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The Quality of Childhood: Exploring a Pedagogical View of the Role of Parents

by Hans Van Crombrugge

SUMMARY

In general, parents are prepared to do whatever it takes to ensure the well-being and development of their children. These good intentions go hand-in-hand with many questions on the part of parents concerning whether they will manage to bring up their children, whether they are doing the right things, whether they are really capable of bringing the task of upbringing to a happy conclusion. Parents must organise the world as well as they can to allow the child to develop and discover him- or herself.

Parents are not the only ones who are responsible for their children. Equal responsibility belongs to the society that is the source of the diverse influences that impact on the child. Governments have very important responsibilities. Governments must not and cannot fulfil the parents' role, but they can support the parents in taking up their responsibility. We note that governments are increasingly more active in assisting parents and more explicitly assuming responsibility for raising children. There are various causes and circumstances behind this. One factor that should not be underestimated is the International Convention on the Rights of the Child. In signing this, the public authorities committed themselves to helping to realise the rights of the child in all possible ways. Supporting parents in raising children is an important element of this.

Parents can use all the help they can get in realising their good intentions, within the space structured by the rights of the child. The attention given by governments to education, to childcare, to the socio-economic conditions of the family is important. We have also argued for the necessity of public rituals in civil society such as an 'upbringing pledge' for new parents. An upbringing pledge would contain not only a statement of lasting commitment concerning care for the child, but also an explicit declaration of commitment to recognise and implement the rights of the child as a person.

The quality of childhood is a matter of the quality of parenthood, which itself is a matter of the quality of public support of parents and families.

Parents and children

We may assume that most parents want the best for their children. They are prepared to do whatever it takes to ensure the well-being and development of their children. The good intentions of parents also go hand in hand with many questions on the part of parents concerning whether they will manage to bring up their children, whether they are doing

the right things, whether they are really capable of bringing the task of upbringing to a happy conclusion. Parents know that they are not the only significant people engaged in the raising of their children: numerous other societal influences also play an important role. For that matter, not all societal influences can be controlled by parents. This conclusion, however, does not diminish the responsibility of the parents. On the contrary: Parents are faced with the additional task of taking these uncontrollable influences and situations into consideration, of finding meaningful ways to deal with them and to continue to look for growth opportunities for the children, for themselves and for their relationship with their children. Children did not ask to be born into this world. Parents must organise the world as well as they can to allow the child to develop and discover him or herself.¹ It is the parent's responsibility to make the world 'meaningful' for the child.

In the upbringing relationship, the child is an active partner, an active, self-willing, giver of meaning. The parent or guardian is obliged to allow the child to participate actively in looking for sense and meaning in the world in which he or she lives. The child will often also add elements to the world of the parents. This is the child's right. The child must also gradually learn to assume responsibility for this contribution and for his or her reinterpretation of the world as well as for the way in which the relationship with his or her parents develops. In this sense, upbringing is searching together for the most meaningful world for all concerned. However, the responsibilities of the parent and the child are not equal. The parent retains the primary responsibility for creating a situation in which children can learn to take responsibility – gradually, according to the development of their opportunities and their experiences. As a person, the child is entitled to be recognised as a discussion partner. The child must be listened to, a dialogue must be entered into. However, in order to be recognised as discussion partner and to engage in dialogue, a person must receive a name and learn a language. Without a name, the child can never say "I"; without language, the child cannot speak. Naming the child and deciding which language will be spoken with the child are the responsibilities of the parents. In this the child not have a say, but if he or she later has problems due to this (and what is puberty if not the person wrestling with all of these given elements – such as language, one's name, one's parents, and the like – that one did not choose but that one must integrate and take responsibility for), it is the obligation of the parents to assist the child in resolving these problems.

In short, the fact that there are many influences that the parent does not have control over, that the child influences the parent, that the child must be able to actively participate in his or her upbringing, takes nothing away from this parental responsibility: it does not diminish it, rather it makes it more complex.

The private and the public child

This is not to say that parents are the only ones who are responsible. Equal responsibility belongs to the society that is the source of the diverse influences that impact on the child.

Governments have very important responsibilities. Governments must not and cannot fulfil the parents' role, but they can support the parents in taking up their responsibility. This occurs in many different ways, each of which must be judged on its own merits. We note that governments are increasingly more active in assisting parents and more explicitly assuming responsibility for raising children. There are various causes and circumstances behind this. One factor that should not be underestimated is the International Convention on the Rights of the Child. In signing this, the public authorities committed themselves to helping to realise the rights of the child in all possible ways. Supporting parents in raising children is an important element of this. According to these rights of the child, the child not only has the right to parents, but especially the right to good parents. And the convention puts forward a substantial view of what the essential qualities of good upbringing are. An essential aspect of good upbringing is a relationship with the parents. Another aspect of good upbringing is the recognition of the child as an active participant in his or her own upbringing with a unique position that requires specific protection.

According to the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, the child not only has the right to parents, but especially the right to good parents.

It would be incorrect to assert that the convention does not impose a normative model of upbringing on governments. The measures that governments take, the institutions that governments set up for this purpose, all imply a well defined vision of children and upbringing. In this, participation is indeed a central concept. Because of this participation, clear norms can be imposed on governments and on parents with respect to assuming their responsibilities. For that matter, participation implies normative and communicative ethics, which means that the actions for enlarging the active participation of all concerned in the upbringing of the child are not only supportive, but also normative and regulative. The normative framework of children's rights creates a space in which the subject is still able to place many of his or her own accents and can have many different convictions concerning what 'good upbringing' is.

But children have more rights than these. As children, they are humans who need (1) time and space to develop; and (2) concerned adults who take care of their learning needs. To be fully human, we have to protect children from influences which they cannot handle because they have not yet developed all their capacities. To cope with the world children have to acquire also many competences (skills, knowledge, attitudes) which can only be taught by organized learning processes. Therefore children have the right to specific provisions, which are at the same time a support for the parents, for example, schools, childcare, health services, etc. So children are indeed active participants in their education, but at the same time they are in need of specific protection because of their right to develop and to learn to be flourishing human beings

Parents may have the best intentions and still have different views of what good upbringing is; in taking up the responsibility for the upbringing and development of their relationship

with their children, they must do justice to the child as a specially placed discussion partner. Governments must support them in this task as much as possible, but in so doing is bound by the way in which the CRC (Convention of the Rights of the Child) interprets this 'image of the child'. Again, all of this does not diminish the responsibility of the parents, but makes it more complex. In the same way, the responsibility of governments is also greater and more complex. And again: this recognition of pedagogical responsibility in no way takes away from the position of the child as a person who is entitled to active participation. On the contrary, in this model of upbringing, the child is more quickly given a greater responsibility for his or her own upbringing.

Parents can use all the help they can get in realising their good intentions in their own special way, within the space structured by the rights of the child. The attention given to education, to childcare, to the socio-economic conditions of the family is important. A very good development is the efforts to develop systems for family and parental support (such as parent education, family enrichment programmes, etc.). We have also argued for the necessity of public rituals in civil society such as an 'upbringing pledge' for new parents.

The upbringing pledge²

The upbringing pledge means a declaration in favour of a lasting commitment with respect to the child. A formal, public declaration cultivates intentions that are undoubtedly present, but these receive added societal value via the making of the pledge. By pronouncing it, the new parents acknowledge the responsibility placed on them by the child.

The pledge affirms that the child has the right to a fundamentally indissoluble relationship with his or her parents. The parents commit themselves to always being available to the child and not to interfere with the relationship with the other parent, whatever the relationship between the partners themselves might be. 'We will be there for you.' 'In good days and in bad, we remain the parents of our child.' When registering the birth or adoption of a child, the parents would formally make such a parental pledge. This presupposes that the symbolic civil and public character of the declaration is preserved. In the case of remarriage or concluding a cohabitation contract or marriage of partners with children, the upbringing pledge can be pronounced in the presence of all the children involved. In the case of divorce, the ex-partners will reconfirm the parental pledge. The upbringing pledge contains not only a statement of lasting commitment concerning care for the children, but also an explicit declaration of commitment to recognise and implement the rights of the child as a person.

As such, the upbringing pledge also affirms the government's responsibility: public authorities have to support parents and children. In signing the Convention on the Rights of the Child, states have, after all, committed themselves to doing everything possible to ensure that children can grow up in a dignified way. According to the Convention, this implies (1) that for the full and harmonious development of the child's personality, he or she must grow up in a

family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding; (2) that the child is brought up by parents who are recognised in their common responsibility for the child's upbringing. Governments must do all they can to ensure this. Instead of sanctioning parents who appear to fall short in taking up their responsibility (we are thinking here of the proposal to withhold child allowance or a part of a scholarship in the case of a child skipping school), governments would be better off creating a positive climate that cultivates commitment. The institution of the upbringing pledge could be a step in the right direction.

The birth of a child and caring for a child are not private matters. The child, as a person who has a right to recognition of his or her human dignity, engages all of society.

It appears from everything said above that the birth of a child and caring for a child are not private matters. The child, as a person who has a right to recognition of his or her human dignity, engages all of society. There are people who, for all sorts of reasons, are more involved with the child and for whom caring for well being and upbringing are, as it were, self-evident (because of affinity, or because of affinity on the part of the child with a person with whom one is intimately involved). At an individual level, these people have diverse intentions. Giving people the chance to articulate these intentions before society is not without importance. By articulating personal subjective feelings, these intentions are as it were objectified into actual societal commitment, in several meanings of the word. First, the human person who pronounces these words identifies with what s/he says. Putting something into words causes one to reflect on and give shape to what one feels. By putting something into words, I become aware of what I feel and I become more aware of myself: I am the person saying this. In this, words are not neutral means, but rather they force the person to give personal form to his or her intentions. In this way, it also becomes clear for other people what I feel and who I am. The articulation of feelings in itself is often a struggle, not only with what one actually feels, but also with the way in which you come across to the other. Thus, putting something into words is never superfluous and self-evident, but rather a non-evident reflection about oneself and the other. This also means that a person opens him- or herself up to judgement. It is clear to the other that you actually intend to commit yourself to the child. Not only does this create the opportunity to be judged in the future, but in this way, you also appeal to the other and, by extension, to society. 'I want to be there for this child' is both a demand for recognition of this commitment, and a demand for the commitment of the other. In the parental pledge, parents not only engage themselves, but also society and the government before whom the commitment is pronounced. 'I will be there for you' is also 'I wish to be recognised as the one who will be there for you and in this capacity wish to be recognised as someone who has a right to genuine support in realising this commitment'. Because of these characteristics, the pronouncement of a pledge in itself already contributes to community building.

Cultivating a pedagogical culture in society

When people are asked to pronounce the upbringing pledge, this is not a mere formality. Time and space are made available for a witness to express a deep conviction. If parenthood is not self-evident, then it is fitting here to reflect briefly on this, as an individual and as society. From this point of view, abolishing the personal registration of a birth at the city hall before a civil servant in the presence of witnesses is a bad thing. By giving form to the pronouncement of the pledge as a formal event, the seriousness of parenthood is put forward and cultivated. It is entirely possible that a feeling for the community-founding significance of such ceremonies is no longer self-evident in these post-modern times, but this is precisely an argument for establishing such ceremonies. Society has every interest in the cultivation of suitable words and feelings concerning this living together as a society, in which expression is given to that which is really important and worthy.

By connecting the pledge 'I will be there for you' with the normative convictions contained in the rights of the child, one is not tied down to the mere application of a model of upbringing imposed by the public authorities. The pledge expresses the desire to give shape to the concern for the well-being and development of the child within the framework created by children's rights. Such a commitment is nothing other than expressing the desire to recognise the child as a person, with everything that this entails. Governments commit themselves to do everything they can to assist parents in fulfilling this pledge. Both the parent or guardian and governments open themselves up to a judgement concerning their commitment to a dignified relationship with the child.

The quality of childhood is a matter of the quality of parenthood, which itself is a matter of the quality of public support of parents and families.

The benefit of the upbringing pledge is not to be sought in quantifiable effects (for example, fewer problems with bringing up children). For this, other resources must be employed. On the other hand, the meaning of symbols for the quality of a society is underestimated. Symbols help determine the culture and the quality of a society. They create the framework to work within. The upbringing pledge is a symbol connected to many existing developments, and as an expression thereof, helps to support them. Developments in law allow the regulation of parent-child relationships to be increasingly a question of a freely taken decision. The institution of the (explicit) pledge expresses this. When parents break up, the principle of co-parenthood applies. In the pledge, this principle – used if problems should arise – is already pronounced beforehand. In the case of blended families and in other situations, a way must be sought to organise the different parental responsibilities (between biological parents, new partners who must be able to assume responsibility, and so on). The pledge can be an important tool here. In regulating the relationship between biological and 'foster' parents in general, there is a need for institutions that regulate the relationship between child and parents. The pledge does not

solve the problems, but it does provide a framework within which to deal with the problems. In this sense, the parental pledge must be linked to the establishment of parenthood, which is pivotal to the quality of childhood, according to the Convention of the Rights of the Child.

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- 1 *This aspect of parental responsibility is beautifully depicted in the film La vita e bella ("Life is beautiful"). The father is not responsible for the fact that his child lands in a labour camp. However, he considers it his responsibility to follow the child into captivity and, as far as possible, to imaginatively translate for the child everything that occurs into situations that provide growth opportunities for the child.*
- 2 *For a detailed discussion of this proposal, see: H. Van Crombrugge, W. Vandenhoele & J.C.M. Willems (Eds.). (2008). Shared pedagogical responsibility. (Maastricht Series in Human Rights, 8). Antwerp-Oxford-Portland: Intersentia.*

Dr. Hans Van Crombrugge is a lecturer and a researcher at the Higher Institute of Family Sciences of the Hogeschool-Universiteit Brussel)

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