

# Children, parents and teachers learning how to care more effectively

Dana R. McDermott

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**Abstract:** *Today economists [1, 2] point to the importance of preschool education, parenting education and the teaching of empathy and care, for the well-being of children and of society. This article connects the recommendations of leaders in economics, science, and social sciences to successful programs worldwide that teach children as young as preschool, skills of empathy/caring/parenting so they might succeed as students, peers and future parents and workers. Additional correlations between learning the skills involved in empathy/caring/parenting and decreases in aggression/bullying/violence are also reported as they figure not only in success at school for students but in adult life as parents, partners and community members. It is hoped that learning about how these important programs help parents, teachers and children (future parents) have more caring decision making and solutions to resolve issues in home, school, community and the larger world will not only help families in Haiti but provide the basis as Rifkin notes for all of us across the globe to save civilization from an often uncaring world.*



**Rezime:** *Sètansi, ekonomis yo [1,2] demontre enpòtans edikasyon anvan timoun antrè lekòl, edikasyon manman ak papa pitit bay pitit yo, pandan yo ap montre yo konpasyon epi fason pou yo pran swen lòt moun, se bon jan engredyan pou byennèt timoun epi sosyete a. Nan atik sa a, nou va jwenn yon koneksyon ant rekòmandasyon lidè nan domèn ekonomi, lasyans, ak syans sosyal pou siksè divès pwogram nan lemond ki aprann timoun, depi anvan yo rantrè lekòl, abilite pou yo gen konpasyon / bay lòt moun swen / vin bon manman ak papa yon fason pou yo kab reyisi kòm elèv, kòm konpayon, epi sa ap pèmèt yo reyisi alavni kòm manman ak papa epi pou yo vin bon travayè. Lòt lye ki genyen lè yon moun devlope abilite pou li gen konpasyon, pou li bay lòt moun swen, pou li vin bon manman ak papa pitit, epitou pou li diminye fòs agresivite li / nan entimide moun epi fè vyolans, se rive kreye mwayen, nonsèlman pou pèmèt moun reyisi nan travay lekòl yo, men tou nan lavi yo kòm granmoun, kòm manman ak papa pitit, kòm madanm ak mouche epi kòm manm nan yon kominote. Nou Kab espere, aprantisay nan divès pwogram sa yo kab ede manman ak papa pitit, pwofesè epi timoun (ki gen pou vin manman ak papa yon jou) pran plis prekosyon nan pran desizyon, nan rezoud pwoblèm lakay yo, nan lekòl, nan kominote yo, epi nan yon anvivonnman ki pi laj. Kalite pwogram sa yo, nonsèlman yo ap ede Ayiti, men tou, yo kab kreye fondasyon, tankou Rifkin fè remake li, pou tout moun sou latè pwoteje lasivilizasyon kont yon sistèm mondyal ki souvan vin ensousyan.*

## INTRODUCTION

In this volume we focus on the well-being of infants and children not only physically but intellectually, socially and emotionally. Many point to the lack of adequate internal and external resources of parents, and educators of children as the cause of problems in child well-being. The question addressed here is how to support Haitian parents, teachers and children and how to prevent such problems in the next generation. There is much research on the effectiveness of preschool education. Schweinhart, Montie, Xiang, Barnett, Belfield, & Nores, for example, in their 40 year study of the High Scope Perry Preschool Program have proven that preschool education has many positive outcomes [3]. It correlates positively and significantly with higher high school graduation rates, less crime, and more employment and work success for adults. This will not be the focus of this article.

Less well known are the positive results for education for parenting, empathy and care. While ways to facilitate the development of more caring relationships among parents, children, schools and communities have been described earlier [4, 5, 6, 7] it is hoped that a synthesis of original and recent findings and recommendations from leaders in economics, science and

the social sciences will validate the importance of focusing on parenting education as well as on empathy and care. Recent significant and positive research findings reinforce the benefit of programs to enhance the well-being of children through promoting their use of empathy and caring for self and others which will also be central to future effective parenting. In addition, the skills taught in these different programs, for example a caring process of decision making [7, 8, 9, 10] can be successfully used by parents and teachers as they care for children and each other in often very stressful and toxic environments.

## ANALYSIS

There are many suggestions as to how to care for children now and how to prepare them for their future. Of course eliminating poverty, increasing employment opportunities, and addressing the many current societal problems remain primary. Many point to teaching children math and science literacy as the key to their future success in this global world. Others point to the importance of the early years and preparation of parents to best maximize those early years for their children. In their book “the irreducible needs of children,” Brazelton and Greenspan have contended that human development literacy is even more ►

important for students than math, reading and science. They also have supported parenting classes in schools as a means to facilitate human development literacy [11].

Noted mathematician Nel Noddings, a strong advocate for teaching children how to care has asserted that

*“All students should be engaged in general education that guides them in caring for self, intimate others, global others, plants, animals and the environment, the human-made world and ideas. Moral life so defined should frankly be embraced as the main goal of education. Such an aim does not work against intellectual development or academic achievement. On the contrary, it supplies a firm foundation for both”<sup>1</sup>.*

Others have supported Noddings’ belief in social emotional skills better preparing a child to cope effectively with interpersonal stresses that might get in the way of academic success [12]. In fact, researchers have found that social emotional competence facilitates academic achievement by 11 % [13].

In the last decade it has interestingly been economists, neuroscientists and primatologists weighing in on this discussion and recommending teaching very young children the cognitive and social-emotional skills of empathy and care to achieve success, to help them as future parents and in fact to save our civilization [2, 14, 15]. Noted economist James Heckman has asserted that *“early mastery of a range of cognitive, social, and emotional competencies makes learning at later ages more efficient and therefore easier and more likely to continue”<sup>2</sup>.*

Heckman further notes that the *“adverse impacts of genetic, parental and environmental resources can be overturned through investments in quality early childhood education that provide children and their parents the resources they need to properly develop the cognitive and personality skills that create productivity”<sup>3</sup>.* He also asserts that *“since inequality starts at or before birth it can or should be corrected at or before birth with the resources of early childhood or parenting education”<sup>4</sup>.* In this article, successful parenting education programs that benefit the child, parent and teacher’s well-being as Heckman and others call for are described and recommended.

Riane Eisler, founder of the Partnership Way and the Caring Economy Campaign (<http://www.partnershipway.org/get-connected>) provides further support for this solution:

*“Certainly parenting courses for adults are important. But the adults who need these the most, are often the least likely to take them. So this schooling has to start much earlier, not only through a partnership process (which makes it possible for all*

*children to experience real one-to-one caring from their teachers) but also through the opportunity to experience the giving of caring themselves. This experiential learning of caring and care-giving behaviors as part of the school curriculum is important for all children, but it is essential for neglected and abused children as well as for children who, in their homes, have learned to associate caring with fear, coercion, and violence”<sup>5</sup>.*

This is consistent with Erikson and others who contend that we are born not needing just to be cared for but with a need to care for others [16]. Eisler’s “Caring and connected parenting guide,” part of the work of the Spiritual Alliance to Stop Intimate Violence taps into the latest neuroscience research and can be used by many programs to strengthen families. (<http://www.saiv.net/ccp.htm>). Dr. Edward Zigler has noted that

*“It is important to help children learn as much as possible about parenting to help prevent social problems like premature child bearing and child neglect and abuse. Now that we know more about brain development in the very young, it is critical that we teach our future parents the important role that parents play in stimulating and nurturing their children, and in preparing them to reach their full potential in school and later life”<sup>6</sup>.*

Brazelton and Greenspan’s conclusions from decades of theory, research and practice also support teaching children as early as preschool how to care for others. Both authors explain the necessity of early nurturing in this way: *“It’s this early reciprocal dialogue with emotional cueing, rather than any cognitive stimulation like flash cards, that leads to the growth of the mind and the brain and the capacities to reason and think.... Both emotional and intellectual development depend on rich, deep, nurturing relationships early in life and now neuroscience research is confirming this process”<sup>7</sup>.* Kohn adds that helping children imagine how someone else thinks, feels, or sees the world not only fosters caring but also promotes cognitive problem solving. It would also Kohn suggests promote more peaceful relations globally [17]. For children to learn this before they become parents is crucial. In addition, as parents and teachers are involved in these programs they too can learn this important information if they have not had his kind of experience earlier.

Siegel and Hartzell have contributed to the discussion and suggested solutions in their excellent book entitled “parenting from the inside out” [18]. Siegel explains that attachment involves contingent communication where *“the signals of a child are perceived, made sense of, and responded to in a timely and effective manner....When parents generally provide a sense of predictable contingency, the child feels understood, joined, and a sense of*

1. Noddings, N. (1992). *The challenge to care in schools: An alternative approach to education*. New York: New York Teachers College Press, p. 173.  
2. Heckman, J. (2006). Skill formation and the economics of investing in young disadvantaged children. *Science*, 312, p. 1900.  
3. Heckman, J. (2011). The economics of inequality: The value of early childhood education. *American Educator*, Spring, p. 35.  
4. *Idem*.

5. Eisler, R. (2000). *Tomorrow’s children: A blueprint for partnership education in the 21st century*. Boulder, CO: Westview, p. 232-233.  
6. Zigler, E. (1999). Testimony to the Connecticut Committee on Children. Retrieved February 14, 2007, from <http://preparetomorrowparents.org/what-experts-say/what-experts-say/>  
7. Brazelton, T. B., & Greenspan, S. I. (2000). *The irreducible needs of children: What every child must have to grow, learn and flourish*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books, p. 9.

*communion between parent and child is established*<sup>8</sup>. We as educators and counselors can help parents who have not formed those attachments in childhood “*by offering the opportunity to deepen self-understanding, to make sense of one’s life; our hopes is that parents could make the choice to enhance the security of attachment of their children while at the same time creating coherence and vitality in their own lives*”<sup>9</sup>.

Renowned primatologist, Frans De Waal asks “*Why did natural selection design our brains so we’re in tune with our fellow human beings, feeling distress at their distress and pleasure at their pleasure? If exploitation of others were all that mattered, evolution should have never gotten into the empathy business*”<sup>10</sup>. After reviewing work of many primatologists and social scientists De Waal concludes that “*it [empathy] probably started with the birth of parental care. During 200 million years of mammalian evolution, females sensitive to their offspring out-produced those who were cold and distant. Females who failed to respond never propagated their genes*”<sup>11</sup>. He went on to suggest that “*the evolution of attachment came with something the planet had never seen before: a feeling brain*”<sup>12</sup>.

A focus on empathy has also come from neuroscientists. Rifkin in his comprehensive book “The empathic civilization” [2] describes the significant work of Rizzolatti and his colleagues [19] when they discovered mirror neurons:

*“Mirror neurons allow humans--and other animals—to grasp the minds of others ‘as if’ their thoughts and behaviors were their own. The popular science press has begun to refer to mirror neurons as ‘empathy neurons.’ What is most striking, says Rizzolatti is that [m]irror neurons allow us to grasp the minds of others not through conceptual reasoning but through direct stimulation. By feeling, not thinking”*<sup>13</sup>.

Many also believe that like all child capacities, these tendencies towards empathy need to be nurtured. That is, both emotional literacy and the cognitive component of perspective taking. In American society and many other countries, the former, dealing with feelings, is often suppressed in children early in their lives. Focusing on oneself to the neglect of the other is also promoted. A focus on academic subjects to the neglect of human development literacy which includes understanding other’s feelings and being able to act on that information in a caring and empathic manner, has left many vulnerable and others remaining cold and distant from another’s plight.

8. Siegel, D. (2005). *Attachment and self-understanding: Parenting with the brain in mind*. Paper presented at the 24th Annual Conference of the Illinois Association for Infant Mental Health, Chicago, IL, September 30, p. 7.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

10. De Waal, F. (2009). *The age of empathy: Nature’s lessons for a kinder society*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, p. 43.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

13. Blakeslee, S. (2006). Cells that read minds. *The New York Times*, Jan. 10.

Rifkin has also used empathy as a critical way to view our economic history [2]. He believes that ironically, as technology connects humanity globally and as our empathic consciousness evolves, the question becomes can empathy and care help us unite in time to save a civilization from the earth’s destruction through human exploitation of others and of natural resources? His book gives us all the more reason to feel urgency to prepare this generation and the next to learn to more effectively nurture our capacities for empathy and care for the self, others and the world.

“Learning about parenting: Learning how to care” is a curriculum that answers the concerns raised above [8]. The program teaches children and youth ways to understand not only their own feelings but other person’s perspectives and feelings. Not only does this program prepare future parents to understand what children need in their first years to succeed as children and then as adults, but this curriculum teaches children critical thinking skills that will allow them to make good decisions in all areas of their lives including the important future role of parenting. Some of the thinking skills involved in parenting and learned in this curriculum include anticipating, brainstorming, causal reasoning, deductive reasoning, descriptive reporting, empathizing, evaluative thinking, imaginative thinking, inductive reasoning, interpretive thinking, judging, noting differences, noting similarities, sequencing, solving problems, planning, reflecting, and relational thinking. With all these skills and dispositions a person can not only succeed in their family but at work, in their communities and in the larger increasingly global society. This curriculum also provides opportunities for children to use the same caring process used by parents to care for themselves through avoidance of drug abuse and through healthy choices, care for classmates, and the environment.

Heath’s teacher manual [8] and books for parents and teachers [9, 10] provide a culturally sensitive caring process for describing situations, brainstorming options, identifying goals, as well as each person’s needs, feelings, developmental level, temperament, beliefs, physical condition and energy, etc. It provides the same user friendly guides/questions for everyone involved no matter what their education. It is an empowering program that puts the decision making in the parents and teachers hands but provides the process and guides for decision making.

This program for students in grades preschool through high school and for adults has been used in several settings in the United States with participants in several socio-economic statuses. I have used this curriculum with diverse at-risk African American and Latino students in Chicago, IL. I also used the curriculum with lower, middle and upper class students and families. In all settings I obtained very positive and significant responses from teachers, parents and students [7].

From very early on when I began working with Heath positive results were found with the learning to care curriculum. In ►



our first study with 474 5th through 7th grade students in Chicago [20] that was replicated in other populations of students and parents [7] we found the increased awareness of safety, curiosity and social needs of children after the program intervention. Prior to this curriculum used monthly across a nine month school year, students went from having little knowledge of children's needs to having very specific understanding of infant's and toddler's needs. In addition, it was clear that when students were given pre and post- tests they gave answers that were significantly more developmentally appropriate to parenting scenarios than prior to the program. In qualitative measures such as student journals, students raised themes of their own needs, and in social and safety needs not only of infants but of students of all ages. They also were much more conscious of the tremendous responsibilities of parents. While these parent-infant visits occur in the classroom, parenting educators work with school teachers to better understand the program and in several instances with small parent groups using Heath's adult version of the program [10]. In some schools the themes of care have become so pervasive after our training and program that it affected school philosophy and policies in dramatic ways where some schools created a comprehensive caring school model. Heath has also worked to adapt her curriculum for New York State's High School scope and sequence educational guides for parenting education which is mandated for high school graduation.

Mary Gordon developed an internationally renowned evidence-based curriculum entitled "Roots of Empathy" (ROE) in 1996. It also involves parent-infant visit classes in grades K-8 [21]. While Heath trains a liaison for each school, she also trains classroom teachers to run the classes so that they can make connections and weave in themes throughout the school year. ROE brings in specially trained teachers to facilitate the infant-visit classes. Findings from ROE are very impressive and are available on their website. <http://www.rootsofempathy.org/en/what-we-do/research.html>. This curriculum in English and French (more recently in German) has been recommended across Canada as addressing human development literacy, diversity and the uniqueness of individuals. The pillars of the program listed on the website are many including: emotional literacy (focusing on feelings), perspective taking (the cognitive aspect of empathy vital to conflict resolution), neuroscience telling us as Gordon says that "love grows brains," prevention of teen pregnancy, understanding of temperament and of attachment/attunement, the importance of male nurturance, participative democracy and inclusion. As one can see these ROE programs are designed to create caring citizens in all countries and it is understandable that Rifkin would advocate for its increased use worldwide [2].

If that is not enough to prove its importance, several research studies since 2000 have reported positive results. Schonert-Reichl, Smith, Zaidman-Zait and Hertzman studied 585 4th through 7th grade students 306 of whom participated in the ROE program [22]. Students showed significant improvements

in understanding of causes of infant crying, and improvements in peer and teacher evaluations for pro-social behavior. Children in the experimental groups decreased in physical, relational, proactive and reactive aggression while control group students increased in all areas. Children in the experimental group showed more significant increases in pro-social behavior than control group students. Students in the experimental group manifested significantly more increases in social and emotional competence than the comparison group. Students in the ROE program felt their classmates and teachers were more caring than the control group. Finally, ROE students had more information as to how to comfort a crying baby and had more competence in other skills in the parenting role.

Rolheiser and Wallace of the Ontario Institute for the Study of Education evaluated the ROE curriculum. They found that teaching empathy in a parenting class facilitated social-emotional and cognitive development in students [23]. They testified that ROE covered all of the components of social-emotional learning including self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills and responsible decision-making. The ROE program has been expanding internationally at a very dramatic pace and has served 445,000 students.

Houston, Texas based Childbuilders (<http://childbuilders.org/solutions/parenting-education/>) is another evidence based program of parenting education from K-grade 12. Their motto is preparing, protecting and empowering. Their focuses are on 1) education to help children avoid bullying and abuse, 2) education to help children maintain healthy relationships and 3) helping children develop life skills that will help them become nurturing parents. There have been 16 studies of this program including longitudinal research following high school students five years after their classes, where they found that the child development knowledge and attitudes (e.g. the use of nurturing discipline techniques) persisted over the five years. What makes this program unique is its reliance on providing children 27 of the Search Institute's 40 developmental assets <http://www.search-institute.org/research/developmental-assets> needed for success and well-being.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I have responded to the goals for this volume by suggesting that there are concrete ways to improve the lives of parents, children and teachers through helping them further develop their capacities for empathy and care. While there has been solid evidence for decades on the success of teaching children how to care more effectively and how to use that learning when they are parents themselves, we continue to fight the pressure in society to promote academic skills to compete in a global society to the exclusion of social-emotional skills. It is hoped that the testimony of economists, neuroscientists, scientists and social scientists and the evidence based research will serve as a tipping point to get countries to adopt these preventative programs. Helping to build children and parent's capacity to care

can only help them succeed in all walks of life. Let us look to the example of Canada for supporting teaching children empathy and caring schools from early on. We hope Haiti will evaluate these programs for possible usefulness to improve the lives of infants and children. Several other programs are noted on the website of [www.preparetomorrowparents.org](http://www.preparetomorrowparents.org) and in my own book on the subject [7] as well as in the appendix for my book at <http://www.sagepub.com/books/Book228935?siteId=sage-us&prodTypes=any&q=mcdermott&fs=1>. It is hoped that you can choose one or combine these programs to surround your children, parents and teachers with a web of care. In addition McDermott [4, 7] suggests how teachers and parents can use the same model of care (Heath's Caring Process of Decision Making) to work more effectively together. ■

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**Dana R. McDermott, Ph. D., C.F.L.E.** obtained her doctorate in Social and Developmental Psychology from Loyola University Chicago. She is certified as a Family Life Educator from the National Council on Family Relations. Dr. McDermott is an Associate Professor at the School for New Learning at DePaul University Chicago. She was involved in developing and/or supporting many parenting organizations including the National Parenting Educators Network and Prepare Tomorrow's Parents. Dr. McDermott has been consulting nationally and internationally to support parents and future parents across the United States, in Russia, and in Australia. Her focus now is to prepare teachers to advance the teaching of caring in schools from preschool through high school. [Dmcderm2@depaul.edu](mailto:Dmcderm2@depaul.edu)

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