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THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

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IMPLEMENTING CHILD RIGHTS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

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Abstract

The rights of the child are the fundamental rights of the individual. If the child is not given an education which respects those rights, he/she will not be able to know what it means to be respected and to respect. The first step to implement children's rights is training educators to solve children problems and prevent the formation of psychopathologies during a child's developmental stage.

1. An "environment" protecting the rights of the child

The Convention of the Rights of the Child, approved by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989, defines parameters that guard against abuse and carelessness. In general it stresses that the responsibility of caring and protecting for children lies with the family, while at the same time respecting their cultural, political and material differences.

Beyond the fundamental material rights, such as food, water, health, education, identity and protection from all forms of exploitation and abuse, the UN Convention states the right of the child to live and develop to his/her maximum potential (Art.6), to express his/her opinion (Art. 12) and to be informed (Art. 13). To implement these rights, parents, teachers and all people involved in the social environment of the child need to be empowered with psychological tools. Unfortunately reality shows us how many violations of children's rights exist in the upper classes, in wealthy families, and where education, health, food and water are not lacking.

The rights of the child are the fundamental rights of the individual, such as dignity, respect, freedom and happiness, but their implementation depends upon how much parents are able to nurture the developing brain of their child and present information fit for his/her age. An approach is needed which enables the child to understand ideas, different behaviours and situations, rather than forcing him/her to respect rules and principles without understanding them. From a neuro-psycho-physiological standpoint two main obstacles exist:

1) It is difficult for a parent/adult to respect these rights if they themselves are a victim of psychological mechanisms, of which they are unaware, which hamper their perspective of others whom are different. As a consequence this adult will shape the way of thinking and behaviour of the child.

2) Only a minor portion of the information reaching a child's brain is coming from his/her parents. In fact the child passively receives information that we could define as "pathological", which comes from the media and from role models offered by a culture associating power with happiness.

2. Parents/Children relationships

Parent/child relationships are bounded by two extreme cases: i) an attitude of neglect, indifference and lack of attention; and ii) an over-protection and involvement which does not allow the child to develop a sense of autonomy and self-assurance. This behaviour expresses the adult's personality, and thus he/she cannot help transmitting these values and conditionings to the child.

We should give the developing child not only rights, but also empowerment. If the child is not given an education which respects those rights which he/she inherently feels, he/she will never be able to know in the future what it means to be respected and to respect.

If the child is taught to express egoism, prejudice, racism (not only against different ethnic groups, but mostly against different ideas), if the child is offered psychological violence as a behavioural model and as a way of problem solving, if the child is taught to see interpersonal

relationships as only an instrument for personal benefit, if the child is taught to achieve success in order to be considered “important” and so on, it means that we are educating the child to disrespect the rights of both itself and others.

How can a child, the adult of tomorrow, be guilty of not being able to respect when it has not been allowed to understand its own rights?

The brain of a 4-5 year old child is already full of information which creates conflicts between what the child feels and what he/she is given as a behavioural model. A child “absorbs” the adults’ misconceptions, which manifest themselves by anguish, distress and fears because the developing brain is not yet able to find many solutions.

The ability for abstract thought is already established around 6-7 years of age, which theoretically could mean that children of this age are able, for instance, to willingly kill. In my opinion, it is not really a question of being able to think abstractly, but rather a matter of having absorbed misconceptions and conditionings from adults prior to having the chance of living a “normal” situation which would have given the child a frame of reference for comparison.

Violence, social climbing and the power of money are normal conditions to many children nowadays. They are able to want only what is in consonance with the conditionings they uncritically received from adults, and they don’t even know that they could want something else.

Only few parents are able to detect these signs of distress. It is not sufficient to check the child’s progress at school, but it is also necessary to observe its way of reasoning, what makes it suffer and why, how it faces its problems, to what extent it participates in its environment and its level of understanding of other people’s motivations.

The psychological wellbeing of the child during this crucial period risks grave problems, because to the parents every behaviour of their child is normal until something very tragic happens. In fact it is considered normal for children to tell their parents to “go to hell”, to not accept people, to act polite with an ulterior motive, to hide their feeling to avoid consequences, while at the same time it is considered normal for a child to be rational and clever but insensitive and selfish. Everything seems normal because we expect children to improve as they grow up, but we must realise that the respect for human rights stems from education, from the principles we instil in their young brains and from the abilities we nurture.

In order to respect a child’s rights we have to understand that age is not the main difference between an adult and a child, because nowadays children are confronted with an adult’s perverse world which has an unlimited power of persuasion. As a consequence children show the limitations and conditionings of adults, yet their mental abilities are still those of a child.

3. The “pathological” information coming from environment

Every child should have the right to play, to happiness, to the expression of one’s own opinion and thinking and to the respect of one’s own dignity. Parents can guarantee all this only with great difficulty, because they often find themselves alone in coping with the huge amount of information that the child has absorbed from other sources. Furthermore they have very few means to fight the highly suggestive power of this “pathological” information.

The amount of news and images a child takes in nowadays is much higher than twenty years ago: Our children are no longer interested in an innocent game without “victims”, but rather want a game capable of making them feel invincible, strong and capable of everything, a game which can give them strong emotions.

Even when children are playing traditional games (for instance with dolls) we can see episodes of intolerance, discrimination, the incapacity to lose, aggression, the impossibility to say “I was wrong”, and the need to overwhelm peers. This is undoubtedly an infringed right, since children cannot wish good for others or seek dialogue if they have not been taught to.

In a recent study we carried out in Italy on 310 children, we showed that television, and in particularly violent images of films, cartoons, video games (49% of which were scenes in which the victim was abused, suffered and died) produces psychological and somatic effects from which the child is defenceless. 70% of the children had difficulties in falling asleep, phobias, nightmares, fear that the same scene could happen at home, fear of the dark and other symptoms.

In many cases these symptoms may lead to aggressive behaviour. In fact in the long run the violence presented on TV is seen by the child as a quick and effective way of problem solving, in contrast with the slow and labour-intensive approach of discussion and mediation (which does not give immediate gratification).

Psychotherapists concerned with developmental age subjects have to face an alarming datum: new pathologies are spreading in the first years of life which make it impossible for a child to live in the world of reality, since he/she is totally involved in the fiction presented on TV, in movies or in video games.

That deviant information also affects behaviour, as in attention disorders, increased aggressiveness, reduced tolerance to change and reduced comprehension of other people. These conditions can often reach such a degree of severity that psychopharmacological treatment is required.

The increasing “bully” phenomenon confirms the negative influence of violence, which presented as a positive sign of power and pleasure. Recent research performed by the University of Florence showed that 41% of primary school children suffer intimidating behaviour from both boys and girls.

To confirm the above we must consider that the psychological features of the bullying child are unfortunately not associated with discomfort or a social or communication deficit, but rather with a behaviour which is opportunist, violent and unscrupulous, often found in a “good family”.

4. The right to be educated to respect other people rights

On the basis of these data it is clear that parents and teachers often have to respect children’s right without having the proper tools to educate them (ex ducere = to bring out), that is to say to bring out unexpressed potentialities of a developing brain.

To educate does not mean to instruct. By instruction we mean to condition the brain to learn human rights, whereas by education we mean to promote the experience of human rights, which then become inviolable for oneself and for others.

It is the right of a child not to be conditioned by violence, power, force or pleasure associated with information not fit for his/her mental age, to be educated so that he/she can comprehend his/her surroundings, and to express his/her thinking while respecting the different ideas of others.

For this reason the first step to implement children’s rights consists of training educators (who presently lack tools to safeguard the rights of children) to solve children problems and prevent the formation of psychopathologies during a child’s developmental stage.

To this end the Centre for Human Evolution studies (C.E.U.) has developed the field of Neuro-psycho-physiology based on thirty years of multidisciplinary and integrated studies and research. This discipline is rooted in an understanding of the higher functions of the human brain, of how all levels of behaviour (rational, emotional, social) are produced, and of how the individual develops the awareness of both him/herself and his/her environment. It gives tools to the various institutions to substantially promote an education focused on the respect for, and spreading of, human rights.

After the International Association Ius Primi Viri (I.P.V.) launched the Decade of Human Rights Education with an European Conference in Rome (Barberini Palace, 3-4 December 1993), as well as the constitution of an International Standing Committee dedicated to its implementation, C.E.U. and I.P.V. have worked intensely and closely together to train educators

and teachers of all school levels using an original scientific methodology which translates abstract principles into consciousness and behaviour¹. (1)

5. *Psychology for parents*

According to neuro-psycho-physiology, a child's development includes not only so-called psychomotor development but also every cognitive and relational acquisition, thereby rendering the child progressively more autonomous, sure of him/herself and in growing interaction with the surrounding environment. Every child is a unique and unrepeatable subject, an original combination of many factors related to heredity (genetics) and education (environment). The instant of birth marks, in a way, the passage from the former to the latter. In fact education, habits and environment not only become predominant in determining the psychophysical development of the individual (genotype), but may even modify the trend of potential genetic components (phenotype).

Developing a responsible society is surely a very ambitious task, as institutions and services (if and when possible) typically intervene after a problem is encountered rather than searching for methods of prevention. An education towards prevention does not yet exist, even if this would clearly be more useful and cheaper.

6. *Motivation and self-esteem*

A human being is born with a "basic education" determined by the genetic memories of around 14 billion neurons, which can potentially make him/her a "genius" and a "sage". One of the prerequisites needed to develop intelligence and wisdom is the creation of a "non-conditioned" motivation linked to the respect of genetic drives, that is the universal values valid for every individual regardless of his/her nationality, culture, religion or age.

We can say that motivation is the motor of life, as it is at the root of learning, growth, planning and participation in life itself. But how is motivation born? Motivation must be born by the gradual awareness of the usefulness of what the child learns, and is linked to the drives promoting personality development. The neuro-psycho-physiology of behaviour stresses that genetic drives represent the inborn aspect of motivation, as they push the child, since the first instant of birth, to explore the environment as if he/she was a little scientist moved by a "physiological" interest in everything that surrounds him/her. In this sense perceptive development witnesses the extraordinary competence and readiness of the child to notice every information, thereby allowing him/her to gradually acquire consciousness and awareness of the environment.

But this "inborn motivation" may be extinguished or deformed when the child is induced to learn behavioural, ethical or social concepts and patterns for conditioning objectives. A classical example of this is the child studying to get a prize or racing against other children to win. One could want the same things without conditioning objectives, such as studying because one wants to learn and acquire useful tools for his/her life within society or racing with friends for the pleasure of playing together, being active or improving one's physical well-being.

At the base of the various motivations and objectives of a child, be they conditioned or not, there is the search for the assertion and respect of one's dignity, assertion and respect of the human being's genetic drives. It is these drives that determine behaviour, and if they are limited and repressed the individual, from the very first years of life, will develop endless strategies to try to satisfy such drives, including anti-social or deviant behaviour

This is why no one (much less a child!) accepts to obey, to be punished, mocked, rebuked or humiliated but we all desire to feel important, to feel that we have value. It is here where we link to another basic theme: self-esteem. Self-esteem must be grounded in the awareness and consciousness of the child's own "value" as a human being, of his/her own dignity and personality, not on external factors, while a number of studies made in this field show that at the present moment both self-knowledge and self-esteem largely depend on the way others perceive and react

¹ For more information please visit our websites: www.ceu.it; www.dirittiumaniipv.org and www.ceucorsi.ws

to our behaviour.

When going to school (and even before) children start to base their self-esteem on their cognitive and social competences. "Social confrontation" starts to establish if one is more or less competent than other children, if one makes more or less mistakes in an exercise, if one is faster or slower in a race. The tendency towards social confrontation, which can play a determining role in modelling self-esteem if an adequate education is not given, increases with age and becomes stronger if teachers create a competitive climate in the classroom or on the playground. Furthermore it has been found that children with the highest self-esteem are generally those who do well at school and have many friends.

From this it emerges that present educational methods induce the individual to base his/her self-esteem only on external factors, particularly related to the quality of interpersonal relations, the ability to control his/her surroundings, mastering emotional reactions, success at school, family life, physical skills and personal attraction and charm. As such one acquires value for what he/she does and not for what he/she is, i.e. one is measured on the basis of social dignity while personal human dignity is completely neglected. This is in spite of the fact that it is fundamental to the goals of education and the correct development of self-esteem that one has a clear awareness and understanding of the difference between these two kinds of dignity.

Just by existing biologically a human being has in him/herself dignity. While **social dignity** is acquired during life and depends on the social, cultural and political context, **human dignity** as a value of life is inborn and untouchable, has an endless value, cannot be traded or sold, is not subject to limitations in time and space, cannot be reduced or increased, and cannot and must not be questioned by anyone; instead it must be loved and respected.

This must be the constant reference point for parents, teachers and everyone coming near a child: love and respect for their human dignity. This means that every child must always be evaluated as a person independently from what he/she does. For example if he/she hits another child we must discuss the action which is not right, without injuring his/her esteem, on the basis of the principle that we must fight against a person's action, and not the person. A child who always feels loved and respected will not have to waste energy looking for, often unsuccessfully, love and respect by pursuing aims which are not useful for his/her growth. He/she will instead be able to gradually develop a self-esteem based on his/her potentialities, and will be able to develop the will to verify the consequences of his/her actions and to continuously improve, without fearing to be wrong or to be judged and without having to depend on the approval of others.

7. *An education to become adults: no more "prizes and punishments" but "prizes and not prizes"*

Children live in a world full of stimuli they do not understand and do not know, which creates in them fears and uncertainties. Only after understanding them will they be able to cope and solve them, "choosing" their parents proposals and solutions.

Up to that moment the greatest damage is caused by coercive stimulus, engendering only pain and very often aggressiveness. It is only a natural mechanism if a child rejects what makes him/her suffer. For instance, it is better to not bathe him/her and instead wash the child with a sponge if the imposition of a bath creates a situation of fear, tension and crying, for this also causes stress and worry in the parents, which are not useful for a serene education.

How much damage is provoked in that little brain, complete in its structure, but not mature in its elaborations and defences!

The child defends him/herself from everything he/she does not know and is not "normal" for his/he habits or familiar stimuli. Lights, sounds, attitudes, manipulations must be attentively modulated, according to the child's status and the aim we propose to ourselves.

For instance, we have to stimulate with sweetness and persuasion in order to make the child

accept a behavioural innovation, as this normally often provokes defence, uneasiness and pain. Great attention and identification with the child is therefore needed to understand the difficulties inherent in the adults' proposals.

We must bear in mind that whim does not exist in the newborn, but rather pain, fear and sometimes drama do. And it is precisely in these first pains that the start of difficulties can be hidden, only to resurface far in the future.

Children's defences are a very important and serious problem. In fact a child's defences are an instinctive process which follow a stimulus/answer mechanism. It is the parent's duty to help him/her to control all his/her instinctive defences through intermediation and the development of both reason and the conscious act.

Initially the child is unable to organize his/her intervention on the environment. His/her gestures are aggressive, often domineering and selfish, with the "desire" to do everything he/she likes and to submit everyone around him/her to his/her wishes. All that exists is a stimulus which results in an answer, thereby "leading" the child that is unable to select or choose them. He/she is used to be taken care of in all his/her needs, and thus cannot suddenly be worried by his/her mother, father, or surroundings. He/she cannot surely mediate between his/her needs and those of others.

To consider others he/she will have to become a subject, that is all his/her answers will have to become deeds formed by conscious choice. Instead of rebuking a child because he/she did not give something to another child we must serenely make him/her perceive the joy of making others happy. And every time this happens a gratification must be given. Gratification does not mean a prize in toys, but rather a gentle voice full of love in which he/she will recognize the confirmation of his/her right deed. Similarly it doesn't help to yell, punish or hit when facing wrong behaviour from the child, but rather it is enough to not "gratify" the child. The little one will notice the lack of gratification, will compare what he/she has experienced as joy with that which is not gratifying, and little by little will try to produce gratifying behaviour.

The problems of children and youths starts to build up in the first stages of development. Parents' lack of ability in gradually giving information to their child's brain in order to promote autonomy, as well as the perception and building of subjectivity is a serious threat to the shaping of a sensitive and aware human being.

At birth the brain contains a wonderful developmental project that "unfortunately" can only be realised in conjunction with the family and the surrounding social environment.

Society and family should take it upon themselves, as stated by the UN Convention on the Rights of Child, the responsibility for protection and care of the child to enable it to become the subject of its life and not an object of conditionings imported from adults. In this way we will eventually reach the psychophysical and spiritual wellbeing of the child.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The first step is the **educating of teachers**, giving them the appropriate tools to help solve children's problems.
2. Understand the real meaning of **education**: ex-ducere, which means to bring out the fundamental values inborn in every human being as opposed to **instructing**.
3. Make the child aware of the value of his/her life, understanding what **human dignity** means and the difference between **social** and **human dignity**.
4. Always educate giving **physiological information** that should be proposed and never imposed.
5. Create a **fit environment** to protect children's rights.