

What is "The Continuum Concept"?

Are we raising our children the way nature and millions of years of evolution intended?

Or are we courting disaster by neglecting it?

"I would be ashamed to admit to the Indians that, where I come from, the women do not feel themselves capable of raising children until they read the instructions written in a book by a strange man." -Jean Liedloff in The Continuum Concept

The Indians referred to in the above quotation are the Yequana, a "stone age" indigenous tribe living virtually untouched by modern western civilization, deep in the Venezuelan rainforest. The author of that quote is Jean Liedloff, an American woman who made five expeditions over nearly a decade to spend time among these so-called "primitives", to observe firsthand their society and behaviors, but most importantly, their child rearing practices. The irony in the quote above is obvious to all but the most obtuse observer. Despite the miraculous scientific and technological advances our civilization has made, our children are insecure and unhappy or worse; our schools are failing; our society is beset by seemingly insurmountable problems of violence, terrorism, poverty, substance abuse, disease, mental illness, stress and just plain discontent; and our planet is in an environmental crisis. What has gone wrong?

Current attempts to address society's overt problems are mere symptomatic palliatives. To reach true and lasting solutions, we need to identify the root cause of these problems. According to Liedloff, that root cause is our failure, as a society, to understand and practice the child-rearing principles she describes in her book The Continuum Concept. We humans, as a species, have deviated from the Continuum of child-rearing practices that served us instinctually during the entire course of our evolution until just a few millennia ago. And we have been paying the price for that betrayal ever since.

The Yequana women would be both astounded and amused by Liedloff's sheepish admission above because they, instinctively and without the benefit of technological advances, medical miracles, drugs, or so-called "expert" child-rearing advice, raise children who are consistently healthy, happy, well-adjusted, cooperative, intelligent and helpful, who become integral, productive, valued members of their society. Yequana mothers and fathers

do not have to deal with post-partum depression, crying or fussing, colic, SIDS, separation anxiety, weaning, toilet training, the "terrible twos", tantrums, sibling rivalry, oppositionalism, depression, ADHD, conduct disorders, or any of the other problems that we in modern civilization have come to expect as "normal" issues in the process of growing up. Their children are innately secure, happy, social, competent and obedient. They are eager to learn, mature and contribute to the family and tribe. They never require the interventions of child psychologists, behavior modification or Ritalin!

What is their secret?

A major clue may be obtained by observing the child-rearing behavior of primates - gorillas, chimpanzees and orangutans - who are our closest evolutionary and genetic relatives in the animal kingdom. Anyone who has read a book or article or seen a Discovery Channel program about primate behavior has noticed a universal practice among them. Immediately after birth, primate babies cling to their mothers' fur and remain firmly attached to them for several months. Attached in this way, they go wherever the mother goes, even when the mother is climbing trees and swinging on vines, until they are ready for separation and independent locomotion. The mother never forces the baby to separate. It is allowed to cling until it decides that it is sufficiently comfortable for independent action, and it is always allowed to reattach if desired.

Because major species-wide genetic changes require, at a minimum, on the order of tens of thousands of years, we can confidently state that these genetically determined contact needs were not transcended in the evolutionary transition from primates to species homo sapiens and the subsequent development of homo sapiens to modern times. Assuming then that this behavior is an evolutionary mandate, modern human infants are still biologically and instinctually programmed to expect and require constant and consistent physical contact with the mother or other caregiver for the first six to nine months of life in order for appropriate and optimal development in all spheres to occur. This means being carried "in-arms" during the course of the day, and sleeping in the same bed, close to the parents, during the night. Just as the human embryo/fetus requires nine months of development in an internal womb, it would appear that a newborn infant requires at least an additional six to nine months in an external one-its mother's arms-before it is truly "born" as a unique independent entity in the world. If an embryo/fetus experiences no sense of separation for nine months, which is the entire length of its existence, how imprudent is it to assume that it is prepared for abrupt and total separation from its mother at and shortly after the moment of birth?

Although human infants today have the same biologically programmed contact requirements as their primate ancestors, there is one critical difference. Primate infants are born with the ability to cling to the mother's fur, taking the initiative in establishing and maintaining contact with the mother. The mother needs to take action only if an accidental separation occurs. Human infants do not have this ability. It is incumbent upon the mother to initiate and maintain the requisite physical contact until the infant is able and willing to begin brief trial separations, when the creeping and crawling stages of development begin at about 6 months of age. Allowing the child to dictate when and how long separation occurs, and always allowing the child to return to the in-arms state when desired, is an integral and essential aspect of a natural, appropriate and trouble-free separation process. This is exactly what Yequana mothers do, instinctively following the dictates of their evolutionary Continuum to perfection.

The essence of Continuum treatment includes:

1. Constant, uninterrupted physical contact with the mother or another parenting figure, including sleeping with the parents.
2. Immediate responsiveness to the infant's cues of need, e.g., providing breastfeeding, toileting, etc. on demand, but without being "child centered" Avoiding either indulgence or deprivation.
3. Passive participation of the infant, by being always in-arms, in the parent's normal daily routine activities while sleeping or awake which exposes the child to dynamic environmental stimulation and allows the child to discharge excess accumulated energy through the parents' activities and movements.
4. When the child is ready to separate, allowing the child full freedom to break the contact in order to crawl and explore, but always and immediately ready to receive the child back into her arms when the child is ready to return. As the child matures, the time spent out of arms increases and the time spent in arms decreases at the child's own pace. This eventually leads to a secure sense of autonomy. Only a highly stressful situation then would necessitate a return to the mother's arms for comfort and safety.
5. Absolute trust in the child's innate self-protective and survival mechanisms and innate sociability.

When an infant receives what he expects and requires, he experiences and maintains a feeling of "rightness". He is calm, secure, untroubled and untroubling, totally comfortable in the "here and now". If an infant does not receive what he is programmed to expect, he feels instinctively that something is missing, that things are terribly wrong, and he loudly signals that there is a problem in the only way he knows how: crying. Crying is the

primal signal from the child that something is wrong, that something is missing and needs to be set right as soon as possible. A mother from a Continuum culture would respond to such a signal immediately. The idea of allowing a child to cry itself to sleep would be not only incomprehensible, but also horrifying.

Another critical factor in Continuum principles is that the mother does not put her whole life and activities on hold while the child is in-arms. Continuum child rearing is definitely not child-centered. The infant is adequately attended to and breastfed on demand, but not made the center of attention. The mother continues to perform all of her routine activities on its normal daily schedule, with the child as a passive participant in those activities. In this way, the infant, while feeling totally secure and in its proper place is also exposed to all manner of interesting and vital stimulation that is essential to optimal neurological development on all levels: sensorimotor, perceptual, immune system, emotional and cognitive. Being a passive participant in the mother's activities also allows the child vicariously to discharge the excess energy that accumulates during the day, which babies in cribs have no means to release save through kicking, screaming and crying. Continuum babies do not need to be "rocked to sleep". That oxymoronic concept is one clear validation of Continuum efficacy. Why would babies need to be moved in order for them to fall asleep? If they were receiving the sufficient and proper movement via passive participation in their mother's routine daily activities, they'd be asleep already. Continuum-deprived babies need to be rocked because they haven't experienced sufficient vicarious movement and have no alternative means to discharge their excess energy buildup in any other way. They can't sleep with all that energy still inside. Nervous energy, sewing-machine legs, restlessness and ADHD are undoubtedly the later childhood and adult inheritances of the omission of this essential practice.

Liedloff describes at length in her book the happy, obedient, social nature of children who have been raised according to Continuum dictates, and contrasts this seemingly utopian image with the nature and behaviors of most children raised according to conventional practices in our modern, technologically advanced western culture. The difference in outcome between these two diverse childrearing methods is shocking, even though both cultures began with exactly the same raw material: a newborn human being. Why should this be so?

The requirement for continuous contact during the first six to nine months of infancy is genetically and biologically programmed. It is "hard-wired" into humans by evolution. Any deviation will create problems, even if that deviation occurs with the best of intentions, devoid of negativity and with

currently accepted, normal levels of love, contact, care and attention. The Continuum is not so much a concept as it is an imperative. When we are separated from our Continuum birthright, we experience our sense of "rightness" only as discrete episodes in time instead of as a seamless and timeless state of presence and connectedness. Because we are not received into an environment in which we are given what we are programmed to expect, we feel unwelcome and unworthy. We feel that we have to do something to be worthy of proper attention rather than just being. All of our beliefs about ourselves, and the behaviors that we devise toward the goal of obtaining what should be unconditionally given, are then based upon this unworthiness. The long-term psychological and spiritual consequences of this deprivation have become abundantly evident in western society and all around the planet.

Reestablishing Continuum practices can transform our planet, saving the world one child at a time. It is arguably the most profound discovery of the 20th Century. It may be our only hope for the 21st.

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