Building the Nest: From brain function to flourishing children and communities of character

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We are in a big mess!

• Human wellbeing in USA on the decline
  – Mental illness increasing (in real numbers) (USDHHS)
  – Violence and suicide at high rates
  – US folks under age 50 at a health disadvantage compared to 16 other nations (NRC, 2013)
  – US lifespan has shrunk
  – Child wellbeing ranks near bottom of advanced nations

• Earth systems are breaking down
  – Climate instability; melting of ice caps (IPCC)
  – Massive ecological disruption from human activity virtually everywhere (UNMEA)
  – “Biological annihilation” (PNAS, 2017)
Shifted Baselines
Old-Growth National Forests

Maps showing changes in the distribution of old-growth national forests from 1620 to 1990.
Shifting baselines for human ecosystem too

1 Child raising practices
2 Individual psycho-social neurobiology
3 Adult being and morality
4 Culture (& narratives)

Deep History and Anthropology
Where do we start?

Establish baselines

What do children need for optimal development?

• **Animal** needs for warmth and nourishment

• **Mammalian** needs for affection and play

• **Social mammalian** needs for extensive bonding, and community support

• **Human** needs for
  • Intersubjectivity with multiple adults
  • Immersion in communal rituals
  • Apprenticeship in adult activities
  • Guiding narratives

Narvaez, 2014

Ethology, Anthropology, Psychology
LIKE ALL ANIMALS, HUMANS HAVE A NEST
Lifetime Evolved Nest

Early childhood  Adolescence  Adulthood  Elders

Childhood  Early adulthood

Photo 2: By Chris Loll (Own work) [GFDL (http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html) or CC BY 3.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0)], via Wikimedia Commons Photo 3: Original caption: "Mosqinte Hawk, Walapai". ("Walapai" is now be spelled "Hualapai"). From The North American Indian, by Edward S. Curtis
The place where stories begin

The Evolved Nest for Young Children
Early body-brain-mind development

• Human babies are highly immature at birth
  – need “exterogestation” (Montagu, 1978)

• Constant interaction between “nature” and “nurture”
  – Epigenetic effects of early experience for all systems
  – Developmentally plastic dynamic system

• Biosocial construction of
  – Emotions and cognition TOGETHER (intertwined)
  – Implicit self (social and moral) (Schore; Stern; Trevarthen)
  – Social worldview (Tomkins)
Human Evolved Developmental Niche
Provisioned by a community

Konner (2005): Hunter Gatherer Childhood Model: Recurring Patterns
(Most practices are 30-40 million years old)

• SOOTHING PERINATAL EXPERIENCES
• TOUCH: Held or kept near others constantly
• RESPONSIVITY: Prompt responses to fusses and cries
• BREASTFEEDING: Nursed frequently (2-3 times/hr initially) for 2-5 years
• ALLOPARENTS: Frequently cared for by individuals other than mothers (fathers and grandmothers, in particular)
• PLAY: Enjoy free play in natural world with multiage playmates
• SOCIAL SUPPORT: High social embeddedness

Hewlett & Lamb, 2005; Konner, 2010; Narvaez, Panksepp, Schore & Gleason, 2013
“The feeling appropriate to an infant in arms is his feeling of rightness, or essential goodness ... the premise that he is right, good, and welcome. Without that conviction, a human being of any age is crippled by a lack of confidence, a full sense of self, of spontaneity, of grace.” (Liedloff, *The Continuum Concept*, p. 34)
What babies practice, they become

Empathic Roots

Social Pleasure

Perspective Taking

Empathy

Presence

Reverence

Intersubjectivity

Social Effectivity
Child’s Neurobiological Story

| Communal self | • Holistic  
<table>
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| Acting self   | • Is sociality easy & fun?  
|               | • Do I empathize? |
| Core self     | • Am I competent?  
|               | • Can I trust self, others, world? |
Brain system function with good care
(based on MacLean, 1990; triune brain theory)

**Survival systems**
ANGER, FEAR, PANIC/GRIEF, LUST, SEEKING
(fight, flight, freeze, faint)

**Mammalian**
Socialility:
CARE, PLAY

**Human Executive functions and neocortex:**
abstraction and imagination interact with other systems

Narvaez, 2014
Species-Typical Mindsets

ENGAGEMENT ETHIC
- Full presence in the moment
  - Intersubjectivity
  - Resonance with the Other
  - Egalitarian regard
  - I-Thou
- Developed and primed by supportive, caring relationships and environments
  - Secure attachment (Bowlby)
  - Companionship care (Trevarthen)

COMMUNAL IMAGINATION
- Egalitarian respect
- Resonant responsibility
- Sympathetic action
- Agency and communion flow together

Narvaez, 2013; Based on review of small-band hunter gatherer descriptions (e.g., work by Tim Ingold; Richard Lee; James Woodburn; Douglas Fry; and indigenous literatures)
Black and White: Edward Sheriff Curtis (1868-1952) was an American photographer. Many of his works are held by the U.S. Library of Congress; these are all now part of the public domain, since their copyright was never renewed. Older paintings by Emile Manier, public domain; newer style paintings by Mary Cassatt, public domain. The Virgin and Child under an Apple by Lucas Cranach the Elder, public domain.
To early care like this?
What happens to a baby **physiologically** when basic needs are ignored?

Early experience sets up structure and function of physiology

- Stress response
- Immune system
- Endocrine system
- Neurotransmitters (number, function)
- Emotions and emotion systems
- Corpus callosum and brain hemispheric integration

Gaps or lesions in brain systems from early trauma, abuse, neglect, or undercare
Power of Survival Systems from Early Undercare

Survival systems:
ANGER, FEAR, PANIC, LUST (fight, flight, freeze, faint)

Mammalian Sociality
CARE, PLAY

Toxic Stress leads to self-protection disposition

Control Stress Reactivity controls

Heart-centered imagination

Human Executive functions and neocortex: abstraction and imagination interacts with other systems

Narvaez, 2014
Protectionist Mindsets:
One-Up or One-Down (coercive relations)

SOCIAL OPPOSITION

• “Fight”
  – Based in the sympathetic system

• Defensive or reactive aggression
  – Feels “good” and “right”

• Self-preservational externalizing

SOCIAL WITHDRAWAL

• “Freezing” / “Fainting”
  – Based in the systems that protect body from death or psychological trauma

• Submission, passivity, disappearance
  – Compliance with an authority

• Self-preservational internalizing
Protectionist Imagination Mindsets

Vicious Imagination
- Fueled by anger, aggression, dominance, need for control
- Un-egalitarian (power over the Other)
  - Scapegoating
  - “Eliminationism” (Neiwert, 2010)
  - “Moral mandate” (Skitka)
  - “Impositional altruism”

Detached Imagination (Intellect)
- Lack of attuned relationship
- Emotionally cool or cold
- Categorizes and stereotypes
- Objectifies, dissects and orders
- Decontextualizes
- Seeks control, power over objects
- Seeks a firm, certain answer
- Calculates usefulness of other people and things
- Innovation without a sense of consequence
Evolved Human Developmental Niche

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Executive Functions

Top-down Shifting
Self-regulation in relation to Identity, Narrative

Neuroception by situation

Engagement (attunement)

Approach
Reward
Social Reading
Meaning-making

“Safe”

Bottom-up Shifting
Safety or threat cues

“Unsafe”

Mobilized: Fight-Flight
Immobilized: Freeze-Faint (hide)

Safety (defense)
The Sustaining, Healing Classroom
Restoring our human capacities

Protoreptilian
- Survival systems: anger, fear, panic (fight, flight, freeze, faint)

Mammalian
- Social: care, play

Learn Self-Calming

Executive functions and neocortex: imagination interacts with survival and prosocial systems

Narvaez, 2014
The sustaining healing classroom promotes (Narvaez, 2010)

• **Self-Calming**
  - Deep breathing
  - Mindfulness
  - Meditation

• **Social Pleasure**
  - Self-directed physical play with peers
  - Silly humor
  - Social dance, song, art

• **Communal Imagination**
  - Group attachment
  - Us and Us
  - Ecological attachment

Think of one thing in each area you can do in your classroom
THE ETHICAL CLASSROOM

Initiated under the Minnesota Community Voices and Character Education project funded by USDE OERI Grant # R215V980001
How do children grow into morally agile adults?

- Relationships (classroom & wider community)
- Apprenticeship (modeling, guidance)
- Virtuous models
- Ethical skills (sensitivity, judgment, focus, action)
- Self authorship

*Integrated across academic instruction, homeroom/advisory, schoolwide projects*
Caring, Responsive **Relationship** with each Child

• Engages the **emotions**
  – Fundamental to learning

• Fosters a **secure attachment**
  – Builds the bridge for instruction
    • Secures the child’s attention
    • Establishes a line of influence
    – Physiological orientation toward relational attunement (oxytocin, opioids)

• May take longer with some students

Photo: By Elizabeth Ann Colette - Flickr, CC BY-SA 2.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=2178973
Provide a Supportive Relational Social Climate

• Keep members calm
• Face-to-face relational engagement
• Encourage prosocial imagination
• Individual positive purpose
  – Enhancement of human potential
• Broad ethical skills
• Global awareness
• Link to community contexts

[Image: Photo: Wikimedia Commons: Project 365 Day 131: Group hug]

[Caption: Project 365 Day 131: Group Hug! Uploaded by MaybeMaybeMaybe]
How do people learn naturally?

- How does apprenticeship look?
  - **Modeling** by someone more “expert”
    - thinks aloud while solving problems
  - Instructor **coaches** the student
  - Instructor **explains** (reasoning, meaning) at the same time as authentic experience
  - Student **practice** is *focused and extensive*
Virtuous Village

- Generosity
- Respect
- Kindness
- Compassion
- Forgiveness
- Humility
- Courage

- Multiple examples of virtue
- Opportunities to imitate
- Practice, practice, practice
Virtuous Village of Stories, Safety and Support

• Adults come together with their stories about their own development
• Understand that their own characters are “under construction”
  – by the activities they pursue
  – by how they use their imaginations
The Power of Stories

• Shape what we believe about ourselves and the world
  – they guide our actions

• Children learn whom they can/should become
  – from the stories we tell them
  – how we treat them is a type of story they internalize
Ethical Skills: A Toolbox

1. Ethical Sensitivity
2. Ethical Judgment
3. Ethical Focus
4. Ethical Action

Ethical Skills to Embed in Classroom Instruction

Minnesota Community Voices and Character Education project funded by USDE OERI Grant # R215V980001
Those with Ethical Expertise are:

- More Ethically Sensitive (perceptive, imaginative, deeply feeling)
- Better at Ethical Judgment (reasoning, reflective)
- More Ethically Focused (attentive, motivated, personal identity)
- Better at Completing Ethical Action (effective, steadfastness)
Self-Authorship

• Virtuous individuals must be autonomous enough to monitor their behavior and choices.
• Once developed, virtues must be maintained through the selection of appropriate friends, activities and environments (Aristotle, 1988).
Ethical Character Development through RAVES

**R**elationships (classroom & wider community)

**A**pprenticeship (modeling, guidance, practice)

**V**irtuous models

**E**thical skills (sensitivity, judgment, focus, action)

**S**elf authorship
RAVES Together

The purpose of ethical behavior is to live a good life in the community.

Each individual lives within an active ecological context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) in which, ideally, the entire community builds ethical skills together.
Our Heritage: Cycle of Cooperative Companionship

1. Companion caregiving
2. Good physio-neuro-social biology
3. Adult wellbeing and wisdom
4. Community attention to basic needs
Self Regulation
Cooperation
Communalism
Lack
Opposition
Dysregulation
Explanatory Frame
Protectionism

Original Species-Typical Outcome
Cooperation, communalism, Receptive intelligence, wisdom
MORAL RELATIONAL ATTUNEMENT & RESPONSIBILITY THAT INCLUDES NATURE

Species-Typical Outcome:
Cooperation, communalism, Receptive intelligence, wisdom
MORAL RELATIONAL ATTUNEMENT & RESPONSIBILITY

Species-Atypical Outcome:
Oppositionalism, egocentrism, Detached imagination
MORAL SELF-PROTECTIONISM

Provision
Immersion in nature
Vision quest
Relational attunement with nature

Lack
Evolved Nest
Dysregulation
Opposition

MORAL SELF-PROTECTIONISM

Protectionism
Explanatory Frame
Cooperation
Communalism
Trauma
Vision quest
For more information

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Free MATERIALS for EDUCATORS:
http://www3.nd.edu/~dnarvaez/Workshops_Materials_2012.htm

Webpage (download papers):
http://www.nd.edu/~dnarvaez/

My blog at Psychology Today:
“Moral Landscapes”
http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/moral-landscapes

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2018 conference:

Save the date! Become a co-sponsor!
Organized by Notre Dame’s Shaw Center for Children and Family & Attachment Parenting International

Program organizers:
Darcia Narvaez (dnarvaez@nd.edu), with planning committee members: Julia Braungart-Rieker, James McKenna, Kristin VanDerMeer

Samantha Gray, API (samantha@attachmentparenting.org)

Part 1 Aug 24-26: Community focus, “Nurturing Primal Instincts for Modern Babies”