

## **The Push for Early Childhood Literacy: A Risk Factor in Child Psychopathology**

Sharna Olfman

Over the past decade, there has been an alarming increase in the incidence and prevalence rates of child psychopathology across a wide range of diagnostic categories, including Attention/Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Autistic Spectrum Disorders (Asperger's Disorder in particular), and Bipolar Disorder. Advances in genetic research and brain imaging techniques have led to a wealth of insights into the genetic and neurochemical substrates of a number of psychiatric illnesses, facilitating more precise interventions for scores of children who might otherwise have been misunderstood as lazy, moody, immature, unintelligent, or the victims of bad parenting.

While medical research has advanced our understanding of specific mental illnesses, it fails to explain the increase in the number of children being labeled as psychiatrically disturbed across diagnostic categories. Some researchers suggest that the percentage of children who suffer from psychiatric illness has not actually changed but, rather, increasingly sophisticated assessment tools enable us to identify more children who might not have been correctly diagnosed at an earlier time. However, given the sheer number of children who are purported to have gene- and brain-based psychiatric illnesses (and are ingesting daily doses of powerful psychotropic drugs), and given the exquisite sensitivity of the brain and of gene activation to environmental influence during infancy and early childhood, we must also consider the role of the environment.

Young children in the United States are being challenged by a confluence of factors that include widespread poverty, the disintegration of the family, inadequate access to medical care, unregulated and substandard daycare facilities, and trends in education that are profoundly insensitive to children's developmental needs and to variations in their learning styles and intelligences. These trends include the premature introduction of formal academic subjects with the aid of computer software that privilege cognitive development over social and emotional development, and increasingly uniform curricula and outcome measures. Vulnerable children may well be succumbing to

psychiatric illnesses which they might have otherwise avoided in healthier and more supportive environments. In addition, as young children are required to function under constraining conditions at school, in daycare and at home, and as caregivers and teachers become more stressed themselves, they may be quicker to label children under their care as disturbed whose personalities, profile of talents, or developmental timetables are not an ideal fit with the environment.

### **Pathogenic Trends in Early Childhood Education**

**The Need for Play:** Early childhood literacy programs that usurp time for play are at odds with what and how children are designed to learn. In the words of Lev Vygotsky, “children stand a head taller when they play” as they learn to symbolize objects and events, delay gratification, practice self-regulation, assimilate adult roles, exercise imagination, practice motor skills, and develop emotional, social and verbal literacy.

**The Interdependence of Emotional, Social and Intellectual Growth:** As Stanley Greenspan and Stuart Shanker’s compelling research demonstrates, emotion is not merely a form of intelligence, but rather the cornerstone of all aspects of intellectual development. Children who are not emotionally engaged with the material they are learning and by the teachers who instruct them, cannot grow intellectually. Teachers who facilitate healthy play provide an ideal means of integrating social, emotional and intellectual growth in a stage-appropriate way. Teaching preschoolers to read is an example of a prevailing attitude that cognitive development is the purview of educators and social/emotional development is a personal matter. This attitude is in keeping with the information-processing model of learning which conceptualizes the brain as a computer and cognition as the processing of information.

**“High Stakes Testing”:** It goes without saying that setting standards for preschool education is essential, and that assessing children’s readiness for kindergarten not only

exposes programs that aren't working but also highlights the urgent need to improve social policies that support the family, such as family leave, subsidized daycare and housing, universal health insurance, and raising the minimum wage to a living wage.

Unfortunately, initial efforts to create and assess standards have been used punitively, so that schools that don't perform well because they are in need of resources are denied aid. As a result, many teachers feel pressured to get results and "teach to the test," but the tests themselves are insensitive barometers of what and how children should be learning. We are now seeing the mindset of "high stakes testing" filtering down to preschools, as their test scores also become tied to funding. As our understanding of the rich and varied ways in which children learn and their intelligence increases, we are requiring them to perform in increasingly prescribed ways, and those who don't fit the model may suffer enormously.

### **Trends in American Society**

Thus far, I have suggested that certain trends in education are insensitive to children's psychological well-being and may be contributing to the significant increase in psychiatric disturbance in children. This begs the question: What underlying currents in American culture are fomenting these changes? Why have so many policymakers, parents and educators become obsessed with teaching three-year-olds to read in increasingly uniform, high-tech settings? Two features of American culture that are influencing how we educate children are 1) our uncritical embrace of technologies, and 2) privileging the rights of individuals over responsibility to community.

**Screen Nation:** Children who are exposed to screens for several hours each day, often from infancy, while their brains are rapidly developing, will be profoundly affected by both the content (e.g. violence, rapid-fire stimuli) and the process of watching screens (e.g. passively absorbing images and fantasies rather than actively creating their own,

stimulating the visual centers of the brain at the expense of the language centers, and interacting with machines rather than humans). As a consequence, children's ability to play, pay attention, use language, and engage in emotionally and socially appropriate ways is undermined. It may be no coincidence that educators at the elementary, secondary and college level are decrying their students' inability to read, pay attention and think critically or creatively. Teaching preschoolers to read can be understood as a desperate effort to compensate, having created the conditions for academic failure in older children. It is particularly ironic that efforts to teach preschoolers to read often utilize computer programs with entertaining graphics that undermine literacy.

Advances in computer technology were the catalyst for the development of the information processing model of learning with the computer as its metaphor. This model overlooks the central role of emotion, intuition, morality, and experiential learning in cognitive development. Computer and internet technologies are also big business, and as baby laptops and preschool software become *de rigeur* and anxious parents become convinced that their children will fall behind unless they furnish them with state-of-the-art computers, corporate executives (who in turn fund political campaigns) have much to gain.

**The Cult of Individualism:** Rugged individualism and the right to privacy have served American pioneers and successive waves of immigrants fleeing oppression very well. Individualism, which shifted the unit of personal membership from the community at large to the family, has also had the effect of undermining the development of humane social policies that support family life. As television and the internet promote shameless consumerism and immediate gratification, and successive administrations continue to impoverish aid to struggling families, parents are increasingly less able or willing to take responsibility for their children. And so, without the safety net of community or family, many children are fending for themselves: children are becoming miniature adults and adults are becoming more childlike.

## Conclusion

It is a striking paradox that as adults feel increasingly entitled to place their individual needs first, we are creating educational environments that do not respect children's individuality or their special status as children. We introduce concepts long before children are ready to master them, deny their need for play, subject them to uniform curricula and assessment, and label and drug the children who do not fit in. Our preoccupation with understanding the genetic and neurological bases of illness, while ignoring the power of the environment, also speaks to our increasingly mechanized conceptualization of human nature.

I would recommend the following research efforts:

- 1) In recent years, stage theories have fallen out of favor, and yet they retain face validity in teachers' and caregivers' awareness of when children under their care have achieved developmental milestones such as kindergarten or grade one readiness. A synthesis of the work of Piaget, Erikson, Greenspan, and Vygotsky, with a focus on the role of play in early childhood, would be timely.
  - 2) In her book *Failure to Connect*, Jane Healy articulates a number of concerns about how early and excessive computer time is impacting on children's social, emotional, moral, intellectual, and neurological development. Research on how children are affected by both the content and process of computer use is urgently needed.
  - 3) We need to create a better tracking system of incidence and prevalence rates of children's psychopathologies, cross-culturally, nationally, and regionally, and correlate these with risk factors such as poverty, access to health care, stability of family life, quality of daycare, quality of early childhood education, and opportunities for play. We also need more systematic information about pattern of drug prescription among children.
-

Sharna Olfman, Ph.D. is a clinical psychologist and an associate professor of Psychology in the Department of Humanities and Human Sciences at Point Park College, Pittsburgh, where she specializes in Child Development and directs the *Childhood and Society Symposium* series. She is the editor of the *Childhood in America* book series for Praeger Publishers, and her anthology *All Work and No Play: How Educational Reforms are Harming our Preschoolers* will be available in December, 2003 (Praeger publishers).