

The Age of Anxiety

By Kathy Carey, MAT

The general perception today seems to be that children are at greater risk, facing more threats from the outside world than children of decades ago. Parents at all socioeconomic levels voice concerns about dangers children face daily: kidnapping, injuries, competition for placement in programs, schools, and activities considered necessary for admission to college.

These perceptions of the child's immediate world are at odds with one another. One set suggests children are not safe without constant adult supervision and that they are better off at home, watching TV, playing video games, or using other technology, because we know where they are and are comforted by the illusion that we are in control. The other set suggests that, by age 3, a child should be active in extracurricular activities, where he can develop academic, social, and athletic skills, because, after all, college is just around the bend.

No doubt, there are risks involved in growing up. And some risks do differ from those faced by children in the 1950s and 60s, eras glorified as times when children led idyllic, safe existences in well-kept, middle-class neighborhoods. These are misperceptions, however: Families in poverty, families where both parents work long hours, families cursed with alcoholism and/or drug addiction, and families dealing with divorce, abandonment, or domestic violence are not new but rather ongoing reflections of the human condition that affect all children, ours and theirs, and the social realm in which we all live.

As parents and grandparents, we can only effect change in our communities

and in the wider world if we change our perceptions and behaviors. The cure for ego confusion (seeing our children as representations of ourselves, who, thus, must be perfect at all times) is first to recognize that we have it. Then we must inform ourselves, using reputable sources, about typical child development.* Finally, we must adhere to Montessori's charge "to follow the child" (Montessori, 1949, p. 231), an endeavor that entails much observation. And observation, as Montessori teachers know, is a skill and an art requiring knowledge, effort, and patience.

Consider the following as some ways to be fully present with your children:

- Childproofing: We usually do a good job with outlet covers, drawer stops, and so on, for babies, but what about older children? Call it "preparing the environment": Place and keep televisions, computers, tablets, and phones in public living spaces and set reasonable limits on their use; balance technology with exercise and indoor/outdoor play; and make time for reading aloud and silently in the presence of other family members doing the same.

- Share meals together, especially dinner and its preparation, as often as possible, five nights a week at least. Share with each other your day as well as thoughts and feelings, and resist the temptation to teach: We learn more through discussion and modeling than through lecture.

- Allow children to speak for themselves: Respect their feelings and their intellect, even if they are mistaken in their thoughts or behaviors.

- Show rather than tell. It is the Montessori way.

- Be considerate of each child's need for privacy. There is no law that says children must share with parents their every thought, feeling, or action.

- Avoid comparison and competition between children, always and everywhere. Each child is entitled to his/her individuality.

- Set up home environments and family interactions that allow choices and freedom to choose. Meals, weekend plans, vacations, and gifts for family members are reasonable areas of choice.

- Understand that mistakes are opportunities for learning. All humans make mistakes; it is what we do with our mistakes that makes a difference.

- Demonstrate active respect in thought, word, and deed for all life. Be the best model you can be. You are being watched.

Children who feel loved and respected will develop their singular potential.

References

Montessori, M. (1949.) *The absorbent mind*. Adyar, Madras, India: The Theosophical Publishing House.

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*See books by Louise Bates Ames and Frances L. Ilg (Gesell Institute of Human Development): *Your 1-Year-Old* through *Your 10- to 14-Year-Old*, Dell Trade Paperback Books, and *Child Behavior* by Ilg, Ames & Baker, Harper Perennial Books.