

So, we're snakes then?

by Linda M. Clement

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I have met a great many people who very strongly feel that the very worst thing a loving parent can do to his child is 'overprotect' her. This is the foundation of the oft-repeated advice to 'just get a sitter' and to leave them to their own devices, lest they become over-dependent.

To say the least, I believe this is a misunderstanding of what human beings (of any age) are, and what they are supposed to be.

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Humans are not, in spite of all the people who believe it, independent creatures. Snakes in no way rely on the presence or labour of other snakes to survive.

Humans rely on the presence and labour of other humans to survive. We do not lay our eggs and walk away, because our children, particularly, cannot survive without us.

We are social creatures by nature, capable of so much more than survival when we have the support and cooperation of other people.

People... people who need people

People clearly need other people, period. I didn't build the computer I am working with, although I could have.

Had I taken the time to learn everything I'd need to know to do so, I wouldn't have had time to learn how to do the other things I need to do: make the pots and pans I use in my kitchen, which of course I'd have to learn to build first, so I'd better learn how to fell trees so I can get some wood after I learn how to make an axe...

You can see where this is going: I have no time to learn everything I would need to know to be actually self-sufficient in this culture, with anything remotely resembling a modern lifestyle.

I don't know how to wire a cordless phone, or install a phone line, and while I do not for a second doubt my ability to learn the tasks, I am busy doing other things.

I am earning a living, I am raising my children, I am being a wife, a daughter, a citizen, an artist... One of the things that makes this possible is recognizing and appreciating the work that other people do that makes it possible for me to have such a narrow focus, so much to choose from and so few, relatively, skills mastered, considering the vast amount of high tech stuff I own.

This is related to child rearing how? It's simple arithmetic: how can my children be any more independent of

needing people than I am? Is that really what I want for them?

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Over-protection is an idea that comes almost entirely out of the expectation that needing people is bad. Of course, needing a committee to decide what is acceptable to eat or wear or think about is certainly maladaptive, but there is more to this than whether or not a person is in need of a team to make a simple decision.

There is the underlying idea that people are better if they don't need anyone... the illusion (or is it delusion?) of the self-made man.

There is, of course, no such thing as a self-made man. Any man alive and breathing today as an adult has a lot of people to thank, not the least the parents and other adults who did not lay him and leave him alone when he was minutes old. Someone, not he, fed this infant, kept him safe from marauding tigers, etc., and managed to keep him interested in the world long enough for his ego to kick in.

He didn't invent the foundations of all the work he did and he didn't create it out of whole cloth without instruction, support or access to prior knowledge created by other people.

In short, there is nothing he did

alone –and very little he could have done alone-- to become his 'self-made' man.

How to spoil a child, 101

What this is not about is keeping a child safe from harm and ensuring she has the opportunity to grow up free from negative forces and damaging experiences.

The warnings about overprotecting children are born of the illogical and unrelated idea that to nurture a child, to be careful about the quality of the parent-child relationship, and to be committed to being involved in the child's growth is an impediment to the child's healthy growth.

With the guiding presence of a parent or loving caretaker, the child will not learn to be aloof, sophisticated, equipped to defend herself from the evils of the world, etc. The child, in fact, will fail to grow up, because children never grow up of their own volition. If they are nurtured and love, they will want to stay young and immature forever, and have no internal impetus for mature.

It is difficult to respond to these funny ideas on paper, because I don't know how to spell pthththpth correctly, and everything else I can think of is too rude to print. I will have to settle for 'nonsense.'

This idea is quite simply totally ridiculous, as it is based on an adult perception that there is anything attractive or easy about being a child, from a child's point of view. It requires a faulty memory, first and foremost, and an astonishing lack of compassion.

Spoiling a child requires one thing only: a commitment to mishandling the child. One author suggested thinking of it this way: if fruit spoils, is it because it was handled carefully or because it was

mishandled? A child, whose real needs are met when they arise, does not carry those needs into the future. A child whose needs are not met has no way of letting them go.

How to make a brat

To make a brat, parents merely have to withhold the things the child actually needs, and compensate for that torture with other things that don't meet those needs in any way.

Prime examples: too busy to spend any time or attention on the child, and buy them toys instead; withhold food from a hungry child, and bribe with junk food; insist the child share all her toys under any circumstances you deem correct, while ensuring she never touches or uses anything of yours.

Nurturing vs. coddling

It is reasonable to talk about the difference between coddling and nurturing, as coddling is a pretty good way to grow a brat as well. Coddling, again, is failing to meet one need by attempting to meet another: the child needs sleep, give it an ice cream cone. While giving the child an ice cream cone in this instance might also feed a need for food, it in no way meets any need for sleep.

Coddling a child also encompasses stopping the natural consequences of their behaviour from making an impression. When the child breaks a beloved toy in anger, buy the child a new one interferes with finding out what happens when things are destroyed.

Paying bail the 10th time for the same infraction is coddling. It is not nurturing, although for a parent who will go all around the houses to keep a child from experience their own real

emotional reaction to their own lives, it may feel nurturing and possibly even loving. It isn't either.

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