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We Suggest

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WE SUGGEST

Eleanor Buelke

Beck, Helen L.

Don't Push Me, I'm No Computer

New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1973. Pp. x + 171.

. . . Cognition does not prosper except in close alliance with emotional development . . . all the potentialities of human beings develop only on the basis of intimate interchange with living people. . . .¹

There is a great tendency in the educational world, as in the modern world all around, to replace human beings with mechanical devices; to substitute extrinsic rewards for human responses; to provide technical props for learning, rather than to pursue optimum openings for personal, intimate interchange. This book is a warning to parents and educators who would support such measures for young children, neglecting real opportunities for development, ignoring the genuine dangers of these artificial surrogates for life. It is a plea to all those who "push children beyond their stage of maturation" instead of allowing them "the time and environment with which they can unfold and develop into whole people to the best of their ability—and enjoy the process while they are growing."

In this book, the author describes contaminating, controlling factors of the mechanical teacher, and tragic results of such teaching in the "mechanized children" it creates. She writes of current trends and fads in the manufacture of commercial books, toys, and equipment for infants and pre-schoolers. She suggests that such trends place unnatural demands upon a young child's adaptability; that they pressure parents into becoming extension schoolteachers, depriving them of the pleasures of "parenting" their children. Early years of childhood should be available for nurture, not pre-empted for structured teaching.

Miss Beck details home activities and advantages of play equipment designed to stimulate imagination and exploration, to encourage freedom of movement and coordination. She outlines needs and benefits of group experiences for pre-schoolers, but counters with examination of the pitfalls and dangers of industrial, financially remunerative ventures that exploit children of families who need help in providing social, emotional, and developmental experiences for their young.

¹ Anna Freud, in the Foreword, *Don't Push Me, I'm No Computer*, p. x.

The need for passionate protection of human values for children is underscored in the writer's discussion of interpersonal relationships in the family, and among children and adults wherever they may live together. She introduces a new set of "three R's:" to relate, to respond, and to be reasonable, as goals for satisfactory learning, and enrichment of the lives of all concerned.

The book concludes with a consideration of structure and discipline that will appropriately permit the young child to grow within a reasonable, flexible environment that can be modified as he matures. The reader is reminded of the understandings of the experience of childhood, discovered by Jean Piaget in his lifelong study of cognitive development in children:

. . . knowledge is not absorbed from the outside, but rather is constructed from the inside by the child in continuous interaction with the environment.²

. . . this construction takes place in a certain sequence that is the same for all children in all cultures . . .³

. . . intelligence is an organized, coherent, whole structure and not a collection of skills. . .⁴

It appears obvious to this author, as it is to others who have studied young children and read reputable research about their intellectual growth, that it takes more than one or two years of pre-school learning to build a cognitive framework. No really meaningful concept exists in isolation; it takes time to build a total framework in which specific skills and information can be anchored. Further beyond that, it takes deep teacher sensitivity and acceptance toward children and their ideas.

The ability to learn is a *human* trait. Teaching is a *human* act; essentially, the teaching profession is a *helping* profession. In a helping profession, its members regard life as *precious*, and must operate within what may be described as a "primary" system. "Secondary" systems abound everywhere—in business, in government, and, increasingly, in the organizational structure of education. They create, rather than solve, problems for those who live in them. They are hierarchial and bureaucratic in structure; their rules are very clear and inflexible; their standards relate to the system, not the individual. Those who manage these systems adopt an affective neutrality; they

² Milton Schwebel, and Jane Raph, Editors, *Piaget In The Classroom*. New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1973, p. 222.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

do not like emotions. In such a system, “to be *good* means to be *best*.” In contrast, the educator, the teacher, must proceed from the “primary” system premise: “Hey, if you’re *born*, you’re *good*! It’s all right. You’re O.K.!”⁵

In a recent issue of a well-known periodical, the editor writes:

We justify the gift of life in many ways—by our awareness of its preciousness and its fragility; by developing to the fullest the sensitivities and potentialities that come with life; by putting the whole of our intelligence to work in sustaining and enhancing the conditions that make life possible; by cherishing the human habitat and shielding it from devastation and depletion; by removing the obstructions in our access to, and trust in, one another.⁶

The push-button computer approach, with its automatic programming for function and reaction, its synthetic concept of life, presenting children too early with mechanistic, static, absolute answers, may well be what Helen Beck calls “an unconscionable waste of precious humanity.” Support for this author comes from recognized, well-documented anthropological research. As a human being, the normal child, even at pre-school level, has a growing need, as acute as hunger or thirst, and a growing capacity to reach out for his world, to establish contacts in it, and to work out his own personal relationship with it.

It is the child’s growing capacity to take in the world, rework experience, and give it out again in speech or song, craft or art, and in all the activities in which men engage, that is the source of individuality . . . a world that is forever mediated by the insistent voices of other people is one in which individuality is inevitably blurred, in which no form can be freshly perceived, no discovery can be made, no reworking of a private experience can survive. A child needs a place and a time for experiences of his own if he is to cherish the world and blend his voice happily with other voices.⁷

⁵ Rodney Napier, in an address, Fourth General Session, 1973 National Conference on Grading Alternatives. Chicago, Illinois: October 28, 1973.

⁶ Norman Cousins, “A Rendezvous With Infinity,” *Saturday Review/World*, (Feb. 9, 1974), p. 4.

⁷ Margaret Mead, and Ken Heyman, *Family*. New York: Collier Books, 1971, p. 144.