

Book Reviews

Canadian Journal of Family and Youth, 7(1), 2015, pp 229-232
ISSN 1718-9748 © University of Alberta
<http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index/php/cjfy>

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

Reviewed By: Farron Wielinga, MacEwan University

Carl Honoré's book, Under Pressure, is an exploration of contemporary childhood from a historical, sociological, and personal perspective. In his book, Honoré takes stock of the methods that society employs in modern child rearing, and how they can contribute to a declining sense of well being in children. His evaluation uses a combination of research, anecdotal evidence and personal observations to demonstrate how society has fallen short of the mark with kids. In exploring these issues, Honoré questions the motivation behind contemporary methods and implores the reader to consider the cost of our modern approach. In considering the breakdown of childhood, he addresses issues related to four main areas: parenting practices, academic pressures, extracurricular activities, and the influence of capitalist culture.

Honoré provides a compelling case for the destructive impact of over-scheduling, pampering, and over-stimulating youngsters. He explains how childhood, once a time of freedom and imagination, has become burdened by many of the same activities and responsibilities that adults assume. In doing this, he argues that we are not empowering our children, but instead are stifling their ability to build an identity outside of the box we construct for them. Many parents interviewed by Honoré are aware that they pressure their kids in order to 'keep up with the Joneses'. One parent states: "the pressure to do what every other parent is doing is incredible" (p. 29). Overall, Honoré clearly believes that these behaviours are rooted in a desire to give the best to children. However, these desires have atrophied into actions that could end up being

detrimental to a child and their developing sense of self. Consider the evidence he gives to illustrate the extreme limits we place on children to ensure their ‘safety’. He points to warnings beginning in the 20th century that “the home was a minefield of germs, electric sockets, hot stoves and water to drown in” (p. 242). Labeling the phenomenon as ‘hysteria’, he describes the safety measures that are put in place both to ‘protect’ children and also, prevent lawsuits. Honoré reflects on the reasons for this obsession, especially given the ever-decreasing risk of death by accident, and increasing medical advances. One psychologist he interviews points to the irony of the situation, stating that by working tirelessly to eliminate risk, we cultivate anxiety and, in the long run, make kids less safe, removing benefits that come from risk taking (p. 247). This parental fear bleeds into many areas of modern childhood.

Honoré also examines a number of different educational methods in his book. Among them, he visits the Reggio Emilia playschools of Italy and the exclusive boarding school preschools of Tianjin. Throughout his journeys, Honoré shows concern with hothousing children; an educational technique encouraging rigorous study schedules for children with the intention of getting them to thrive academically. He references research that shows negligible difference in intellectual ability between kids who are hothoused and those who were not. They do, however, often suffer from higher anxiety and show a lack of creativity (p. 59). In addition to the various forms of schooling available, Honoré pays close attention to the demands placed on children in schools around the world. He investigates the stresses of copious amounts of homework and punishing exam schedules typical in many Western and Asian countries, and explores alternative programs that have amassed success in Scandinavian and other European countries. Honoré carefully assesses parental attitudes towards different educational methods, as well as the benefits and limitations of each method that is surveyed. Also discussed at length are

the pressures children often face in preparing for their post-secondary academic futures at obscenely young ages.

Honoré is also concerned with the plethora of extracurricular activities and sports that a child can be involved in these days. He cites a study done by KidsHealth.org that surveyed children ages nine to thirteen. According to this research, 41% of children often feeling stressed because they have too many activities to participate in (p. 167). He presents anecdotes about the “extracurricular treadmill” (p. 165) and urges society to consider their motives for running our children into the ground with activities that are supposed to be enjoyable. The situation has become so dire in one New Jersey town that they have instituted one day a year called “Ready, Set, Relax!” where the town takes a break from homework, activities and long work hours. It is startling to read about places where overscheduling has become so rampant that they need to schedule a one-day shutdown. Honoré does mention that children often ask to be enrolled in extracurricular activities and sports, but points to the responsibility of parents to limit their children’s schedules appropriately, and be attentive to their individual needs. He also discusses the inability of many parents to set limits, and how that can contribute to the degradation of childhood. It used to be that parents made decisions for their children. Now, Honoré states, children often run the show. ‘No’ has become the most difficult word, and equally disturbing, he discusses how parents often feel their children the message that they can accomplish anything they dream of doing. Honoré warns that children often suffer from increased anxiety because they are not taught that failure is a normal and inevitable part of life. He illustrates this with the words of one high school student: “I ...always question my capabilities... I am scared of how people will react if I do not live up to their expectations” (p. 203). Between the lack of realistic messages we impart on children about their abilities, and our hesitance to deny children of

anything, Honoré sums up a great deal of his book with this statement “children can only really be children when adults are adults” (p. 206).

A portion of the book is also devoted to criticizing the influence of capitalism in child rearing. Honoré references the pervasiveness of “pester power”, which is when children hound their parents to buy things. He states that advertising encourages it by “denigrating adults, portraying them as killjoys that stand between children and Fun” (p. 219). He also deliberates over the dangers of all the technology readily available to children. They “offer a very tempting form of babysitting” (p. 91), and Honoré questions whether these devices, often advertised as ‘educational’ and ‘enriching’ are actually a positive influence on our children. He discusses research that supports the negative effects of over-stimulating children with technology, and proposes a solution. While he doesn’t propose avoiding these devices, he supports placing limits on children’s usage. He consistently advocates for the importance of limits throughout the book.

Honoré thoughtfully weaves anecdotes into his writing, both personal and those garnered from the extensive research he presents. These stories effectively link his research sources, and the result is a book that is easy to read and thought provoking. I enjoyed this book immensely. In terms of limitations, this book provides abundant evidence for the problems with child rearing in this modern age, but solutions are often presented in a complicated jumble that does not inspire confidence. There is a ‘sky-is-falling’ mentality that comes across in his writing, and it may cause the reader to come away feeling less than empowered about their options to combat these issues. With the advent of even more technology, and increased importance placed on education, this book is quite timely. I think the appeal of this book is broad and could be of interest to those in the fields of psychology, history, anthropology, and sociology. As well, this book may be of interest to parents and others who spend time with children.