

JESSICA ALEXANDER & IBEN DISSING SANDAHL MPF

THE DANISH WAY OF PARENTING

A guide to raising the happiest children in the world

Kort uddrag af bogen til Kristligt Dagblad



 FORLAGET
EHRHORN HUMMERSTON

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND PARADIGM SHIFTS

We have all thought from time to time about what it means to be a parent. Whether it be before the birth of your first child, during a toddler meltdown or during a fight at the dinner table over not eating their peas, we have all once thought “Am I doing this right?” Many of us refer to books and the Internet, or talk to friends and family for advice and support. Most of us just want to be reassured that we are, in fact, doing things the right way.

But have you ever considered what the right way is? Where do we get our ideas about the right way of parenting? If you go to Italy, you will see children eating dinner at 9pm and running around in restaurants until 11 or 12 at night, in Norway babies are regularly left outside in minus twenty degree weather to sleep and in Belgium kids are allowed to drink beer. To us, some of these behaviors seem bizarre but to these parents it is the “right way”.

These implicit, taken-for-granted ideas we have about how to raise our children are what Sarah Harkness, a professor of human development at the University of Connecticut, calls “Parental Ethnotheories”. She has studied this phenomenon for decades across cultures and what she has found is that these intrinsic beliefs about the right way to parent are so ingrained in our society that it’s almost impossible to see them objectively. For us, it just seems to be the way things are.

And so, most of us have thought about what it means to be a parent but have you ever thought about what it means to be an American

parent? About how the American glasses we wear correct our vision for seeing what “the right way” is?

What if we were to take those glasses off for a moment: what would we see? If we stood back and looked at America from a distance, what would our impression be?

For years we have seen a growing problem with people’s happiness level across the board in America. Antidepressant use went up 400 percent between 2005 and 2008, according to the National Center for Health Statistics. Children are being diagnosed and prescribed medication for a growing number of psychological disorders, some with no clear-cut method of diagnosing them. In 2010 alone, there were at least 5.2 million children between the ages of 3-17 taking Ritalin for hyperactivity disorder.

We are fighting obesity, early onset of puberty or “precocious puberty” as it is now referred to. Girls and boys as young as seven and eight are getting injected with hormone shots to stop puberty. Most of us don’t even question this as being strange but rather just the way things are. “My daughter is getting the shot,” one mother rattled off nonchalantly the other day about her eight-year-old who she thought was hitting puberty too soon.

Many parents are excessively competitive with themselves, with their children and with other parents without even realizing it. Of course, not all people are like this, nor do they want to be, but they can also feel pressured living in this competitive culture and the language surrounding them. This language can be intense and challenging, putting people on the defensive: “Kim is just amazing at soccer. The coach says she is one of the best on the team. But she is still managing straight A’s despite soccer, karate and swimming. I don’t know how

she does it! What about Olivia? How is she doing?” We feel pressure to perform, for our kids to perform, to do well in school and to fulfill our idea of what a successful kid should be, to fulfill our idea of what a successful parent should be. Stress levels are often high and we feel judged. We feel judged by others and by ourselves. We feel judged by our families and our friends and we judge others in turn. Part of this is human nature and part of this is what it is to be American. What is pushing us as a society to perform and compete and be successful to a standard that ultimately doesn’t seem to be making us very happy as adults? What if some of the “answers” we have for raising our kids—our parental ethnotheories—are flawed?

What if we discovered that the glasses we were wearing had the wrong prescription in them and we weren’t able to see things as clearly as we thought? So we change the lenses, fix the stigmatism and look again at our world. Lo and behold, things do look different! By trying to see things from a new perspective, with new lenses, the question arises naturally:

Is there a better way?

The Danish Way of Parenting is a guidebook aimed at charting a new path through the jungle of parenting. A better path. A path that leads to more resilient kids and happier adults. The results of this path have been seen for over 40 years in Denmark. This method has been developed through painstaking research and observation. It is our theory and we believe that it generally encompasses the philosophy of parenting in Denmark. Perhaps you will find some ideas you already have in practice and perhaps you will discover some you never even considered. The fact is, implementing even some of our tips from *The Danish Way* will guarantee positive changes not only in your children but also in your own self-esteem and satisfaction as a parent. It really does work!

PLAY

“Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning, but for children play is serious learning.”

MR. ROGERS

Have you noticed that there is an unspoken or even spoken pressure to organize activities for your kids? Whether it is swimming, ballet, tee ball or soccer, somehow you just don't feel like you are doing your job if you don't have your kids signed up for at least 3 or 4 things a week. How many times do you hear parents saying that their Saturday is taken up with driving their children to various sports, lessons or activities?

When was the last time you heard someone say, “On Saturday, my daughter is going to play?”

And by play, we don't mean play the violin or play a sport or even go on a play date where adults have organized activities. We mean “play” where they are left to their own devices, with a friend or alone, to play exactly as they see fit for as long as they want. And even if parents do allow this free play to take place, there is often a niggling feeling of guilt admitting it. Because ultimately, we feel we are being better parents by teaching them something, having them involved in a sport or “giving” their little brains some input. Play, in a way, seems like a waste of valuable learning time. But is it?

In America in the last 50 years, the number of hours that a child was allowed to play has decreased dramatically. Aside from the television and technology, there is also our own fear of them getting hurt coupled with our desire to “develop” them, which has taken over much of the time they once had to play.

As parents, we feel comforted when our children are making visible signs of progress in something. We like watching them play soccer while others cheer them on or going to their ballet or piano recital. We feel proud to say that Billy won a medal or a trophy or learned a new song or can recite the alphabet in Spanish. It makes us feel like we are being good parents. We do it with the best intentions because by giving them more instruction and controlled activities, we are giving them training to become more successful, thriving adults. Or are we?

It’s no secret that the number of anxiety disorders, depression and attention disorders have skyrocketed in America. Is it possible that we are making our kids anxious without realizing it by not allowing them to play more?

Are we overprogramming our kids’ lives?

Many parents strive to start their children at school early or jump a grade. They learn to read and do math earlier and earlier and we are proud because they are “smart” and being smart or athletic are highly valued characteristics in our culture. We may go to great lengths with tutors and educational toys and programs to try to get them there. Success is success and these are tangible, visible, measurable signs. Free play, for all intents and purposes, seems fun but what is it really teaching them?

What if we told you that free play teaches children to be less anxious. It teaches them resilience. And resilience has been proven to be one of the biggest factors in predicting success as an adult! The ability to “bounce back”, to regulate emotions and cope with stress are key factors in a healthy, functioning adult. We now know that resilience is great for preventing anxiety and depression and it’s something the Danes have been instilling in their children for years. And one of the ways they have done it is by placing a lot of importance on play.

In Denmark, dating back to 1871, husband and wife Niels and Erna Juel Hansen came up with the first pedagogy based on educational theory, which incorporated play. They discovered that free play was crucial for a child’s development. In fact, for many years, Danish children weren’t even allowed to start school before they were seven. They didn’t want them to engage in education because they felt that children should first and foremost be children and play. Even now, children up until the age of ten finish regular school at 2pm and then go to what is called “Skole/Fritidsordning” (free time school) for the rest of the day, where they are mainly encouraged to play. That is pretty incredible if you think about it.

In Denmark, there isn’t a sole focus on education or sports but rather on the whole child. They focus on things like socialization, autonomy, cohesion, democracy and self-esteem. They want their children to learn resilience and develop a strong internal compass to guide them through life. They know their children will be well educated and learn many skills. But true happiness isn’t coming only from a good education. A child who learns to cope with stress, makes friends, and yet is realistic about the world has a very differ-

ent set of life skills than being a math genius, for example. And by life skills, the Danes are talking about all aspects of life. Not only career life. For what is a math genius without the ability to cope with life's ups and downs? All the Danish parents we spoke to said that excessive focus on "developing" children seemed very strange to them.

As they see it, if the children are always performing to obtain something—good grades, awards or praise from teachers or parents—then they don't get to develop their inner drive. They believe that children fundamentally need space and trust to allow them to master things by themselves, to make and solve their own problems. This creates real self-esteem because it comes from the child's own internal cheerleader, not someone else.

Internal vs. external locus of control

In psychology, this internal cheerleader or drive is known as the locus of control. A person's locus of control is used to describe the control a person believes they have over their own lives and the events that affect them. The word "locus" in Latin means "place" or "location" and so the locus of control is quite simply referring to the place from which one feels a sense of control over one's life. Thus, people with an internal locus of control believe that they have the power to control their lives and the events that happen around them. Their drive is internal or personal. Their place of control comes from the inside. People with an external locus of control believe that their lives are controlled by external factors like the environment or fate, which they have little influence over. What drives and controls them is coming from the outside and they can't change it. We are all affected by our surroundings, culture and social status, but how much we feel we can control our

lives despite those factors is an internal versus external locus of control.

Studies have repeatedly shown that children, adolescents and adults who have a strong external locus of control (that is, that circumstances outside of themselves control their lives) are predisposed to anxiety and depression. When people believe they have little or no control over their fate, they become anxious, and when this sense of helplessness gets to be too great, they become depressed.

Research also shows that there has been a dramatic shift towards a more external locus of control among young people in the last 50 years. In studies conducted by psychologist Jean M. Twenge and colleagues, they examined results from a test called the Children's Nowicki-Stricklund Internal-External Control Scale (CNSIE) over a 50-year period. This test measures whether a person has an internal or an external locus of control. What they discovered was that there was a dramatic shift from an internal towards an external locus of control in children of all ages, from elementary school to college. To give you an idea of how great a shift it was, the average young person in 1960 was 80 percent more likely to claim that they had control over their lives than children in 2002, who were more prone to say they lacked personal control over their lives.

And what was even more striking was that the trend was more pronounced for elementary school children than for middle school and college kids. So younger and younger children were feeling the lack of control over their lives. They were feeling this sense of helplessness earlier and earlier. This rise in external locus of control over the years has a linear correlation with the rise in depression and anxiety in our society. What could be causing this shift?

Respecting the zone of proximal development

Much of Denmark's methodology is based on a concept called proximal development by Lev Vygotsky, a Russian developmental psychologist. This basically states that a child needs the right amount of space to learn and grow in the zones that are right for them with the right amount of help. Like helping a child climb over a fallen log in the forest. If at first they need a hand, you give the hand, but then perhaps only a finger to help them over and when it is time you let them go. You don't carry them over or push them over. In Denmark, parents try to intervene only when it is absolutely necessary. They trust their children to be able to do and try new things and give them space to build their own trust of themselves. They provide them with scaffolding for their development and help them build their self-esteem, and this is very important for the "whole child". If children feel too pressured, they can lose the joy in what they are doing and this can cause fear and anxiety. Instead, Danish parents try to meet children where they feel secure trying a new skill, and then challenge and invite them to go farther or try something new, while it still feels exciting and strange.

Giving this space and respecting the zone of proximal development allows a child to develop their internal locus of control because they feel they are in charge of their own challenges and development. A child who is pushed or pulled too much risks developing an external locus of control because they aren't controlling their development, rather external factors are and the foundation for their self-esteem becomes shaky.

We sometimes think we are helping kids by pushing them to perform or learn faster, but leading them at the right time in the right moment of their development will yield much better results. Not

only because of the learning itself, which will surely be more pleasurable, but because the child will be more self-assured of the mastery of their skills since they feel more in charge of acquiring them.

David Elkind, an American psychologist, agrees. Children who are pushed to read earlier, for example, may read better than their peers initially, but those levels even out in a few years' time and at what cost? The pushed children exhibit higher levels of anxiety and lower self-esteem in the long run.



Is it possible that we are making our kids anxious without realizing it by not allowing them to play more?

In America, we find an endless number of books on how to lower or reduce anxiety and stress. “No Stress”, “Stop Stress Now”, and so forth. We want to eliminate stress at all costs, particularly for our children. Many parents helicopter over their children and intervene to protect them at a moment’s notice. Most of us barricade staircases and protect and lock up anything we can find that might be remotely dangerous. If we don’t, we feel we are being bad parents and, in fact, we judge and are judged by others for not doing enough to protect them. These days require so many safeguarding gizmos and gadgets that one wonders how parents didn’t kill their children 20 years ago.

Not only do we want to protect our children from stress but we also want to build their self-confidence and make them feel special. The standard method of doing this is to praise them, sometimes excessively, for insignificant accomplishments. But in our quest to increase confidence and reduce stress, we may actually be setting them up for more stress in the long run. Building confidence rather than self-esteem is like making a nice house with little foundation. We all know what happens when the big bad wolf comes.

But how, you may be wondering, can play help?

Scientists have been studying play in animals for years, trying to understand its evolutionary purpose. And one thing they are finding is that play is crucial for learning how to cope with stress. In studies done on domestic rats and rhesus monkeys, scientists found that when they were deprived of playmates during a critical stage of their development, these animals became “stressed out” as adults. They would overreact to stressful situations, unable to cope well in social settings. They would either react with excessive fear, sometimes running shaking into a corner, or with exaggerated aggression,

lashing out with rage. The lack of play was definitely the culprit, because when the animals were allowed a playmate for even an hour a day, they developed more normally and coped better as adults. It makes sense if you think about it.

Fight or flight behaviors, normally experienced in play, activate the same neurochemical pathways in the brain as stress does. Think about when you see dogs running around chasing each other for fun and growling. Many animals engage in this kind of play where they chase each other and put each other into the subordinate or attacker position in a play fight, creating a kind of stress. We know that exposing the brains of baby animals to stress changes them in a way that makes them less responsive to stress over time, meaning that the more they play the better their brains become at regulating stress as they grow. Their ability to cope constantly improves through playing and they are able to deal with more and more difficult situations. Resilience isn't cultivated by avoiding stress, you see, but learning how to tame and master it.

Are we taking away the ability to regulate stress from our kids by not allowing them to play enough? Looking at the number of anxiety disorders and depression in our society, one wonders if something is amiss. Seeing as one of the biggest reported fears of someone with an anxiety disorder is “the fear of losing control of their emotions”, we can't help but ask: if we stand back and let our children play more, will they be more resilient and happier adults? We think the answer is yes.

Play and coping skills

In a pilot study conducted on preschool children in a child development center in Massachusetts, researchers wanted to measure whether there was a positive correlation between the level of playfulness in preschoolers and their coping skills. Using a Test of Playfulness (ToP) and Coping Inventory, the researchers cross-checked the children's playfulness and the quality of their coping skills. What they found was that there was a direct positive correlation between children's playfulness level and their ability to cope. The more they played and the better they were at playing, the better they were at coping. This led the researchers to believe that play had a direct effect on all of their life adaptability skills.

Another study conducted by Louise Hess, a professor of occupational therapy, and colleagues at a health institute in Palo Alto wanted to investigate the relationship between playfulness and coping skills in adolescent boys. They studied both normally developing ones and those with emotional problems. The researchers measured this with the ToP and Coping Inventory and their findings were almost identical to the preschool study. For both groups of boys, there was a direct and significant correlation between the level of playfulness and their ability to cope. They concluded that the use of play could be employed to improve coping skills and particularly to improve adaptability and being able to approach problems and goals in a more flexible way. This is fascinating if you think about it.

But it makes sense. Just look outside to see children swinging from bars or climbing trees or jumping from high places. They are testing dangerous situations and no one but the child himself knows the right dose or how to manage it. But it's important that they feel in control over the dose of stress they can handle. This in itself

makes them feel more in control of their lives. Juvenile animals and primates do the same thing. They deliberately put themselves into dangerous situations, leaping and swinging from trees while twisting and turning, making it difficult to land. They are learning about fear and how to cope with it. It's the same with play fighting as mentioned earlier. The animals are putting themselves into both the subordinate and the attacker position to understand the emotional challenges of both.

For children, social situations are also stressful. Social play can bring on both conflict and cooperation. Fear and anger are just some of the emotions that a child must learn to cope with in order to keep playing. In play there is no such thing as getting excessive praise from the other kids like from their parents or their teachers. There are no special rules or special people in play. If someone feels too bullied or put down, they will quit. So rules have to be negotiated and renegotiated and players have to be aware of the emotional state of the other players in order to avoid someone getting upset and quitting, because if too many people quit, the game is over. Since children fundamentally want to play with each other, these situations make them practice getting along with others as equals. It makes them practice democracy. And democracy is an important value for the Danes.

Play Patrol and self-control

In many Danish schools, for example, there is a program in place called Play Patrol. Play Patrol is promoted by "Dansk Skoleidræt", which is a national sports organization whose main goal is to promote learning through sports, play and exercise for all students in the school.

The way it works is the school signs up for the program, then the selected students from the middle classes take part in a one-day

training course. They are taught how to involve children of all ages in play and they learn a myriad of wonderful games and receive clothing and gear to help them stand out in the schoolyard. They also get a games folder and play bag that contains inspiration and tools to help them. They are taught how to include kids who are shyer and may have difficulty playing with others. Play Patrol creates more life on the playground both physically and socially. It ensures a better social environment in the schoolyard and it also helps prevent bullying. There is also something called “GameBoosters”, which is exactly the same concept as Play Patrol but created for older students. No age is exempt from the importance of play!

“Both of my girls have Play Patrol in their school,” Iben says, “and they love it. Ida, my older daughter, signed up to be a facilitator and it was a great learning experience for her because she got the chance to teach the younger pupils a lot of games. She really grew from the experience.”

Playing between different ages like in Play Patrol and GameBoosters is a wonderful way to promote kids getting to the next zone of proximal development naturally. They have the ability to push and test themselves with the older kids in a way they wouldn’t with their parents or teachers. They can practice different roles like mother, firefighter or family pet. Practicing more difficult roles and tasks between kids of different ages in play is a natural learning curve and also helps socialization.

Lev Vygotsky, the psychologist mentioned earlier, says that a lot of the value in children’s play is based on the practice of self-control. He says that children’s strong desire to keep the game going leads

them to accept restrictions on their behavior that they would not accept in real life. This is how they acquire the capacities for self-control that are so crucial to social existence. They learn through play that self-control is a source of pleasure. Having self-control as an adult is a big factor in happiness and is partly developed through free play as a child. Learning to exercise self-control in order to keep a game going is much more meaningful than having control rules imposed upon us. Some say rules are made to be broken, but when a rule is discovered from within it becomes a core value rather than a boundary to push.

The truth behind Lego and playgrounds

Almost everyone has heard of Lego and played with the famous colorful building blocks at least once in their life. Ostensibly one of the most popular toys in history, Lego was dubbed “the toy of the century” at the start of the millennium by *Fortune* magazine. Originally made in wood and then plastic, Lego has never lost its fundamental building-block concept. Like the zone of proximal development, Lego can work for all ages. When the child is ready to take the next step towards a more challenging construction, to get to the next zone of proximal development, there are Legos made for taking that next step. It’s a wonderful way to play with your child to gently help them master a new level. They can play on their own or with friends and countless hours have been spent playing with Lego all over the world.

The interesting fact most people don’t know about Lego is that it comes from Denmark. Created by a Danish carpenter in his workshop in 1932, it was called Lego as a contraction of the words “Leg godt”, which means to “play well”. Even then, the idea of using your imagination to play freely was in full bloom.

Another of the world's biggest suppliers of play facilitators is a company called Kompan. Kompan creates outdoor playgrounds that have won numerous design awards for their simplicity, quality and functionality in supporting children's play. Their mission statement has been to promote healthy play as being important for children's learning. Their first playground was developed accidentally over 40 years ago when a young Danish artist noticed that his colorful art installation, created to brighten up a drab housing estate, was used more by children to play on than for the admiration of adults.

Kompan is now the number one playground supplier in the world. It's pretty fantastic to think that a country of only 5 million people is the world leader in both indoor and outdoor play supplies, and quite telling.

So the next time

When you see your children swinging from the branches, jumping off some rocks or play fighting with their friends and you want to intervene to save them, remember that this is their way of learning how much stress they can endure. When they are playing in a group with some difficult children and you want to protect them, remember that they are learning self-control and negotiation skills with all kinds of different personalities to keep the game alive. This is their way of testing their own abilities and developing adaptability skills in the process. The more they play, the more resilient and socially adept they will become in the long run. It's a very natural process. That's why the Danes have been so focused on play for all these years. They know it is a key element in long-term success and well-being in their children. Being able to "Leg godt" or "play well" is the building block to creating an empire of future happiness.