



## **Parenting in the Global Age**

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Despite many claims to the contrary, America does not give children's welfare high priority. Although it has become a cliché in recent years, it does indeed 'take a village to raise a child' – the village being a metaphor for a vibrant, intact community. Unfortunately, today, our 'village' serves corporations rather than families. America does not guarantee families the most elementary supports such as health care and maternity leave. We stand alone among wealthy nations in our failure to create national policies that ensure the health, safety, and integrity of families and children. Our society permits corporations to contaminate its air, soil and water, exposing children to scores of toxins that undermine neurological and endocrinological development, while damaging the ecosystem that sustains life on this planet. Our government has deregulated the media, which bombard children with ultra violent, sexually explicit messages that undermine parental values. It has mistaken standardized testing for engaged and engaging education.

Any parent today who is not concerned about their ability to rear their children to a wholesome maturity in the face of these very real challenges and threats, is either uninformed or in denial. But unfortunately, parental anxiety as recently portrayed in the media, is focused on completely different issues, evidenced in a series of recent books

and articles written by upper middle class women who persevere endlessly about their children's preschool resumes, play dates, and parties, and the trials and tribulations of the "min-van mom".

These books usually do not address the more urgent questions we need to ask. For example, why have we not created better support networks for parents and children, comparable to those which many western European and Scandinavian countries deem essential to civil society? Part of the answer can be found in the beliefs and values that undergird our culture. First, Americans give primacy to individual rights and freedoms, even when they undermine humane consideration of our collective responsibilities to children, families, and communities. Second, Americans have a deep faith in and an uncritical fascination with technologies that removes us farther and farther from the natural world and the constraints of our bodies—even as they destroy our ecosystems and undermine our physical and mental health. So enamored are we of our machines that the information-processing model of thinking, with the computer as its guiding metaphor, has become the backbone of American educational philosophy. Our culture's relentless pursuit of unfettered individualism and our uncritical embrace of technologies explains

- why we are not deeply alarmed that our kids are interacting with unregulated screen technologies for more hours every day than any other activity but sleep;
- why we don't demand that our government ensure that all children have access to healthcare and childcare;
- why we confuse the ability to download and process facts with real education;

- why we are out of touch with children's basic needs for close physical and emotional attachments, fashioned by millions of years of evolution;
- why we feel so few qualms about destroying our ecosystem.

Our runaway pursuit of individualism leads us to defend the rights of corporate CEOs to pay their workers slave wages, the rights of pornographers to make their websites available to anyone who can turn on a computer, the rights of video game manufacturers to expose children to graphic acts of racism and violence, and the rights of alcohol and tobacco companies to spawn the next generation of addicts. Tragically, in the process, we trample upon our children's right to grow up in a wholesome environment that supports physical, emotional, and intellectual well-being. Record levels of childhood obesity, asthma, high school failure, psychiatric disturbance, youth suicide, and preteen sex speak to the fact that we are failing our children. The time has come to acknowledge that ensuring a healthy generation of children is not a private matter but a national priority. It is time to temper our pursuit and protection of individual rights and technical "know how" to protect the needs of our youngest citizens.

**Sharna Olfman, Ph.D.** is a professor of clinical and developmental psychology at Point Park University, the founding director of the *Childhood and Society Symposium* and the editor of the *Childhood in America* book series for Praeger Press. Her books include *Child Honoring: How To Turn This World Around* (with co-editor Raffi Cavoukian, 2006), *No Child Left Different* (2006), *Childhood Lost* (2005), and *All Work and No Play: How Educational Reforms Are Harming Our Preschoolers* (2003). Dr. Olfman is a member of the *Council of Human Development*, and a partner in the *Alliance*

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