

Time to get under-involved with the kids

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When it comes to nurturing children's creative skills, we have got it all wrong, argue two new books – especially when it comes to over-parenting.



[Must we exhaust ourselves with over-involved child rearing?](#)

coined the term neontocracy), this aim is an outlier that bucks the historical and ethnographic record, and in *Raising Children*, he picks apart the good and bad in WEIRD parenting.

Abandoning harsh practices (sending the kids into the forest in hard times, or enslaving them) is surely good, but progressive virtues carry their own risks. The new ways, says Lancy, can leave many as kidults, ill-prepared to enter a complicated, adult world. They can even feed rising levels of mental illness, stress and suicide.

“New ways of child-rearing can leave many as kidults, ill-prepared to enter a complicated, adult world”

While Lancy is clear that he is an anthropologist, not a peddler of childcare manuals, readers who are parents will still feel uncomfortably nudged. Another book, *Lifelong Kindergarten* by Mitchel Resnick, also offers parents similar fodder. Luckily, both books draw on more than psychology or neurology. Lancy's book is based on decades of anthropological research, while Resnick, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, concentrates on the relationship between kids and coding.

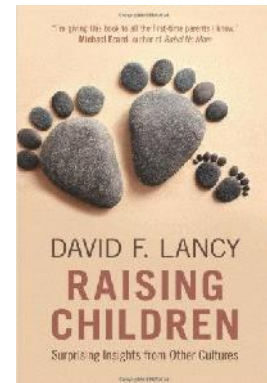
In some ways, both writers offer relief to hard-working WEIRD parents, exhausted by catering for their offspring in the high-maintenance regimes demanded both by current parenting movements and by ever-more prescriptive, anxious societies. Newer research seems to back the idea that parenting doesn't have to be this way. Both Lancy and Resnick cite developmental psychologist and writer Alison Gopnik, whose 2016 book *The Gardener and the Carpenter* shares similar insights.

But Lancy's book in particular delivers a cultural context that Gopnik's book lacked. And while Gopnik gently challenged Western parents, Lancy will have them choking on their lattes. Take one cornerstone of child development, attachment parenting. A strong emotional and physical attachment to at least one primary caregiver (parent, aunt, adopter and so on) is said to be crucial. Yet for most of history, and across all cultures to varying extents, the emphasis was for the mother not to get too emotionally invested in a newborn or young infant who might die or sap her energy and health, and consequently the well-being of the family or community.

WELCOME to the neontocracy: a world that revolves around the needs of children far beyond the basics of food and material comfort. Here, it is considered vital to maintain children's happiness, status, self-esteem and protection, and for parents to do their own childcare and schedule life-enhancing activities for their kids, providing constant stimulation.

The neontocracy is increasingly the ideal for the WEIRD world of Western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic societies.

For anthropologist David Lancy of Utah State University (who



In many cultures, found Lancy, it could not be taken for granted that a baby would be considered a person. The idea of delayed personhood is, in fact, common. Among the Sikkimese Lepcha people, a baby is considered as being still in the uterus for three days after birth and referred to as a “rat-child” rather than human, while the Punan Bah see a child as little more than a body while its soul gradually takes residence, making it human.

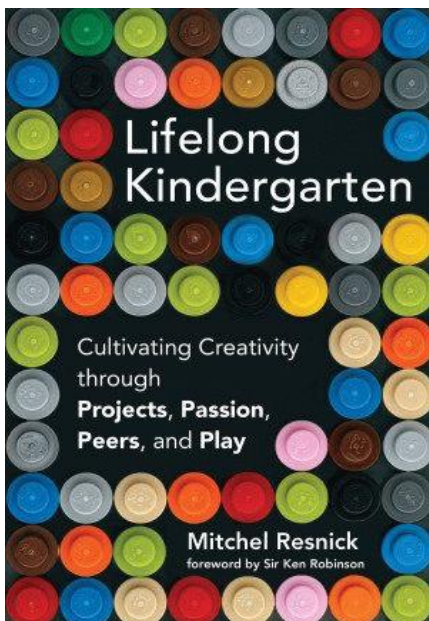
And we should recall that centuries ago, high infant mortality gave Western societies a more utilitarian view of the cost-benefit of children. Lancy cites a 6th-century Frankish law which decreed that the fine for killing a young woman of childbearing age was 600 sous, compared with just 60 sous for a male baby and a mere 30 for a female one.

Lancy’s point is that modern practices – such as co-sleeping, on-demand feeding and constant parent-child play – now associated with attachment parenting should serve both parties or be abandoned. “We must not let the pendulum swing so far that other family members, or even the very fabric of family life, must suffer to stave off the dubious threat of reactive attachment disorder,” he cautions.

Lancy also dismantles another aspect of the neontocracy: the way the West hails the uniqueness of every child. That, alongside an “everyone’s-a-winner” mentality, says Lancy, is doing children, society and the economy no good. Obsessed with children’s happiness, US parents, “tolerate mediocre academic performance and rail against teachers who expose our children’s failings”. In Connecticut, he says, teachers are banned from marking pupils’ work with red ink to avoid damaging their self-esteem.

While parenting styles promoting achievement and compliance with social or family rules, like that of the “Tiger mother”, are met with a backlash, Lancy notes there is no evidence that high-achieving children are at particular risk of harm. But this doesn’t mean we need more schooling or formal education. As Lancy says, our forebears thought learning through observation, play and autonomy were critical.

Cultures such as the nomadic Maniq hunter-gatherers of Thailand and Amazonian Matsigenka and Parakanã still encourage children to practise using tools, knives and machetes. In our quest to shield children from harm, we may be undermining their natural inclination to learn adult survival skills, social and practical, and so extending childhood and “failure-to-launch”.



Happily, Lancy’s research is so thorough and his writing infused with such gentle humour that even his admonishments and one-liners to parents are a pleasure. For example, advocating “benign neglect” in parenting, he urges: “Go ahead; try it. They’ll thank you later on.”

This is a fascinating book and, unusually for an academic work, my only criticism is that it was not long enough. There is so much more to know, particularly on the consequences of WEIRD societies’ penchant for history-bucking parenting, with Lancy as a trustworthy, readable authority.

Lifelong Kindergarten takes its title from the research group Resnick heads at MIT’s Media Lab. It promises so much: to shed light on how children and adults can be creative throughout life by learning from the ethos and practices of the kindergarten.

Lancy’s basic assertion – how to harness kids’ passions through collaborative projects and play – is clear in its implications for creativity. Many of his examples draw on the interactions of children in online communities exploring what they can do with the programming language Scratch.

Like Lancy, Resnick highlights the shortcomings of the formal classroom. But while the book is insightful, it feels limited by focusing so much on the MIT group's work, and on Scratch and its online communities.

Resnick does allude to Gopnik, Piaget and stalwarts of creative play like the Denmark-based LEGO Group and even the woes of the Singaporean government in nurturing creativity in its high-achieving students. But a still wider perspective is needed.

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In one section, Resnick explores dichotomies in teaching and learning styles: between the idea that adult intervention should be formal, and a more hands-off approach. For him, children need balance between freedom and structure to optimise their creativity. And then there is the Silicon Valley idea of “playpen versus playground”.

While some computer games are like playpens, requiring children to advance through levels, others inspire creativity through virtual playgrounds. In Minecraft, for example, children can build their own structures and games, not unlike playing with physical Lego bricks.



Play – and the freedoms it unlocks – are key to Resnick and Lancy. For the good of all and for maximum creativity, it is time to unwrap the seedlings from the cotton wool in which we have wrapped them, plant them in rich soil and make sure they don't grow up into another generation of overprotected kids.

Raising Children: Surprising insights from other cultures, David Lancy, Cambridge University Press

Lifelong Kindergarten: Cultivating creativity through projects, passion, peers, and play, Mitchel Resnick, MIT Press