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The Epidemic of Permissive Parenting: The Brats are Coming

*Dr. Robert Shaw is convinced that American society has become toxic to children. In his new book, *The Epidemic*, Shaw argues that a pattern of absentee and permissive parenting has led to children that are anti-social, emotionally fragile, and even dangerous. Shaw is a child and family psychiatrist practicing in Berkley, California. He also serves as director of the Family Institute of Berkeley, and has directed the Family and Children's Mental Health Services for the city of Berkeley. Even the slightest evidence of common sense coming out of the city of Berkeley is worthy of note—and this book deserves the attention of every American parent.*

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“Far too many children today are sullen, unfriendly, distant, preoccupied, and even unpleasant,” Shaw argues. “They whine, nag, throw tantrums, and demand constant attention from their parents, who are spread too thin to spend enough time with them. Feeling guilty and anxious, the parents in turn sooth their kids with unhealthy snacks, faddish clothing, toys, and media.”

Something has gone desperately wrong with America's kids. Evidence seems to flow daily from news reports and personal observation. Far too many kids are rude, belligerent, and hopelessly self-centered. Tendencies toward violence and abusive behavior have been filtering down from teenagers to younger children. A loss of shared morality and parental discipline has produced a generation of tiny dictators with endless demands.

In order to deal with this phenomenon, our society has sought to medicalize the problem. Millions of American children are diagnosed with newly-discovered “diseases” and “syndromes.” As Shaw notes, “A host of new ‘clinical diagnoses’ have been invented to explain why children seem totally spoiled, untrained, and unsocialized, and an incredibly large number of children have been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and bombarded with psychoactive drugs.” In some school systems, nearly half of all boys in ages four through eight are reported to be on psychotropic drugs such as Ritalin. What kind of society would turn to chemicals in order to deal with what is at base a moral and cultural pathology?

Refreshingly, Shaw refuses to shift the blame to culture at large. Instead, he focuses his attention on parental neglect and the failure of parents to fulfill their responsibility. He blames this on a weakening of what society expects of parents and a confusion about how parents are to fulfill their role.

“We used to be clearer about the importance of parenting, but somehow we've forgotten what children actually require in order to grow into happy, responsible adults. We've lost our sense of what matters most in our children's lives—and when we do know, we're not spending the time and energy to make it happen.”

Beyond this, Shaw describes a “great conspiracy of silence.” This conspiracy is one product of political correctness.

But, as Shaw insists, “some of our lifestyle choices are not in the best interest of our children, despite our loving intentions, and...they compromise their opportunity for the connections and rituals and nurturing that are so necessary to children’s healthy development.” Imagine that—a psychiatrist in Berkeley, California warning parents that some lifestyle choices are harmful to children. Something is going on here.

Piece by piece, Shaw takes apart the massive edifice of permissive parenting that has been built over the last half-century of the American experience. He goes after such ideas as the “family bed,” arguing that this kind of commune on a mattress is not healthy for either children or their parents. “Children develop resources sleeping alone that are essential for adaptation in our complicated culture. Sure, they’re going to be happy about being equal participants in what is essentially the core of the marital relationship. But in allowing them to maintain that delusion, we only postpone the day when they learn that they are not the center of the universe, and not on a par with their parents in power and presence.”

Put most simply, Shaw wants parents to act like the grown-ups in the family relationship. Parents must set the rules, apply discipline, establish expectations, and inculcate a sense of right and wrong in their children.

Shaw provides a checklist for ruining a child’s life. His list includes failure of parents to make adequate provision for their personal responsibility in child-rearing, leaving children to be raised by inadequate caretakers, keeping themselves stressed and busy, giving in to a child’s desires on all matters, facilitating the child’s bent toward materialism, and letting the child believe that he is “the boss of the universe.”

Furthermore, Shaw adds to his list such issues as lack of parental supervision, failure to force children toward maturity, allowing children to spend too much time in front of the television (and with video games), giving children too much privacy, and failing to give children responsibilities in the household.

As Shaw describes, “our stricken children spend much of their time pursuing entertainment rather than accomplishment: TV, video games, mall roaming, computer hacking, substance abuse, [and] promiscuous sex.” Furthermore, “Prematurely on their own, they put their asocial, disaffected peers before their parents far too soon. Taking a page out of our own playbooks, they derive their self-worth from possessions, demanding special sneakers or the latest high-tech toy. It is as though they live on a bed of quicksand that will swallow them if they are not cool or fashionably correct.”

America’s schoolyards and playgrounds—not to mention its classrooms and homes—are filled with children who demonstrate all of these effects of permissive parenting. The regime of liberal child-rearing philosophies instructed America’s parents that they were to see their children as equal participants in the family process, little innocents ready to emerge into a healthy adulthood—if only their parents would get out of the way.

Bravely, Shaw takes on some of the most controversial issues in child-rearing. He warns parents against “excessive” use of alternative child-minders. While he does not insist that parents never use daycare or similar services, he does suggest that parents take on significant risk when their children are raised or tended by others. As Shaw explains, “I spend much of my professional time treating anguished parents and their children, and I can tell you this much is true: at least one of the parents has to make raising the children the top priority. If you do not, you and your child will live with the consequences the rest of your lives.”

Shaw also warns against parents allowing children too much access to the media. He is no fan of most children’s programming, and suggests that parents should not allow their children to watch any program that the parents do not themselves find helpful or interesting. Television must not be allowed to become a pacifier or entertainment box for children who could otherwise be learning valuable lessons in life and developing both intelligence and moral capacity through active play and engagement with parents.

Children are living busy lives, and as they grow older, their lives grow even busier. Many children play on multiple sports teams, with frequent practices and very little time for anything else. Shaw sites a study conducted by the University of Michigan’s Institute for Social Research that revealed that children’s free time “has decreased by one-third since 1981.”

As a result, children have very little time to themselves and very little “down time” for thinking, playing, and just being a kid. Too much of the time kids do have on their hands is given to television, which—at best—is mostly a way of killing time.

The Epidemic presents a powerful argument, but it is essentially a secular argument. Shaw writes as a medical specialist with an obvious concern for the health and well being of children. The Christian worldview demands that we also give attention to the reason why children need parental love and discipline and the expectations of parents as the molders of the future generation. Christians understand that children are not little innocents whose only bad habits are likely to come from outside themselves as the result of societal failure. Instead, we know that children are miniature sinners, who need parental nurture and discipline in order to emerge in adulthood as anything else other than self-centered, anti-social brats.

God designed the family with consummate care, and assigns moms and dads the responsibility to teach the next generation to obey, respect, and honor their parents—and to obey, respect, and honor God. A breakdown in parental responsibility is a recipe for national disaster.

Robert Shaw's proposals are a potent antidote to the culture of permissive parenting that still holds sway in much of our society.

Nevertheless, the problem is even worse than Dr. Shaw thinks—and the epidemic is spreading.

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