Saving Children: Notes From the Front Line

A review of

Children and the Dark Side of Human Experience: Confronting Global Realities and Rethinking Child Development

by James Garbarino


Reviewed by

Judith L. Gibbons

This short book about children in difficult circumstances is sensitively expressed, thought provoking, and highly readable. The author, James Garbarino, has spent over 30 years working internationally on issues of child welfare. He is not only a scientist and theorist but also a perceptive, thoughtful observer. The book reads more like a memoir than a scientific report. It is sprinkled with mention of current events, the author's own experiences, and his original frameworks for thinking about children living under distressing conditions. Moreover, unlike many authors of scientific manuscripts, he doesn't shy away from forays into the importance of spirituality.

Children and the Dark Side of Human Experience: Confronting Global Realities and Rethinking Child Development is structured as an introduction, nine examples of children exposed to or living in difficult circumstances, and a short epilogue. The difficult circumstances include exposure to vicarious trauma; social conditions of fear and brutality; death row; living amid hate, poverty, and sexism; life in displaced-person camps; and
exposure to war and to political conditions that exacerbate rather than ameliorate trauma. Garbarino argues that children have not only the rights laid out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), but also the rights to a safe and socially healthy environment and to the opportunity to heal from trauma.

There are many jewels in this book. For example, Garbarino reiterates some facts that are often overlooked, such as (a) children may have serious consequences from the same traumas that barely affect adolescents and adults, (b) resilience is not free but takes its toll and lowers resistance to further trauma, and (c) the effects of trauma may not be revealed until years later.

Another jewel is Garbarino's original framework for describing the hard truths of life that he calls the three secrets. Those are the physical vulnerability of the human body (Snowden's Secret), the vulnerability of the social fabric (Dantrell's Secret), and sad secret that humans can and do commit any form of unthinkable violence against others (Milgram's Secret).

A third issue that resonated for me is the reminder that, in helping children in difficult circumstances, good intentions are not enough. Applying traditional, insight-oriented psychotherapies to children affected by war and terror may do more harm than good (e.g., Lykes, 1994). Garbarino uses a version of the tale of a man searching for his keys under a lamppost to make this point. Neither cognitive-behavioral therapy nor insight-oriented therapy will help the man find his keys.

Another powerful metaphor that Garbarino introduces in this book is the notion of children as social weather vanes. Because of their vulnerability, children serve the function of canaries in mines, as harbingers of social change and bellwethers of social toxicity. He gives examples of adolescent drug abuse and child prostitution portending negative social changes in different countries. In the developing country (Guatemala) where I live for most of the year, youth gangs have been increasing both in prevalence and in their use of violence. My thoughts on their origin are twofold: that they are a consequence of the 30-year violent struggle in Guatemala and a result of migration back and forth to the United States (where children learn about gangs). But from Garbarino's perspective, the gangs may also portend increased social unrest, perhaps related to present social inequities as well as to past events.

In the first paragraphs of the book, Garbarino issues a disclaimer about the difficulty in seeing accurately one's own culture. Despite that, he is an astute observer of the culture of the United States and of the behavior of North Americans. He notes the generosity of Americans in helping others in difficult circumstances—American soldiers in Kuwait who cleaned up a facility for children, volunteerism and contributions after the Asian tsunami and the Katrina hurricane. He also notes elements of social toxicity in U.S. culture, including materialism, media violence, and heterosexism. He calls for the elimination of child abuse as a way to prevent damaging children who may grow up to commit heinous crimes.

Another highlight of the book is Garbarino's reflections on cultural relativism. He gives the example of a colleague who tries to teach U.S. students not to quickly judge other
customs and traditions. Although he sees this as worthy, he reaches the limits of his own nonjudgmental attitudes toward other cultures in the case of genital mutilation of girls that occurs in, among other countries, the Sudan. He argues that between cultural ethnocentrism and complete acceptance of other's practices, there should be a third option, that some cultural practices are wrong. In addition, Garbarino implies a strategy for change based on methods that ended the Chinese practice of foot binding. Enlightened Sudanese men (as well as women) can speak against the practice, and men can refuse to marry “cut” women.

There are many other insights, frameworks for addressing child welfare, and astute cultural observations in this book. Space precludes mentioning all of them.

This is an essential book for everyone interested in promoting the well-being of children. Those who have worked extensively in international child welfare will welcome the perceptions of one who has been through the trenches with them. They will experience “click” after “click” that resonate with their own experience. Those who are beginning to work in this field will be well briefed on the importance of sensitivity and caring but also of making interventions based on theory, research, and cultural knowledge.

References
