

Book Reviews

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Honoré C. (2008). Under Pressure: Putting the Child Back in Childhood. Toronto:
Vintage Canada.

Reviewed by: Sapphire Kaye, MacEwan University

Carl Honoré proclaims his book, Under Pressure, is “not another parenting manual” (p. 18) but it just might be the wake-up call that parents of this generation need. Honoré examines all aspects of growing up today – from toys that are marketed to make your kids smarter, to the desire to fit as many extracurricular activities in after school, just in case your child is secretly a prodigy in one of them. He focuses on eleven different topics with each chapter dedicated to analyzing one topic thoroughly. In a brilliant investigation, Honoré travels the world to present how problems with raising the perfect child reach all different cultures and discovers that many places are finding solutions to these problems in inventive, yet almost obvious ways.

At the start of the book, Honoré already specifies that it is pressure on parents that in turn puts pressure onto kids. He describes our culture as “the age of the trophy child” (p. 26), where parents are pressured to have the perfect child and to be ahead of other parents. To not do enough creates a feeling of guilt. In an interview with the former Dean of Admissions at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Marilee Jones, she explains, “It has reached a point where it’s not about the kids or what’s good for them any more; it’s about what the parents want; it’s about Mom telling her friends that her daughter aced her SATs, or Dad boasting about how his kid got into MIT or Harvard” (p. 114). A parent in

Taiwan admits, “The pressure to do what every other parent is doing is incredible” (p. 29).

Honoré’s view on what is happening to childhood is entirely based on our current “rat race atmosphere” (p. 27). But in many chapters he interestingly reflects on what writers and philosophers have said in centuries past, such as Plato, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. On the topic of toys, Honoré quotes Emerson, “We fill the hands and nurseries of our children with all manner of dolls, drums, and horses, withdrawing their eyes from the plain face and sufficing objects of nature, the sun, the moon, the animals, the water, and stones, which should be their toys” (p. 82). The difference is that in today’s society, Honoré feels that there is a lot more pressure on parents to raise the perfect child. He explains that child prodigies have become “the gold standard”, when in past generations they were “portrayed as a bit freakish” (p. 27).

The most important thing that needs to be done is to listen to the children, and that’s exactly what Honoré does. In each chapter, Honoré talks to kids about the topic at hand, whether it is how they feel about being in four after-school activities, how much homework they are expected to do, or even if they like all the electronic and educational toys. In a fascinating study Honoré observed, kids were asked to chose toys to play with in a room and at the end they all ended up with Lego. A six-year old in the experiment says, “I like toys that you can make things up with” (p. 79). At Viertola, a school in Finland, there is no testing and competition that stresses students in many other countries, such as in the United States and Japan. One student remarks, “If school is too much like a race, then you get tired and enjoy it less ... I know I learn things best when I am enjoying myself” (p. 125). In a sad insight on how it feels growing up in this type of atmosphere, a

fourteen year old in Vancouver confessed, “I feel like a project that my parents are always working on” (p. 13).

Contrary to what a lot of parents might believe, Honoré clearly shows that all the early starts and extra lessons for children do not really pay off in the long run. Outlining some research done on rats raised in enriched environments, Honoré states “no amount of enrichment ever produced rats with better brains than those raised in nature” (p. 41).

When it comes to sports, starting out early has little effect as well. A study in the United States revealed, “70 percent of children who play youth sports quit by age thirteen, with many more dropping out by the time they turn fifteen” (p. 190).

With all this pressure, parents wonder where to turn and what to do better. Honoré travels to a few different places that boast solutions for many of today’s child rearing problems. He visits Reggio Playschool in Italy, where children are encouraged to learn what they find interesting without any curriculum and little adult intervention. A teacher explains, “We don’t impose things on the children; we prefer to leave space for experimentation and see how they approach the subject first” (p. 65). Similar to Reggio, Lakeside nursery in Switzerland is located outside and encourages children to learn for themselves. The director of Lakeside nursery expresses, “When you see children out in the woods, exploring, playing taking responsibility, making mistakes and learning from them, doing their own thing, you just know that is what children are meant to do” (p. 72). The Forest School in Northern Taiwan bans television, video games and computers, and conducts all the lessons and homework outdoors in the forest. A student here tells Honoré, “At the school we have fun and learn a lot without computers” (p. 111). An outdoor nursery school in Britain called “The Secret Garden” has the students spend the

Book Reviews

entire day outdoors, no matter the weather, interacting with plants and animals and building campfires. The outcome with these innovative schools – the children love it and learn more in the process. A study in Denmark that Honoré includes shows that “children in outdoor preschools catch 80% fewer colds, sore throats, ear infections and other contagious illnesses than do those cooped up indoors” (p. 252).

Honoré’s conclusion title sums up his suggestions perfectly: “Leave Those Kids Alone”. Ultimately, what Under Pressure seeks to do, it does perfectly. Using Honoré’s own first-hand experiences, insightful interviews, fascinating historical anecdotes and a wide variety of experiences from all over the world, ‘Under Pressure’ is a unique and important insight into what today’s culture is doing to our children. Honoré urges parents to remember that “children have a range of aptitudes and interests” and that “we have to cherish children for who they are instead of for what we want them to be” (p. 259). This may be hard for parents to do right away, but Honoré reminds us that “it will take time but the change will be worth it” (p. 262).

Honoré’s clear demographic for this book is parents or prospective parents. Even grandparents or aunts and uncles can find importance with the information provided in Under Pressure. Any person from any walk of life who has children, is planning to have children, or is involved with the raising of children will benefit from the advice in this book. Most will probably find themselves relating to many of issues brought up, if not every single one.

Changing the ways of parents today is Honoré’s main goal, but there are many other areas that will get an advantage from reading this book. Sociology students studying families, elementary to high school teachers, daycare workers, kids’ sports

Book Reviews

coaches, toy developers, game developers, the public school board, child doctors, child psychologists, social workers, and kids' music and art teachers will find this book very useful in their disciplines. I found Under Pressure a highly addictive and easy read. It was captivating, stimulating and enlightening. I highly recommend this book to everyone who finds interest in the impact of our society on childhood.