

IFTA - LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD 2011 ACCEPTANCE SPEECH ALICE VAN DER PAS

I feel deeply touched by the IFTA Award.

It is good to know that my writing about families and parents has inspired many, and continues to do so.

And is it a coincidence that the previous speaker, Ms. Jordan, is the representative of a Foundation, which uses its financial might to make the child 'everybody's business'? - As you know, the 1989 United Nations Convention for the Rights of Children stipulates that children are not only entitled to all the help and support they themselves need, but also to the help or support their parents need. In other words: professional help for parents, too, is 'everybody's business'.

I gratefully use the opportunity to expand on this point.

PARENTS: INVENTING AND RE-INVENTING CHILD REARING

Ever since Adam and Eve, parenting has been the very backbone of mankind. The mere fact that our species survived evolution, that we were not eaten up by insects or trampled by mammoths - is due to parents protecting their babies, to parents teaching the older ones to share food, and parents helping their children bring up the next generation. That we did not remain stuck in the post-paradise wilderness is because generation after generation of parents figured out how to grow something edible, and because they taught their children the use of axe and hammer. Adam's grand-grand-grandchild Noah had his three sons help him build an ark, large enough for family and livestock to survive forty days of rain!

But biblical parents slipped up, too. When, during a party after the flood, Noah drank too much, he was ridiculed by his youngest son - tipsy himself. Had Noah missed the fact that the boy was getting older? Or did he and his wife disagree on the use of alcohol by teenagers? Well, parental failure is traceable through each and every chapter of our history - and it is what brought us together here, today: family therapists from forty-four countries!

Because, yes, parents *continue to* outwit professional expertise. They are the clients who cause professionals the most headaches: they sabotage therapy, dismiss expert advice, and have a unique capacity to polarize clinical teams. 'Those parents!' someone grumbles; 'Just put yourself in their shoes!' someone else protests.

Whatever one's expertise or shoes, the complexities of working with parents are daunting.

In the meantime, parents *re-invent* child rearing again and again. Compelled by circumstance, they adjust, kind of, their child-rearing: to the ways of each particular child, and to the needs of a particular time and place. From the invention of the wheel to the invention of the cell phone, parents have re-adjusted their ways so as to help their child fit into a different world than they themselves were brought up in.

Each child's upbringing, thus, is an experiment: shaping a new generation to the traditions of yesterday, the realities of today, and hopes for a *better* tomorrow.

Am I stretching it when I call 'parenting' one of the world's natural resources? Like water, parenting is everywhere, and supporting life itself.

WISHFUL THINKING REGARDING PARENTING

I do not have to tell you, however, what is happening to the globe's water: we take it for granted, and we neglect it. The same is true of parenting, alas. And as I am one of the oldest

pieces of furniture in the house of family therapy, I feel entitled to voice concern. - Bear with me, please.

We are naïve with respect to parents - not just you and I, but 'we' in general. Let me give you three examples of widely held myths about parenting.

1 - The myth of risk-free parenting

'As long as you keep them from harm, feed them well, and exert some control', a widely held, wishful notion says, 'they'll grow up OK'. And hardly anyone knows that, even in medically up-to-date Holland, 1 out of every 16 children dies before the age of nineteen - of a physical illness. *Not* as the result of a traffic accident; *nor* through violence, suicide or drugs - a *physical* illness: an acute, lethal infection, a progressive disease, or prolonged ailment - 1 out of every 16! And when we pause to think of the burden this places on these youngsters themselves, on their siblings and parents... - and when we then consider the *much* larger number of children who do not die young but who have a life-long handicap, disease or disturbance - 2 out of 16 perhaps? - you will understand why I see 'the child' as risk factor No.1 for parenting. - Risk factor No. 2 is that professionals are not aware of these facts.

2 - The myth of the innocent parent

Professionals assume that the motherhood constellation, plus undiluted sensitivity, old-fashioned patience, and love (of course), guarantee a securely attached baby, and its development into a responsible person.

My colleague, Dr. Katie Lee Weille - recently appointed Lector 'Parenthood and Professional Work with Parents' at the Leiden University of Applied Science - stressed in her inaugural addressⁱ the importance of ambivalence as 'perhaps the most central experience of parenting, careening back and forth between intense enjoyment and loving feelings, *and* furious, frustrated and even hateful ones' (24). This often-condemned emotional state is indispensable, Weille explains, because '... hatred is but a temporary obliteration of the steady base of parental ambition ... [And] feeling safe or allowed to have ambivalence exerts a containing effect on the experience' (29) of hatred for one's child. Ambivalence as a safety valve! Indeed: *not* the mythically-innocent parent, but the one who can allow hatred, best safeguards her or his affection - *and* the child!

3 - The myth of peace and quiet at home

'Control' and 'structure' - as long as these are intact, popular wisdom tells us, children become orderly citizens. The reality is quite different, as the following two findings may illustrate.

- The researchers Tizard & Hughesⁱⁱ observed that the *young* child has, on average, 27 exchanges per hour with the mother, with every 'dialogue' lasting about 16 'turns' - adding up to 200 turns per hour for mom. And 11-year old boys, Patterson & Forgatchⁱⁱⁱ observed, do not do what they are told about half of the time. And because demanding compliance requires so much energy, parents switch to bartering - and the children to whining, sulking, crying, sighing, pouting, shouting - until a deal is reached.

Because not every parent is a Sokrates, many such 'dialogues' sound like a nasty argument, repetitive drone, or stubborn silence. And yet, it is *not* through peace and quiet, or parental control that children become orderly citizens, as these findings suggest, but through ordinary bartering-dialogues.

A CASE OF THEORETICAL NEGLECT?

The three myths - about parenting as ideally risk-free, innocent and peaceful - tell us that psychology has neglected to develop knowledge about the parental experience of child

rearing.^{iv} In fact, psychology hardly distinguishes between on the one hand child rearing by teachers and child-carers, and on the other the experience of bringing up a child from babyhood to adulthood - mini-step by mini-step! (Not counting the child who dies or who is long-term handicapped, ill or troubled.)

We tend to view parents as 'child rearers', period, and to forget that they are partner, too, ex-partner, wage-earner, sibling of their siblings, child of their parents, and neighbour, colleague, friend, soccer coach, or what have you. Consequently, the parental capacity for change tends to be *overestimated* by professionals, and the need for support or 'respite care' is *underestimated*. On the other hand: when we see a couple, or individual client, we are prone to forget that they may also be *parents*, and that the problem at hand might have its roots in the domain of parenting.

In other words: problems *with* and *about* child rearing do disturb other areas of a parent's life, and marital dilemmas often point to unresolved parenting dilemmas.

After all: cooperating as partners and cooperating as parents are two, vastly different, and often separate assignments.

FROM LAGGING BEHIND TO CATCHING UP

Supported by a great many colleagues from various disciplines, I have been working - for 24 years now - on a theory of parenting which might explain why some parents fail where others do not, and which spells out basic principles of professional help for parents. Just two months ago, Dr. Weille presented her inaugural address with the daring title *Making sense of Parenthood*. It contains a crash course on parenting theory for all of you who feel they lag behind on this subject - and it may even be of use in the breathtakingly rich program for this conference - with its 65-plus workshops and 50-plus posters.

'Parent' or 'parenting' are mentioned only 11 times, I noticed, even though problems of parenting loom behind many a workshop title.

Sessions on 'Abuse and violence', for example, raise immediate questions about how these issues affect parenting. They do! Workshops on 'Couples' beg the question of whether, and how these people's couple-hood coexists, or clashes, with parenthood. And, is not the *central* issue of 'Divorce' *how* to prevent the divorce of partnership and parenting!

My conclusion: *parents* make families, and *parents* break them up; *parents* bring up children, or keep them dependent; *parents* civilize them, or neglect them, *parents* cherish children or abuse them, and we count on these same people, *parents*, to achieve more than the ordinary whenever something is amiss with a child - should we not conclude that fathers and mothers and parenting are as much 'everybody's business' as children are?

They certainly are *every* family therapist's business!

I sincerely hope, therefore, that in the near future the IFTA will dedicate one of its conferences to the parental experience of child rearing.

ⁱ Weille, K.L.H. (2011). *Making sense of parenthood. On ambivalence and resourcefulness*. Amsterdam: SWP.

ⁱⁱ Tizard, B. & Hughes (1986). *Young children learning; talking and thinking at home and at school*. London: Fontana Press.

ⁱⁱⁱ Patterson, G.R. & S. Forgatch (1985). Predicting future clinical adjustment from treatment and process variables. *Psychological Assessment* 7: 275-285.

^{iv} Pas, Alice van der (2003). *A serious case of neglect: the parental experience of child rearing. Outline for a theory of parenting*. Delft: Eburon (Distributed by University of Chicago Press).