
This article is based on a verbal presentation given to the Quality of Childhood Group in the European Parliament. Notes taken during the presentation were formulated into the article below, which has been checked and approved by Jesper Juul.

The Quality of Child-Adult Relationships in Families and Schools

by *Jesper Juul*

SUMMARY

Jesper Juul distinguishes the following key characteristics with regards to the quality of relationships:

- *equal dignity (Gleichwürdigkeit)*
- *integrity*
- *authenticity*
- *responsibility*
- *self-esteem and self-confidence*
- *migration from a subject-object relationship to a subject-subject relationship*
- *the process of the growth of a relationship.*

Key characteristics with regards to the quality of relationships:

1. Equal dignity

Relationships between adults and children have been improving decisively and qualitatively in the past 25 years, as the concept of equal dignity within family life has emerged. This change is perhaps most clearly illustrated by the fact that children and young people are now able to function in the world with a much greater sense of naturalness and self awareness. They are no longer automatically programmed to tolerate infringements and violations inflicted by parents and other adults that earlier generations were forced to accept.

At the same time, however, both the family and society still fail to fulfil a crucial need of children and young people: to see them, and encourage them to see themselves, as valid members of the community.

2. Integrity

With the word integrity Jesper Juul refers to a collective concept, that relates to the wholeness and inviolability of our physical and psychological existence, which is related to issues like identity, limits and personal needs. Children can in fact set their own limits to a great extent, but often they will disregard their own needs if these needs conflict with those of their parents. They then choose to cooperate instead of thinking of themselves.

3. Authenticity

One of the basic ingredients for a healthy relationship between an adult and a child is the attribute of authenticity. A person who is authentic is reliable, trustworthy, genuine and true

to his inner self. Jesper Juul mentions in his book *Vom Gehorsam zur Verantwortung* (page 116, *From Obedience to Responsibility*) the example of a teacher who feels uncertain. He explains that there is nothing wrong with feeling uncertain. However, the teacher has the choice of how to behave when feeling uncertain. If he lets it be, he behaves in an authentic way. If he tries to hide it, he is inauthentic. The first way is better and children will relate to it. The latter behaviour creates a distance between the teacher and the children and the quality of the relationship will suffer as a result.

4. Responsibility

Jesper Juul distinguishes two forms of responsibility:

- Social responsibility
- Personal responsibility

Social responsibility is the responsibility we have for each other, those in our family, community, society, and the world. It enables larger groups of people to live together. We learn it from our parents and teachers.

Personal responsibility is the responsibility we have for our own lives, our physical, psychological, mental and spiritual health and development. Few of us have been raised to assume this type of responsibility, but it is one of the pillars of a healthy psycho-social development and consequently of healthy relationships.

For children it is important to live with adults, who

- *Safeguard their personal integrity*
- *Intervene when they sense that children are cooperating to an excessive degree.*

5. Self esteem and self confidence

Self esteem is our knowledge about, and experience of, who we are. It addresses the question of how well we know ourselves and how we look upon what we know. Self esteem can be envisioned as a kind of inner pillar, centre or core. People who have a healthy, well-developed sense of self esteem feel self-contained and at ease with themselves.

Self-confidence is a measure of what we are capable of, what we are good and clever at, or awkward and inefficient at doing. It refers to what we can achieve.

If one has a healthy self-esteem, then self-confidence is rarely a problem. The opposite, however, is certainly not the case.

6. Migration from a subject object relationship to a subject-subject relationship

One of the major themes in the books of Jesper Juul is the understanding that we should not treat children as objects, but instead as subjects. This means that we define the relationship between the adult and the child as a relationship between two human beings instead of defining ourselves as the parent or the teacher and the child as a pupil, who must obey, learn, fill in tests, be nice, be clever, adapt him/herself to our wishes etc.

7. The process of the growth of a relationship

Jesper Juul explains in the book *Aus Erziehung wird Beziehung, Authentische Eltern, Kompetente Kinder* (From Upbringing to Relationship, Authentic Parents, Competent Children), that we should raise our children in such a way that the child is respected as a fellow human being, who wants to be who he/she is and to develop his/her inner potential. If we treat a child in this way we enable the child to get to know him or herself and to develop deep and healthy relationships with the parents and the teachers and other people.

Conclusion:

We can only give our children a childhood of a good quality when we, as adults, first make the above-mentioned seven characteristics our own, because otherwise we will never be able to set them a good example. This is of course also true for our schools and other institutions.

What to do about the social/personal development of children?

We discover that all adults dealing with children face the same challenge, namely "What to do about the social/personal development of children?" Furthermore we notice that 'marriage' today is something completely different from marriage during the past 300 years. We have to reinvent marriage. New elements of this marriage relationships are:

- **Equal dignity**, this means something other than equality, because this is a political term;
- **Raising children**, means something different to educating children.

My parents raised me in what was then usual way: they rarely disagreed with each other and they also fully agreed with what the teachers said. They had a lot of support from the moral consensus in society, which no longer exists. My generation thought that if they did the opposite of their parents, it would be OK. But this also turned out not to be the best approach.

Young parents today are pioneers, who have to discover completely new ways of parenting that have not been followed before at any time in history.

Here are various characteristics that have an impact on the quality of the adult-child relationship:

a. Subject subject relationship

At the Kempler Institute we did not start with a particular theory. We wrote down our approach as our experience grew. However, meanwhile brain science has developed very quickly over the past decades and scientific discoveries about the brain nowadays confirm the approach which we took. The new paradigm that is emerging is: as soon as children are born they should have a subject subject relationship with their parents, instead of what we have been thinking until recently, that this was a subject (= the parent) -object (= the child) relationship. This paradigm was developed by professor Daniel Stern, a Swiss-American,

who works in the areas of medicine and psychoanalysis at the University of Geneva. As soon as we start to follow this approach with children and adolescents very often the difficulties will disappear.

b. Start to think in terms of relationships

Another important finding is that it is very useful to look at the relationship of the adult with the child, instead of looking at the behaviour of the adult or the behaviour of the child. If something is good for the relationship it is also both good for the adult and for the child.

c. What does the child bring?

- The reactions of children are always meaningful in the relational context
- The child is born with social skills and desires. One of the main objectives of education was and still is to enable children to become social beings. Recently we have discovered that children are social beings from the moment of their birth.
- The child is able to be (personally) responsible. Here the same is true: we thought that we had to teach this to children, but they have this ability also from the start, even at only a few days old. You see this, for instance, in families where a parent is an alcoholic. Here children tend to take on too much responsibility. To give another example, a longitudinal study took place over a 25 year period in which two groups of 60 children each were followed: the children in the first group were free to indicate how much and what they wanted to eat, the children in the second group were not given this freedom. The result: the children that had the freedom to eat in accordance with their appetites thrived much better and developed fewer psychosomatic symptoms later on in their lives.

d. Relational competence

Adult and/or professional competence is the ability to 'see' the child on his/her own terms and adjust one's behaviour in accordance therewith, without giving up the leadership. For example, Great Britain is being observed by teachers from all over Europe, because so many teachers in Britain suffer from burn-out. One of the reasons for this is that the teachers don't focus enough on the relationship with the child, but focus instead on the curriculum. If you want to improve the quality of childhood then do not give the extra means directly to the children, but instead treat the teachers and the parents better, because then the children will benefit in the most optimal way. A recent meta-study from the Danish Pedagogical University has gone through the conclusions of 175 studies and the conclusion is, that teachers' "relational competence" is THE most important factor in children's learning.

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e. Ethics

By ethics I mean the 'ability and willingness of the adult to take full responsibility for the quality of the relationship'. Children have social skills and can take personal responsibility, but they do not have the ability to take responsibility for the quality of the relationship between themselves and the adult.

To give a couple of examples:

- For centuries adults have been practicing a moral double standard in relation to children – i.e. When our relationship to children is successful it is our success – when it is not it is the fault of the child.
- In the Scandinavian countries the number of children and youth who are victims of public institutional abuse and neglect is now considered to be higher than the number of children being neglected and abused within their families.

I have been teaching teachers to take responsibility for the quality of the relationship. You cannot measure if it is present, but you notice it within 10 seconds after you enter a classroom. In the Nordic countries we no longer come across the phenomenon of five year old children who are afraid of adults. This is a real achievement. Children have become real human beings: they ask for respect before they will show respect. Of course, many teachers do not like this: they want to get their power back.

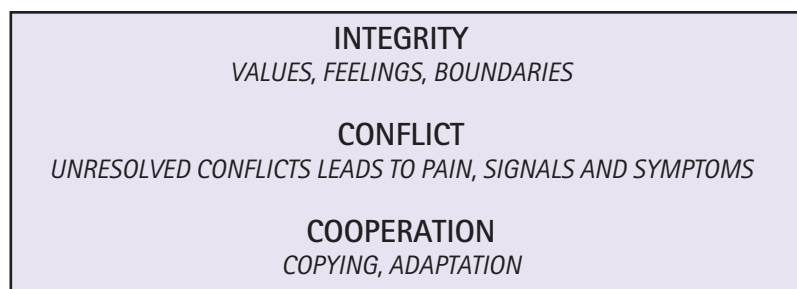
f. The values:

The following values are fundamental for the quality of adult-child relationships:

- Equal dignity. This does not have to do with equality or democracy. It means that the adult respects the child to the same degree as he or she would respect another adult regarding his/her actions, thoughts, ideas etc.
- Personal integrity (taking care of our personal needs and boundaries and respecting those of the child)
- Responsibility
- Authenticity. Parents try to be perfect parents. In that case the parent tries to be 'the role', but the child is looking for the real person inside, not the role that the parent is playing.

g. Cooperation versus integrity

Take a look at the following diagram:



During the past three decades many children have learnt both to cooperate and to maintain their own integrity. By the word integrity I mean a collective concept that relates to the wholeness and inviolability of our physical and psychological exist-ence, including issues such as identity, limits and personal needs. Children can in fact set their own limits to a great extent, but often they will disregard their own needs if these needs conflict with those of their parents. They will then choose to cooperate instead of thinking of themselves.

If people have not learnt to maintain their personal integrity and always try to please others they run the risk of destroying their physical and mental health, which may lead to burn-out. It is therefore of vital importance that children are treated in such a way that their integrity is respected. They will then copy this behaviour themselves and be aware of maintaining their integrity.

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h. Self-confidence and self- esteem

Self esteem = who I am and how I feel about me – a more Nordic approach

Self confidence = what I can do or achieve – a more American approach

Self esteem is our knowledge about, and experience of, who we are. It addresses the question of how well we know ourselves and how we look upon what we know. Self esteem can be envisioned as a kind of inner pillar, centre or core. People who have a healthy, well-developed sense of self-esteem feel self-contained and at ease with themselves.

Self confidence is a measure of what we are capable of, what we are good and clever at, or awkward and inefficient at doing. It refers to what we can achieve.

If one has a healthy self-esteem, then self-confidence is rarely a problem. The opposite, however, is certainly not the case.

It is of vital importance to help children to acquire self esteem. Let us take as an example a mother feeding a toddler. When the child does not want to eat any more the mother can say: Ah, you are full? You don't want any more food? With this approach the child learns the following:

- The mother gives the child a language for the body (there is a word for this feeling and that is 'full')
- It is OK to be full;
- I am respected as I am.

In earlier generations the mother defined when the child was 'full'. My approach is: do not define who your child is, but instead be interested in who your child is.

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i. Social responsibility and personal responsibility

There are two different forms of responsibility that I would like to speak about:

- Social responsibility is the responsibility we have for each other, those in our family, our community, society, and the world. It enables larger groups of people to live together. We learn social responsibility from our parents and teachers.
- Personal responsibility is the responsibility we have for our own lives, our physical, psychological, mental and spiritual health and development. Few of us have been raised to assume this type of responsibility, but it is one of the pillars of healthy psychological development and consequently of healthy relationships.

For children it is important to live with adults who:

- Safeguard their personal integrity
- Intervene when they sense that children are cooperating to an excessive degree.

The old way: parents took away the personal responsibility of the child until he or she was 12 or 13 years old and then gave it back. I advocate the approach that parents leave the personal responsibility to the child as far as possible, but of course they should be present and support the child where necessary.

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A few examples:

- A young girl of three years old walks down the stairs. The grandmother wants to hold her hand, but the girl refuses: 'I want to do it myself'. When they are on the ground-floor the little girl says: 'I did it myself, but not alone.'
- Attitude to school: at some point children grasp the idea: "I don't like school, but in some way it is useful for me and I have to do it." Then they start to take personal responsibility for this.
- In 1989 I worked in Croatia and when I was there I spoke about 'personal responsibility'. My audience did not understand what this was because they had lived for so long in a society where the state took all decisions. From this example one can see that a strong democratic tradition is necessary for building personal responsibility.

Children speak in political terms. They say for instance: 'I want to take a decision myself'. In fact they want to say: 'I would like to take more responsibility'. The clue is that they can do it themselves but they need some help. It is thus our task to be creative in this process and let the child do as much as he or she can, without letting them be in risky situations. Of course, this is a dynamic process, because each day you can give the child more room to manoeuvre.

In this context we should distinguish two things:

- we are educating the child, and
- at the same time we have to pay attention to where the child is at this moment.

Take, for example, the school shootings that occur regularly in the USA, and also in Europe. At one of the incidents in Germany the adolescent who had just killed a whole group of teachers and students stated, before he killed himself: 'the only message that this school ever gave me was that I am a loser'. We should take the last words of this adolescent very seriously, because it gives us a powerful message about our school system. The pedagogy of the school system violates in a structural way the integrity of the student.

I advocate the introduction of some guidance for all parents regarding their parenting role, and not to limit this to the 5% of the parents that do worst. Nobody has the answer but all parents are eager to learn in this respect. It is important to find the right methodology for this.

Jesper Juul studied education and the history of European ideas. Later he combined the two. He also taught education. He has been working for the past 30 years as a family therapist and as the director of the Kempler Institute in Denmark, which is a post graduate institute which trains social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists and pedagogues. The Kempler Institute was one of the first institutions to focus on the theme of relationships. This is a very important element for kindergartens, schools and other pedagogical institutions.

At the Kempler Institute (which has 65 employees) they did counselling work and advised on the pedagogical development of institutions such as kindergartens and schools. Jesper has worked in many European countries, including working as a volunteer for 6 months per year in refugee camps during the war in the former Yugoslavia. For the last three years he has been working on his own, doing what he has wanted to do for many years, namely to work on a higher level in the area of psychotherapy and to make it available to the general public. This project for public education is called Family-lab.com. Jesper Juul has written a number of books of which the following two are best known:

- *Your Competent Child, published in 13 countries*
- *From Obedience to Responsibility (for professionals, not yet translated into English).*

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