

Compassion Deficit Disorder

What causes it? What can we do about it?



“I find I’m spending more and more time helping my children settle disputes. Some kids seem to have fewer social skills than the children I had when I started teaching 15 years ago. They just grab what they want or hurt other kids as soon as they can’t get their own way, or they try to bully their way into getting what they want. I keep telling them to ‘use words, not fists’ but it’s often like talking to a wall. I think some kids actually feel scared by what’s going on.” (from a Kindergarten Teacher)

Changing Times

Many teachers tell me they spend too much time trying to maintain a sense of safety in their classrooms and admit to resorting to more “time outs” and harsher “discipline techniques” than in the past. While learning how to interact in positive ways is a vital developmental task of early childhood, children seem to have more trouble getting involved with group activities or sharing materials. Teachers also say they are seeing younger children exhibit the kind of bullying and teasing that used to be characteristic of older children. Children get teased, ridiculed and rejected for not looking right or not having the right logos on their lunchboxes or clothes. And, an apparent increase in antisocial behavior has led some schools to abolish recess because children are being aggressive and hurting each other on the playground (Zimmerman, et al., 2005).

What is going on? Why are teachers reporting these social problems? How did things get this way? What is causing some children to develop social behavior disturbances that I have come to characterize as “Compassion Deficit Disorder”?

Learning to Be Connected or Disconnected

Here are two scenarios with babies fussing in their cribs. If things continue for the baby as described below, which baby do you think is more likely to be the one to cause trouble in the classroom described by the teacher above:

Baby #1 is crying in his crib. His father picks him up and cuddles him. The baby lets out a few more yelps and his father begins to sing a soothing song. As the singing continues, the baby begins to watch his father's face, and smiles and coos. They begin smiling and cooing a little chorus together as they look at each other. In this situation, the father serves as the comforter of the baby as they have a mutual give-and-take exchange that ultimately leads to a contented baby and parent.

Baby #2 is crying in her crib. Her mother comes in and pushes buttons on the electronic crib toy that the family received as a baby gift. Lights start flashing, music plays and pictures appear. The baby quickly turns to look at it, stops crying as images and sounds keeps thing going fast and furious. The "bells and whistles" seem to startle Baby #2 into silence. Every time a button is pushed, the images, bells and whistles grab her attention. There is little or no give-and-take interaction with her mother or the sense of comfort and warmth it can bring. The baby does stop the crying but she is not learning how to connect with her mother as they adapt their behavior in a mutually rewarding way (Levin & Rosenquest, 2001).

If you decided that baby #2 is more likely than baby #1 to be causing trouble in the classroom described at the beginning, you are correct. Children may be born with the predisposition for learning how to have positive relationships with others. But if and how that predisposition is developed depends on their experience with others—for instance, how much they interact with others, how the person they are interacting with responds to their behavior, and how they see people treating each other (i.e., how Baby #1's father responds and interacts with him). Increasingly, children learn what they need to say and do to others to get their own needs met, and to work out problems with others in a give-and-take manner—and to empathize with how another person is feeling based on their behavior (Bowlby, 1982). Of course, children's level of development will affect the way in which they understand and work on social relationships; for instance, their early egocentrism can cause them to focus more on how things affect themselves, not others. But appropriate social experiences help them learn positive social skills at their current level of development.

It is vital that children have real life, meaningful experiences right from the start that help them learn these skills, because research suggests that patterns of behavior by age eight are related to behavior in adulthood (Eron, Gentry & Schlegel, 1994). Baby #1 shows us how this process begins as he and his dad develop their own special way of interacting and attaching.

Unfortunately, if Baby #2 continues along the track with flashy toys—with more machines, gizmos and screens—she is less likely to learn how to connect with people, to learn how to build caring and connected relationships, or to be able to work things out in an age appropriate way. Thus, she would be more likely to be one of the difficult children described by the teacher above; for instance, getting into frequent conflicts with other children over sharing toys or doing mean-spirited things to hurt others' feelings.

What's Going on Today?

I have come to characterize the problems many of today's children are having with social relationships, learning to decenter, and empathizing with others as *Compassion Deficit Disorder*. There are several factors contributing to the situation:

- Children are spending increasing amounts of time with more and more technology and screens at younger and younger ages (Levin, 2013). We see this beginning with Baby #2. At the very least, this means that children have less time to interact with others in the real world where they would have opportunities to build age-appropriate give-and-take social interactions and relationships with others. It also means that children become more and more dependent on screens and develop fewer interests and skills using their own devices.
- As children are glued to screens, there is much they can see that models anti-social, mean-spirited, and highly stereotyped behavior. This content can teach anti-social lessons that children bring to their relationships and interactions with others.
- When children do play, many of the toys marketed today are highly realistic replicas of what they see on screens. These toys can channel children into imitating what they saw rather than engaging in rich, creative play in which they are the problem finders and problem solvers—two essential skills of positive social relationships (Levin, 2009).
- The many families that are experiencing financial and personal stress in these times often need to rely on screens to occupy their children and also have less time to oversee what their children watch. Thus, these children are more subject to the lessons that screens and popular culture have to teach.
- Whether it is to develop talents and give their children what parents think are special early advantages, or to keep them from being glued to screens at home, or just for enjoyment, many families (especially those that are well-resourced) are planning more and more structured and organized activities for their children outside of the home at younger ages. While children may learn valuable skills from these activities, they are often controlled by adults and have prescribed actions where children do not have opportunities to organize or

learn how to organize their own activities and interactions with other children. Again, in this situation, these children have less opportunity to develop the skills that taking charge of their own actions can teach.

What Can We Do?

Often, when children behave in ways that hurt or upset others—when they exhibit *compassion deficit disorder*—adults respond by blaming the children and punishing them for what they did. This response assumes that the children both understand what they are doing and choose to do it. By punishing or shaming them, the thinking goes, children will behave with compassion the next time. But given what we know about how children learn from active experience, and what I have described above about the experiences today's children are and are not having regarding social relationships, this non-compassionate response is exactly the opposite response children and society need!

Instead, we need to work to:

- Limit exposure to the high tech, media and commercial cultures as much as possible when children are young. The longer we can delay this exposure, the more opportunities children have to build a healthy sense of self, quality play, and a repertoire of skills for relating with others (See Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children's Entertainment; www.TRUCEteachers.org).
- Help children make sense of the things to which they are exposed. One of the best ways to do this is to *stay connected* with children around these issues. For instance, we can have conversations with children that allow us to discover and value what they know and think, and then base our responses on what children say.
- Influence the lessons that children are learning about relationships and how to participate in them. Too often, schools are sacrificing opportunities for children to develop social knowledge and skills in favor of intensified academic instruction (See Defending the Early Years; www.deyproject.org). The social curriculum is now so important, and there are many resources to help with this.
- Connect with other adults in children's lives—such as other family members, other parents and teachers - to support each other's efforts to promote children's positive social development and relationships.
- Reach out within communities—with organizations and policymakers—to try to change, in big and little ways, the current economic environment that has made the marketing of technology

and media culture such powerful forces in children's lives (see Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (www.commercialfreechildhood.org)).

References

Bowlby, J. (1982). *Attachment and Loss. Vol. 1: Attachment* (2nd Ed.). New York: Basic Books (originally published in 1969).

Eron, L, Gentry, J. & Schlegel, P. (Eds.). (1994). *Reason to Hope: A Psychosocial Perspective on Violence and Youth*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Levin, D.E. (2008). "Compassion Deficit Disorder? The Impact of Consuming Culture on Children's Relationships" *Risking Human Security: Attachment and Public Life*. Marcie Green (Ed.). London, UK: Karnac Books.

Levin, D.E. (May, 2009). Problem Solving Deficit Disorder. *Community Playthings*. <http://www.communityplaythings.com/resources/articles/2009/problem-solving-deficit-disorder>.

Levin, D. E. (2013). *Beyond Remote-Controlled Childhood: Teaching Young Children in the Media Age*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Levin, D. E. & Rosenquest, B. (2001). The Increasing Role of Electronic Toys in the Lives of Infants and Toddlers: Should We Be Concerned? *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*. 2(2): 242-247.

Zimmerman, F., Glew, G., Christakis, D., & Katon, W. (April, 2005). Early Cognitive Stimulation, Emotional Support, and Television Watching as Predictors of Subsequent Bullying Among Grade-School Children. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 159(4): 384-388.

About the Author

Diane E. Levin

PhD, is a Professor of Early Childhood Education at Wheelock College in Boston, where she teaches a course on children's play, a summer institute on Media Education, and a service learning course which takes Wheelock students to Northern Ireland to study how schools can help communities affected by violence and conflict heal. She has published 8 books, most recently *Beyond Remote-Controlled Childhood* (NAEYC). She is a founder of Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children's Entertainment (TRUCE; www.truceteachers.org), which prepares materials to help parents deal with the media and commercial culture in their children's lives, and Defending the Early Years (www.deyproject.org), which work to promote appropriate early childhood teaching practices in this era of often inappropriate mandated school reform.