

probing role that enables the individual to escape from false end points—what engineers call “local optima.”

All of this is rich, interesting, and often conceptually challenging. In general, I liked the breadth of this book and the authors’ obvious enthusiasm for their topic. For anyone who does not study the areas of research they cover and wants to know more, this is a very good place to start.

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Nurture Shock: New Thinking About Children

Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman

New York: Twelve, 2009. Notes, references, index. xi, 336 pp. \$24.99 cloth. ISBN: 9780446504126

Erik Erikson once wrote, “To be heard in the United States you have to take an extreme position and shout it loudly.” Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman have taken this advice to heart in their new book. The title gives the impression that readers will be shocked by the revelations the authors bring to light. The problem is that they have to create a number of straw men of nature against whom they can take extreme nurture positions. We can tell they are straw men by the numerous qualifications and exceptions the authors are forced to concede in order to take their positions against them.

In the introduction, for example, they suggest that the ideas they challenge are part of the intuitive, inborn wisdom of parents: “Prior to that story, our instincts led us to believe, quite firmly, that it was

important to tell young children they were smart in order to buoy their confidence” (p. 5). First of all, for authors whose claim to originality is based on their scientific knowledge, the use of the term *instinct* is rather amazing. Instincts are inborn patterns of behavior, which psychologists long ago discarded for humans. Perhaps the authors use instinct to enhance their nurture argument, but its use reveals a superficiality that is present throughout the book.

Take the chapter on praise, for example. The authors suggest, as in their introduction, that parents have a natural inclination to overpraise their children. For their evidence, they use data from studies of gifted children who underestimate their abilities. But in these studies, praise was not a variable! In addition, it turns out that overpraise has negative effects only when it is applied to children’s abilities, not to their efforts. Moreover, the authors ignore the fact that parents are as likely to overcriticize their children as they are to overpraise them. (If you doubt this, go a youth soccer or Little League game; you will soon be convinced.) So, do we have an instinct to overcriticize as well?

A few other examples will help show the weakness of the authors’ nurture arguments. In the chapter on adolescent lying, the authors take the nurture view that adolescent storm and stress is not a universal, natural phenomena. Here they join a number of psychologists who argue that adolescence is just a transition stage like any other. What they ignore is the fact that adolescence is not a unitary stage—it has distinct phases. Storm and stress are part of the first stage when hormones are raging, emotions are changing, and adolescent bodies are going through a metamorphosis.

In the midst of these changes, it would be strange indeed if adolescents did not have moments of conflict with their parents and siblings. But the later stages of adolescence (sweet sixteen) and of emerging adulthood are more tranquil. Early adolescence is a time when nature plays a huge role in adolescent behavior, but this is not so for the whole of adolescence.

Similarly, in the chapter on intelligence testing, Bronson and Merryman argue that IQ tests are not very good at predicting giftedness and academic achievement and are, therefore, of little or no value. They imply that intelligence is mostly nurture and not nature. But there is a good deal of literature—including that of identical twins reared apart—showing that at least 60 percent of IQ is genetically determined. The normal curve of intelligence in the population is more nature than it is nurture. Moreover, intelligence tests were not devised to detect giftedness. Alfred Binet invented them to detect retardation, which they do very well. And after the age of four or five, IQ can predict with more than 50 percent accuracy the IQ at age eighteen. So the authors' implication that IQ is largely a matter of nurture is not supported by the evidence.

Another, more glaring example of the authors' unscientific approach is in the chapter entitled "Can Self-Control Be Taught?" They begin by giving evidence that a lot of programs expected to help adolescents gain self-control, simply do not work. Drivers' education classes do not reduce the accident rate for teen drivers, nor does the DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) program reduce substance abuse among teens. Then, taking a huge leap of faith, the authors go on to describe early-childhood programs

that they claim do help the children gain self-control. The authors simply ignore the vast differences between what might work for young children and what will work for teenagers. The authors give the impression the same type of program will work with both groups. Shocking indeed.

As a clinician, I found particularly galling the illustration the authors use to make their point in the chapter on sibling rivalry. The subtitle of the chapter reads: "Freud Was Wrong and Shakespeare Was Right." Freud argued that, generally, sibling rivalry arose in a competition for parental affection. In Shakespeare's *King Lear*, however, the siblings quarrel over possessions. The authors do concede, contrary to the strong claim in the subtitle, that Freud's theory was not wrong, only "incomplete." But they do not bother to explain why.

Their evidence for favoring Shakespeare's view of family feuds is a study that did find that siblings, when asked, overwhelmingly said that they fought over possessions. But where do a child's toys and other possessions come from? Oh yes, parents. Toys and possessions are symbols of parental affection and that is one of the underlying reasons for sibling rivalry. And if the authors had read Shakespeare more closely, they would have discovered that he, no less than Freud, understood the workings of the unconscious.

For a book purportedly based on science and neuroscience (sixty-two pages of references), the writing is embarrassingly unscientific in its generalizations, its simplistic interpretation of data, and its unwarranted conclusions. The book has won abundant praise in the popular media and by talk-show hosts for its "new thinking about children." But anyone who

knows anything about the science of child development will not be taken in.

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Toys and American Culture: An Encyclopedia

Sharon M. Scott

Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2009.

References, illustrations, index. xxix, 418 pp. \$85.00 cloth ISBN: 9780313347986

Toys and American Culture is an ambitious reference book that breaks new ground in taking the entire field of American toys as its purview. Previous guides to American toys have focused on classic toys, old and new favorites with particular cultural significance or staying power. The best of these are Tim Walsh's *Timeless Toys: Classic Toys and The Playmakers Who Created Them* (2005) and Scott Eberle's *Classic Toys of the National Toy Hall of Fame: Celebrating the Greatest Toys of All Time!* (2009), books which not only document toy history but also provide extensive context and discussion. As an encyclopedia, *Toys and American Culture* aims to be far more comprehensive. Although the book does not quite live up to its promise to "provide the cultural and historical framework for understanding American toys," it does bring together in one convenient volume essential information about a diverse range of toys and toy-related subjects.

Toys and American Culture features over two hundred entries illustrated with sixty black-and-white photographs. The entries fall primarily in the categories of toys, toy designers, and toy companies,

with smaller numbers of entries on organizations, publications, collections, and special topics. Eighty-five toys are included, some as broad categories (Dolls, Trains), others are more narrow brand names (My Little Pony, Cabbage Patch Kids, Aqua Dots). The encyclopedia defines toys as playthings that encourage imaginative play, therefore games are categorically excluded (although the cultural relevance of games like Monopoly or Chutes and Ladders is surely worthy of consideration).

The entries on traditional toys such as dolls and trains make good use of the substantial research on these artifacts. For post 1950s brand-name toys, this volume relies more heavily on corporate and production histories. In many cases, this provides illuminating and surprising contexts for familiar toys. In other cases, the omissions of relevant cultural connections are worrisome. For example, the entry on Lincoln Logs discusses the connection to Frank Lloyd Wright, whose son invented the building pieces, but does not place the log cabin theme into a broader context of America's fascination with the frontier or children's related play motifs such as cowboys and Indians.

Entries on toy designers bring attention to many hitherto obscure characters in the history of American toys. As most of the designers also were involved with toy companies as well as specific toys, there is frequently substantial overlap between corresponding entries. The stories of designers are especially engaging: the reader comes to appreciate the range of life experience and creative expression that have been brought to bear on the creation of American toys. Women found particular success in the toy industry in an era when