own children. That we even need such campaigns is evidence that we are a long way from integrating both the idea and the behaviours that guarantee universal human rights within our culture.

## **Women's rights**

Women's rights are one third of the human rights equation. Due to the steadfastness of many women who have campaigned for the vote, for equal pay for equal work, for the right to a career and a family (denied my mother's generation), for the right to choose, women (in many cultures) have gained the right to 'get a life'. These are huge and hard-won gains in fairness and justice by gender.

## **Men's rights**

That same steadfastness displayed by women securing rights by gender has been employed by men and women working for rights, including the right for every man to vote, regardless of that man's ethnicity and/or landowning status. The most spectacular gains were in the area of workers rights, the rights of those who labour for others. These gains included achieving the 40 hour working week which enabled working men too to 'get a life'. The hard-won right to organise labour for bargaining purposes was pivotal in bringing about a more egalitarian society and did much to bring about the prosperity experienced in most Western cultures following World War Two.

## **Children's rights**

And then there are children's rights, they are the other third of the human rights equation. If children's rights are on the agenda in a culture at all, so new is the *idea* that babies and children have rights that 'the ink is still wet'. Yet this is where the strengthening of family fabric and societal fabric begins - and conversely, this too is where the tiny holes appear first, quite literally, in the baby's brain.

## **Every child is The Magical Child - in potential**

The research findings of neuro scientists and neurocardiologists have brought a whole new level of understanding about human development, from before conception through the prenatal, neonatal and early childhood periods. These findings put before us the *biological imperatives*, that which must and must not happen for the optimum development of the organism. A fuller knowledge of biological imperatives has put the inherent rights of babies and children into very sharp focus. As a consequence, our responsibility toward altering our culture in order to secure children's rights has also come into sharp focus. Every culture has *cultural imperatives* around babies and children, these are the things the culture says you must do to/for babies and children. Cultural imperatives are always man-made, and very often they do not line up with what the baby requires. Decades ago Joseph Chilton Pearce pointed this out: "When cultural imperatives match the biological imperatives you get a magical child". The more quickly we embrace and act on our increased knowledge the less chance of the fabric of family and society unravelling beyond manageable repair.

## **The warp and the weft**

If the warp of the cultural fabric is the people, then the weft of the fabric is the way those same people make their living to survive and thrive. Ideally, warp and weft are in harmony, both working in a symbiotic partnership, neither one stronger than the other or an inferior fabric results. You can see where this is heading...

## **The warp has responsibilities**

It is the weaving together of the rights and the choices for men, women and children that form the warp of family and societal fabrics. Unlike babies and children, men and women have passed the age where they are classed by law as adult with legal culpability, so their rights also carry responsibilities. This is a new consideration around rights, so new that responsibilities to children and babies can be genuinely overlooked because, so far, it is mainly specialists like neuroscientists and midwives who are aware of them. Responsibilities to babies and children can also be treated with contempt. An example of contempt of a child's right to a life free of poverty would be a parent in gainful employment who leaves the family home

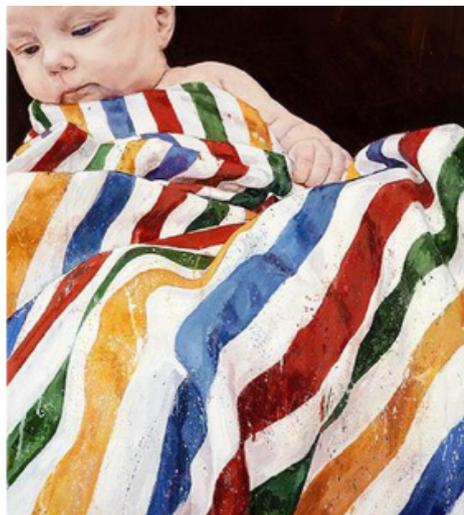
and pays minimal maintenance for his/her children, or refuses to pay altogether. Or a government making welfare cuts to the vulnerable with families. Or putting 20 babies in one room and calling it childcare or early childhood education when it is neither. The research is unequivocal about that.

### **The weft has responsibilities**

This is where the weave has begun to deteriorate over the last three decades as a result an ideology known as *neoliberal capitalism* or *neoliberalism*. This is a misnomer really because there is nothing new or liberating about it; it is old fashioned greed in fancy-dress. Those who provide employment - employers and corporations - have lobbied the state in their respective countries to systematically strip away employment rights hard-won last century. They have had laws and acts of parliament enacted to protect their own interests, while at the same time they have weakened workers' collective bargaining rights, driven real wages down, 'downsized' (read sacked) large swathes of the work-force, moved employment offshore to cheaper labour 'pools' (read low paid people in Bangladesh, Fiji, China...), 'cleverly' and 'legally' evaded their share of the taxes upon which their country's running depends (you try evading your taxes), brokered free trade agreements in their own interests... and all in the name of 'efficiency in the economy' (read greater profit for shareholders and greater salaries and bonuses for top level management and CEOs).



Brooke Walker-Knoblich



Aaron Robinson



Kalman Aron

### **Nurture the golden goose**

It is basic husbandry. If you want the goose to continue laying golden eggs you have to look after the goose. Only the very dim and narcissists would risk ruining the health of their golden goose with an economic theory and greed. In this case the workforce is the golden goose - and by extension, so is society - and both are being stretched to the point of unravelling due to the implementation of a discredited economic theory and greed. Neoliberalism classically ignores United Nations statutory human rights of men, women and children as well as considerations for the integrity of the biosphere. This un-'economic' experiment cannot continue. There are signs of serious cracks appearing in the neoliberal-construction, fault lines that could bring the whole lot down. It can't happen soon enough for babies, toddlers and children.

### **Who is lobbying for the children?**

In Britain, a cross party manifesto, "The Critical 1001 Days: The Importance of the Conception to Age Two Period" was launched in September 2013. It is a first move in recognising the special biological-emotional-psychological needs of the child in their early days. Because these needs are not arbitrary but the outcome of thousands of generations of genetic-fine-tuned evolution, we adults have responsibility to meet these needs. This is where it gets messy: children's rights are very often in conflict with newly-

won women's rights, and children's rights are not part of the equation in an economic system that doesn't recognise parenting as gainful employment.

### **Messier still**

In much of the world women are now able to choose their work. Trades and careers that not too long ago would have been out of bounds to women, are now open. Among women - mostly women with higher education it has to be said - there is a deeply held belief about the sanctity of a woman's choice of employment. For women with fewer saleable skills, they can only sigh, "I wish". There is no choice about employment for many women. The outcome of real wages diminishing while costs escalate means they *must* work simply to put food on the table for their families, and many have to work at the most undesirable of jobs like night-shift cleaning. These women are not only denied a choice of work, they are also denied the choice which is surely every woman's right, the right to choose motherhood as gainful employment.

### **And children's rights and choices?**

A bit of biology first: the baby is born with her brain 25% of its adult size, and she is born at 40 weeks (give or take) not because she has finished gestation, but because she must enter the world before her head and brain grow any larger thereby making birth impossible. She will spend the next 40 weeks (give or take) finishing gestation, a period Ashley Montague termed *exterogestation*. That being the case, it doesn't take any imagination to see it is every baby's right to continue gestation with the mother. There isn't a baby who would choose separation from the mother in that exterogestational period, nor for the completion of their first three years, by which time their brain will have reached between 85% - 90% of its adult size.

### **But but but...**

The idea that babies and young children might have rights and choices that come first by virtue of their vulnerability can set off a lot of discussion, even white hot arguments: *What about the mother who doesn't want to mother? What about the mother's right to pursue her career? What about the parents who have two-tenths-of-no-idea about how to parent? What about parents who are bludgers on the dole? What about the parents who only have children to get the benefit? (Yes, they ask that, with a straight face.) What about teenage parents? What about abusive and violent parents?* Good questions. What about them? And closer to home, what about us?

### **We are all one**

Yes, of course we are separate, and paradoxically, society is the sum of the parts. That means there is no 'us' and 'them'. It might be a very novel idea for neoliberals to consider, but we need to work for the good of every *one* in our country's family. That will cost money, lots of money, and we have money, enough to do the right thing by children and families. It is how we spend our money that needs to be held up to scrutiny.

### **The school model**

In this country the state has poured a lot of money into early childhood 'education'. Many of us working in this field are starting to realise that this probably wasn't the best course of action for the *children*. Indeed, one respected scholar in the early childhood field recently confided that this might be "a failed social experiment". The interests that are served when we deal with babies and young children using the (industrial revolution's) school model are commercial interests, employers' interests, banking-mortgage interests, parents' career interests and teachers' career interests; but not babies' and toddlers' biological, psychological, physical and spiritual interests.

### What do other countries do?

Other countries - notably Scandinavian and Eastern European countries - have read the research around prenatal, perinatal and young child development. They recognise that the first three years are the formative years and have put in place policies that support the rights and needs of babies, young children *and their families*. The cross party manifesto Britain has placed on the table for the policy makers to consider outlines child neuro-development research. It also includes research about the long-term savings to the state by investing in the early years. The projected savings are predominately across the health and justice sectors. A brain that is formed *without* the stress resulting from separation, neglect, abuse, crowded 'class'rooms... is a brain that can develop the prefrontal cortex. Using a computer analogy, the prefrontal cortex is the hardware which runs the programmes of self regulation, empathy, nurturing and related higher human qualities; the qualities that generate a healthy society.

### Meeting children's rights means supporting families

Some of the measures taken by other countries include paid maternity/parental leave for up to three years, job held open for up to three years, parent education during the prenatal period and up to three years. Clearly it isn't a case of not enough money in the treasury, but a case of priorities. These countries consider children and families their priority.

### Budgeting for prevention or picking up the pieces?

Parent education is the best value for money, and you can do a lot of parent education for the cost of locking people up in jail, almost all of whom had parents who had two-tenths-of-no-idea how to nurture their baby successfully. Here in New Zealand we have an interesting parenting programme, interesting because it demonstrates how so much can be achieved with so little. In the Parent's as First Teachers Programme (PAFT) the parent receives a home visit for one hour a month over three years. The programme is successful with parents reporting it as a lifeline. They say it makes all the difference for them as they grow in their parenting. One hour a month! Over three years! That is only 36 hours, not even a 40 hour working week. Imagine what could be achieved if the Ministries of Education and Social Development really backed prenatal and early childhood parent education.



Christiane Vleugels



Jonathan Ahn



Ernesca Strino

### Endangered indigenous species

Here in New Zealand we also have the most innovative parent education model on the planet, the New Zealand Playcentre movement. It is a parent cooperative, a place of emergent leadership with all positions 'staffed' by parents. At Playcentre parents continue their own education, they provide and nurture their children's education, they engage in parenting education, and the cooperative structure of the organisation requires they engage in civic education. That would have to be value for money, and yet Playcentre is

on the wane. Unfortunately, the demands of the neoliberal economic system with its burdensome paper 'accountability' is strangling this indigenous golden goose. Policy makers could have foreseen that parents who run a cooperative organisation, balancing parenting with part time work - and who are not full-time early childhood employees - would crumble under the work-load designed for early childhood workers in fulltime employment.

### **What now?**

Three years is a short time in your life and mine, yet three years is 'the life-time' that decides the rest of every three year old's lifetime at the very basic level of their biology. As Bev Bos says, "*Your childhood takes you by the hand for the rest of your life*". Babies in utero and early childhood can't vote, they can't lobby and they can't choose where they will spend their day. They can protest when they are separated from their family but they can't do anything about it when their protests are ignored, day after day. There is a saying in the La Leche League world, "*They don't get over it, they just get used to it*". We can do better than that. It's one thing to say we love kids, but it's quite another to speak up for them and to lobby on their behalf.

### **Darning the holes, weaving anew.**

There isn't only one way to meet children biological needs, the discipline of ethnopaediatrics has shown us that. Ethnopaediatrics also informs us that the style of parenting practiced by Western cultures is not a great match for the child's biological imperatives. We will only see a darning and mending in families and society when enough people understand and lobby for the rights of children and their families, and lobby for education to enable families to fulfil their responsibilities. Here are some of the considerations for a saner future:

- Babies and children are vulnerable. They are 100% dependent on us educating ourselves about their needs and rights, and on lobbying to secure those rights.
- Choosing to have child is a right that comes with responsibility.
- Having chosen to have a child, accepting that the baby and child has rights that parents and professionals must uphold.
- A focus on the prenatal period - researchers estimate at least 50% of the personality is decided by the uterine experience, and the life-time physical and mental health profiles can be predicted with accuracy based on the uterine experience and the quality of nurture in the first three years of life.
- Universal provision of prenatal care and education for the mother and other parent.
- Universal provision of natural birth education.
- Universal provision of breastfeeding support before and after the birth of the child.
- Universal provision of parental support including mentoring and education for new parents.
- A child has a right to grow in a family during the formative first years.
- Provision of paid parental leave with the job position held for the period of the leave.
- Acknowledgement that parenting children under three is gainful employment.
- Early childhood centres for children up-to-three years of age be radically reformatted using a home model instead of the school model.
- Group size in early childhood centres decides the stress factor and stress decides the level of brain-damage - legislate for a maximum of 8 in a group for up-to-three year olds.
- Move away from 'them and us' concept; like it or not, we are all in this together,
- and enjoy the journey with others who want the same.

Pennie Brownlee, January 2014

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There is no single effort more radical  
in its potential for saving the world  
than the way we bring up our children.

Marianne Williamson