



Help for Raising Morally Centered Children

A Review of

8 Keys to Old School Parenting for Modern-Day Families

by Michael Mascolo

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Reviewed by

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8 Keys to Old School Parenting for Modern-Day Families is one in a series of self-help texts designed to offer accessible, evidence-based, practical guidance on topics such as parenting, stress management, and addiction recovery.

As an academic psychologist, a parent, and a consumer of trade press books on parenting, I found Mascolo's text timely and insightful, and I am happy to have it on my shelf. I say this because Mascolo has effectively applied well-established developmental research and parenting models to numerous examples, exercises, and sample scripts showing parenting philosophy in practice.

8 Keys would be most appreciated by advanced, reflective readers. Instead of packing a text with plain advice and humorous anecdotes, Mascolo opens his with two chapters on the complex cultural conditions that underlie recommendations appearing in later chapters. He describes today's prevailing parenting model as "child-centered," one that grew out of the individual rights activism of the 1960s and subsequent social movements emphasizing personal autonomy and moral relativism. I would add that widespread acceptance of child-centered parenting corresponds to the rise of consumer culture and affluence not enjoyed by previous generations.

In child-centered parenting, children, not parents, take the lead in their own self-determination. Keeping children on the path to self-determination requires that parents identify what the child wants and needs and then provide support accordingly. In other words, children take a step ahead of parents in charting a course, but parents do not step off the path—they stay a step or two behind, ready to catch the child when she stumbles.

As Mascolo makes clear, child-centered parents most often empathize with their children and have their children's well-being at heart. However, as well intended as child-centered parents may be, their children are far from ready to effectively direct their own behavior and choices and to resolve conflicts absent hands-on adult guidance. As a consequence,

child-centered parenting ultimately produces overindulged children who lack compassion and concern for others, and, contrary to the self-direction it aims to instill, children consistently placed at the center fail to develop the skills necessary to function competently in a complex society.

As an alternative, Mascolo does *not* recommend returning to the strict authoritarian approach of yesteryear. Such an approach would likely have only limited effectiveness in producing competent and morally responsible offspring in the 21st Century culture of permissiveness. The author *does* recommend that parents, as the more skilled partners in the relationship, assume the lead role in directing their children's development. In the well-researched authoritative parenting model Mascolo recommends, parents use their adult-level knowledge to provide children a moral compass, to help them learn to persist and persevere, and to help them see the short- and long-term consequences of their decisions and actions; and, they do so while taking the child's perspective into account. In sum, "Children need guidance from competent and worthy adults about how to craft a worthy self" (p. 232).

To help parents learn to practice authoritative parenting, the author provides numerous illustrative examples. One goes something like this: Child 1 grabs an attractive toy from Child 2. An authoritative parent would recognize Child 1's desire for Child 2's toy as reasonable, but out of respect for Child 2's rights, the parent would correct Child 1's behavior by directing Child 1 first to return the toy to Child 2 and then perhaps teaching Child 1 to ask to share, to share fairly, and to respect Child 2's right to refuse to share.

Mascolo bases his discussion of disciplinary strategies from this other-oriented framework. He argues that gaining child compliance through teaching and guidance is more effective across time and situations than are reward-based systems and punishments, which have limited effects at best. From here, Mascolo proposes replacing the more familiar terms "logical" or "natural" consequences with "meaningful" or "morally responsible" consequences and then implementing these for their teaching potential. For example, a parent whose child routinely acts disrespectfully when the parent reminds him that his computer time limit is up could implement a meaningful, morally responsible consequence of having to earn computer time through practicing respectful treatment. In addition to making a clear argument for the power of "morally responsible" consequences, this chapter on discipline has some of the best examples of effective negative reinforcement—procedures Mascolo calls "remov[ing] the negative"—that I have read.

Later chapters on solving problems, managing conflicts, and communicating effectively focus on teaching children to separate interests from positions, and this serves as the basis for resolving interpersonal problems. Again, most parents would find the sample scripts in these chapters helpful along with specific suggestions for improving active listening and perspective taking, such as writing down what a child says. Importantly, the author advises readers to put problem solving and conflict resolution aside until intense emotions have subsided, which even skilled practitioners might find useful as a reminder.

Again, throughout his examples and recommended strategies, Mascolo has integrated the message that contemporary parents have a moral imperative to help their children find a balance between personal fulfillment and respecting others' needs. While cultivating children's moral character is an uphill battle in a culture where "faith in moral values [has] waned" (p. 224), Mascolo does not argue that contemporary culture is corrupt; in fact, he

acknowledges that emphasis on individual rights has resulted in important gains for women, sexual minorities, and diverse populations. However, given children's lack of experience relative to adults, it is unrealistic to expect them to function as autonomous, self-determined individuals who can also respect the greater good.

I have had days when I would have embraced *any* text that would offer me quick, intelligent advice on how to best discipline my child or how to communicate more effectively. I am not sure if on those days I would have had the patience to wade through this author's discussions on cultural conditions of contemporary parenting or the distinctions between authoritative and other parenting styles. I can say with greater certainty that the author has distilled highly regarded contemporary parenting theory and research and tied them to clear examples that most any reader could follow.

My other reservation has more to do with certain realities of contemporary parenting that the author did *not* cover, and I bother mentioning them because I expect these realities might factor into resistance to the author's otherwise sound messages. Spending long hours working and commuting, dealing with children's ridiculous school homework demands, trying to focus in the midst of continuous media intrusion, and managing the pressures of consumer culture can overwhelm even parents firmly committed to devoting the energy that authoritative parenting requires. But where might today's parents find that extra energy? Is a "moral imperative" a sufficiently strong motivator? Are arguments against old-time authoritarian parenting strong enough to counter its often successful, resilient, and morally responsible "greatest generation" proponents? These are not necessarily issues that a self-help book should tackle, but they should at least be acknowledged when trying to persuade parents to adopt a child-rearing practice aimed partly at enhancing the greater good.

In considering the greater good, Bronfenbrenner and Evans wrote: "Re-creating social development is the principal challenge confronting contemporary societies" (2000, p. 123). Mascolo's book is a timely response to that challenge, and one might hope that parents—and the culture at large—can see the value in parental efforts to lead their children to become fulfilled, morally centered citizens.

Reference

Bronfenbrenner, U., & Evans, G. A. (2000). Developmental science in the 21st Century: Emerging questions, theoretical models, research designs and empirical findings. *Social Development*, 9, 115–125. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1467-9507.00114> [PsycINFO →](#)