

Communicating Our Values and the Role of Peer Relations-Part 2

Hello and welcome back to Part 2 on this difficult topic! As you may remember from Part 1, parents have a job to teach their values to their children. This is not as easy as it used to be, as social media, television and peers are a constant distraction. As mentioned, this is an area that Dr. Gordon Neufeld is particularly passionate about. Dr. Leonard Sax and Dr. Gabor Maté (a Canadian medical doctor who specializes in ADHD) are in agreement about the conclusions Neufeld makes.

According to Neufeld, the relationship that a child holds with his parents or caregivers and extended family should be the priority. Parents often worry that in order to properly develop, children need to spend a lot of time with other children in order to learn socialization skills and to turn out alright. Neufeld is not opposed to children spending time together but sees it as “something fun to do” and nothing more. When children are too oriented towards their peers, this disturbs the natural attachment between a parent and child. The relationship between a parent and child is like a shield that protects them from many problems in life. The child then turns his or her primary attachment towards the peer or peers. The problem is that peers cannot give unconditional love, support and guidance to other peers, as they are still immature and learning themselves. This is a bit of “the blind leading the blind”. As Neufeld points out in his book, there is no proof that socialization begets socialization. No research has ever actually concluded this and is a myth that circulates in North America. In Europe, the practice of having children spending large amounts of time together does not exist. When children spend too much time together, they run the risk of conforming and imitating their peers. What their peers think becomes the center of their world and this is not healthy.

Neufeld comments that numerous parents have made comments such as, “I don’t get it, the more time that John spends with other children, the more difficult he becomes!” Neufeld says that if socialization really was the key to socialization and proper development, gang members and children in orphanages would be our best citizens (and for those who have read *Lord of the Flies*, you may recall this didn’t turn out too well!). Again, if we think back to the “mother duck” analogy, we know that the little ducklings are spending their time learning from their mother and father, and not off socializing all day with other ducklings from other families.

Again, this does not mean that children shouldn’t socialize or have fun together. Neufeld recommends some of the following in order to create a healthy balance:

- Limit the amount of sleepovers your child has with other children. This is not a necessary activity.
- When your child comes back from socializing with friends, “collect” them. This means getting the child back into the family way by spending time doing something enjoyable with them and talking together.
- Eat family meals together on a regular basis (this was another topic we discussed!)

-Spend time together as a family doing simple activities on a regular basis. This could include playing board games, going to the park, getting an ice cream cone together, having a picnic or taking a road trip. It's important to note that during this time, the parent should be giving their undivided attention to the child. Unfortunately, catching up on email with your child in the room doesn't count!

-Be wary of activities that force children to spend large amounts of time with other children. One staff member at Crane came in one day, disturbed by something occurring in her son's life. Her son was on a hockey team that met twice per week. However, the coach was encouraging regular weekend parties together and pizza outings after practices for "team building". This staff member found the extras unnecessary and somewhat odd at the age of 9. She allowed her son to keep playing on the team but did not give in to the pressure of more time with peers.

-Spend quality time with your children on the weekends. Don't allow friends to tag along often and interrupt the bonding time you are having with your children. As children get older, don't allow them to take vacations with other families and don't believe them if they say "I will be bored without my friends".

-Limit time on social media, as this is another way that a child can become more peer-orientated. Be wary of what your child watches on television. Shows that promote the child as being in charge and/or make the adults seem foolish are a dangerous combination.