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From children as consumers to children as contributors?

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Some time back, I was reading the death notices in *The Age*, as one does, of course, when one retires and returns to Melbourne! One death notice intrigued me:

> Pa, didn't we have some fun? As a boy you took Kari and me for rides on bulldozers, tractors and the timberjack; and you taught us so much around the farm. Working with you, stacking timber, feeding the animals, tractor work, and right up to recent times, gardening, or just polishing your cars — it was satisfying to hear you say 'beauty', knowing I did a good job for you….

Did children still experience the joy of helping grandparents like that, I wondered?

Have the roles of children as consumers in modern society deprived them of the opportunity to be a contributor?

Could caring for others be beneficial for children's mental health and wellbeing?

I had a hunch about this. I had recently had an opportunity to observe, through voluntary work in my community in the Dandenong Ranges outside Melbourne, children in two primary schools. I had watched a group of children at one school planting trees in the habitat of the critically endangered helmeted honeyeater, the avian symbol of this state. It was

raining and it was cold but the joy on the children's faces warmed my heart. At the other school I watched a class of ten-year-old children teach five-year-old children how to use the school computers. I was touched to witness how they gently encouraged the youngsters and praised them for their efforts.

Yet I could find little in the research literature to answer my questions. The positive psychology literature emphasises the importance of a sense of meaning derived from belonging to and serving something bigger than the individual self. And then there is the WHO definition of mental health:

> a state of wellbeing in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, *and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.* [emphasis added]

Making a contribution to his or her community — this statement resonated with what I had seen some years earlier in a remote Aboriginal community in the land of the Pitjantjatjara people in central Australia. In this part of our nation there is a very serious problem of severe malnutrition among some infants and very young children, including those of normal birth weight. Mostly they are the infants of young adolescent mothers.

This was a longstanding problem and all sorts of things had been tried, including evacuating the babies and their mothers to Alice Springs Hospital — all with limited and very short-term success in terms of weight gain for the infants. An Aboriginal woman, Brenda Stubbs, was taking a new approach, and it had the full support of the women in the community, who were deeply concerned about 'the skinny children' and were often exhausted from caring for so many grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Brenda invited the young mothers into a home-like place she had spent a lot of time making welcoming for them, and gave them a tasty meal. Over a number of

conversations she offered them payment for several hours of work a few days a week.

The job was to prepare the food for a midday meal for elderly members of the community under a government-funded program. The young women accepted the offer, and before they all ate lunch together, they would feed their children, and took home what was left over. Brenda was a grandmother figure writ large, and used the traditional Pitjantjatjara concept of *ngaparti ngaparti*, meaning 'I give you something/you give me something', to insist on the contribution in order to receive payment and food.

Within a few months, the young women were no longer seen as the bad mothers of the skinny babies but as contributors in their community. And their children gained weight. Brenda's approach worked where other, far more expensive approaches, had failed.

Does this story have any relevance to mainstream Australian society? I think so. Since the Industrial Revolution, children's roles have changed markedly as the institution of the family has shifted from a unit of production to a unit of consumption. Children have largely ceased to be contributors in families and have instead become consumers on a scale previously unimaginable. Reciprocity, *ngaparti ngaparti*, appears to have diminished. Even the ritual of children washing and drying the dishes after dinner has long gone. For many families, sharing meals has also long gone. I invite you to reflect for a moment about your own family over the past three to four generations and see if this shift from the child as contributor to the child as consumer is apparent.

But does this matter?

Well, there are two landmark longitudinal studies which suggest it might.

The first is that of US sociologist Glen Elder.[1] In his classic study, *Children of the Great Depression,* Elder analysed data

from the Oakland Growth Study, whose members were born in 1920–21, and the Berkeley Guidance study, whose members who were born in 1928–29. He compared children in both these birth cohorts from families who had suffered a very significant loss of income in the Depression with those who had not.

Using a range of measures, Elder found that young children in families experiencing a marked drop in income fared far worse than those in the other families. This is not surprising given the impact of parental stress and despair on young children. However, for adolescents the opposite was the case. Elder linked this to the status-enhancing responsibilities adopted by the adolescents in the financially-strained families.

He explored similar issues in a later study on the impact of the severe farm crisis of the 1980s and 1990s in Iowa, comparing those children who adjusted well with those who did not:

> As in the Great Depression, the children of hard-pressed families assumed more responsibilities, from unpaid chores to work on the farm and paid jobs in rural communities. The farm family most fully embraced the collective ethic of *required helpfulness*, the responsiveness of family members to the collective welfare of the family.[2] [emphasis added]

The second researcher is psychologist Emmy Werner, whose pioneering work in the area of children's resilience has been very influential. Werner's longitudinal study followed infants well into adulthood, and identified the key factors associated with resilience in those children who had been exposed to multiple risk factors such as poverty, parental mental illness, parental substance misuse and domestic violence. She found that the resilient children, those with much better than expected educational and employment outcomes, and the absence of criminal convictions and mental illness in adolescence and adulthood, shared certain key factors in their childhood:

1. personal temperaments that elicited positive responses from family members and others;
2. a close bond with, and few disruptions from, their primary caregiver in the first year of life; and
3. an active engagement in acts of 'required helpfulness' in middle childhood and adolescence.

In Werner's own words:

> Self-esteem and self-efficacy also grew when youngsters took on a responsibility commensurate with their ability, whether it was part-time work, managing the household when a parent was incapacitated, or most often, caring for younger siblings. At some point in their young lives, usually in middle childhood and adolescence, the youngsters were required to carry out some socially desirable task to prevent others in their family, neighbourhood or community from experiencing distress or discomfort. Such acts of *required helpfulness* (Rachman, 1979) can also become a crucial element of intervention programs that involve high-risk youth in community service.[3] [emphasis added]

Strangely, this finding on required helpfulness has been ignored in both the academic and popular literature on resilience. It has also been ignored in the way we provide services for children and young people — in health, mental health, education, child protection and juvenile justice. Why is this so, I wonder?

- Is it because we have so firmly placed children in the client and consumer role that what they may have to offer others is not part of our mindset?
- Is it because we have seen resilience too much through the lens of the individual rather than through the lens of the web of relationships to which the child belongs and to which they could potentially contribute?
- Is it because white middle-class family norms determine what are now deemed to be 'appropriate' tasks for

> children, and that 'helicopter parenting', as it has been called, makes us see children as needing to have everything done for them?

I found, almost accidentally, a comment by the eminent UK child psychiatrist and epidemiologist Professor Michael Rutter on the subject. In a 1983 speech he gave to a gathering of fellow Quakers, he said:

> it does seem desirable that we foster personality development in such a way that our children are cooperative and prosocial in their interaction with others, not because they feel they have to be so, but rather because they get pleasure from being so.[4]

If it is a duty, it is unlikely to be a pleasure. I closed my eyes and thought again of the local primary school children's faces — they radiated pleasure.

The child's pleasure of caring for others is something that the British psychoanalyst Adam Phillips and the historian Barbara Taylor have written about in their book *On Kindness*.

> Children, like the adults they will become, are complex creatures with … an instinct for kindness and concern that is every bit as strong as their self-regarding instincts … the child needs the adult — and his wider society — to help him keep faith with his kindness, that is, to help him discover and enjoy the pleasures of caring for others. The child who is failed in this regard is robbed of one of the greatest sources of human happiness.[5]

Are we indeed robbing children of one of the greatest sources of human happiness? Might caring for others, both human and non-human, which is so central to the experience of being part of something larger than ourselves, be an antidote to the corrosive consumerism and narcissism of contemporary culture on our children and young people?

How about a national action research initiative led by an organisation such as the Australian Research Alliance for

Children and Youth, which might involve inviting children and young people as co-researchers to investigate questions such as:

1. How many children in Australia have an opportunity to contribute to the wellbeing of others in ways they enjoy, within both their home and school settings?
2. To what extent are intrinsic or extrinsic rewards significant in shaping and sustaining caring behaviour?
4. Are there differences in how caring behaviour is encouraged in boys and in girls, and in children from different culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds?
5. How is helping behaviour best encouraged for children whose behaviour is not pro-social?
6. Does the onset of adolescence change the pattern of helping behaviour established in childhood?

The local results of such a national action research project could be co-presented by children to their families and teachers in their local communities. The overall findings could be launched in Parliament House by the National Children's Commissioner and presented to the prime minister.

Is it time we heard the vision which Australian children may have on how they might contribute to their communities?

Endnotes

1 G Elder, 'Life trajectories in changing societies', in A Bandura (ed), *Self-efficacy in changing societies*, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

2 Ibid, p. 63.

3 E Werne & R Smith, *Overcoming the odds: high risk children from birth to adulthood,* Cornell University, 1992.

4 M Rutter, 'A measure of our values, goals and dilemmas in the upbringing of children', Swarthmore Lecture 1983, Quaker Home Service, London, 1983, p. 38.

5 A Phillips & B Taylor, *On kindness*, Penguin, London, 2009, pp. 9–12.