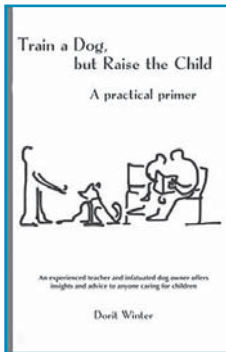


Book Review

Train a Dog but Raise the Child: A Practical Primer by Dorit Winter

Cindy Brooks



Train a Dog, but Raise the Child: A Practical Primer
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Many parent education books now focus on helping parents with two dimensions of the parent-child relationship: (1) fostering secure attachment and parent-child connection and (2) promoting children's emotional intelligence. Ever since the 1995 publication of psychologist Daniel Goleman's groundbreaking best-seller, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*, and the concurrent development of and research with brain imaging technologies, parenting educators have focused their attention more and more on parenting skills that build emotional intelligence and neural integration.

Brain-imaging studies of infants and parents have clarified the critical significance of parent-child interactions in the first year of life for the child's later development. During an infant's first year, neurological development takes place primarily within the right hemisphere where repeated experiences of parental soothing help establish connections between limbic and cortical centers. These physical connections, built through the soothing activities of attuned parents, provide the neurological foundation for the child's emotional maturity and resilience for the whole of life:

For the rest of the life span, the right hemisphere that has been imprinted and organized by early relational experiences is dominant for the nonconscious reception, expression, communication, and regulation of emotion, essential functions for creating and maintaining social relationships, especially intimate ones.¹

This vertical integration of the right hemisphere, established in the first year, is also seen as the neurological basis for the child's later development of trust, empathy, and morality.²

Researchers also have found that parents who attune to and guide their children with emotional intelligence throughout childhood raise children who are more likely to have better physical health, academic success, and social-emotional well-being; fewer behavior problems, including less violence; fewer negative feelings and more positive feelings; better self-regulation skills; and higher levels of resilience when faced with distress.³

So it makes sense that parent educators have been exploring how to help parents grow more emotionally-intelligent children. The central capacities being taught to parents include: noticing the child's emotion and one's own; recognizing the child's emotion as an opportunity to have intimacy with and give help to the child; listening empathically and validating the child's feelings and needs; responding empathically to the child's expression of feelings, wants and needs; and setting boundaries for behavior while helping the child solve the practical problems that are causing the child's emotional distress.

Waldorf education also values the emotional health of the child, and many Waldorf schools

and teachers are adopting strategies such as these to promote healthy communication and conflict resolution practices in their communities. As a child therapist and parenting educator, I have welcomed the increasing interest in fostering emotional intelligence and neural integration in children. The one aspect of this flood of attention to emotional intelligence that concerns me is the emphasis on talking to children about their feelings and asking them to reflect and be self-aware about their emotional lives before age 12.

My concern stems from Rudolf Steiner's insights regarding child development and the three phases of childhood, which I first encountered as I was beginning my work as a child and family therapist and which I have continued to explore in depth. It also stems from my own observations of children's developmental needs and difficulties, which I have encountered while working with children in play therapy and supporting their parents and from my work as a Waldorf parent educator. What has become clear to me from all these experiences is that children under the age of 12 are not ready for intellectual conversations with adults; in fact, such conversations work against their well-being. Many other Waldorf parenting educators emphasize this as well.⁴

Young children thrive when they can have plenty of physical movement, rich sensory experiences, purposeful work, and learn through imitation and doing. A regular daily and weekly routine is also essential for well-being in these years, as is protection from adult concerns and adult-style conversations. In the early years, when we talk to children abstractly, ask too many questions, or regularly ask them to be aware of adult concerns and concepts, including their feelings, then their integration with the physical body is weakened. I have seen first-hand how

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an overly intellectual parenting style can lead to anxiety, dysregulation and poor adjustment in a young child. During these years adults can best support a child's healthy growth by providing many opportunities for imaginative play, establishing a predictable life rhythm, engaging alongside the child in purposeful work, and communicating through action and action-words when relating with the child. This is what I have emphasized in my parent education work and in my own parent education materials.

In the second phase of childhood, children thrive when they experience nourishment for their heart and life (etheric) forces. If we emphasize and activate the thinking of elementary-aged children through talking to them using our intellect, explaining and giving reasons about why we want them to do certain things, involving them regularly in adult concerns, or talking about abstract concepts, including about feelings, the child's heart and life forces are weakened. True nourishment for the heart at this time comes from imaginative, artistic experiences filled with wisdom and truth, such as stories from the world's great mythologies or biographies and stories of the great figures and events of human history. It also comes from activities and experiences that call forth what is noblest and best in the child (and in us), especially adventures in places that are life-giving and full of beauty. Family or community celebrations, regular moments of reverence and ritual, creative play, artistic and musical activities,⁵ experiences of graceful, flowing movement—all these are the kinds of activities that open and nourish the heart and life forces of the child and build emotional intelligence, far more effectively and healthfully than conversations about feelings.

If we ask our children to talk and think a lot about their feelings before age 12, we are

encouraging them to use self-awareness, a capacity that belongs to the 'astral body,' which normally becomes active around age 12. The more we wake up a child's astral body in the years before 12, the more the child begins to feel and behave like a teenager—full of sass, with a desire for independence and teen-like interests, and less inclined to admire and revere parents. It is healthier for children to grow a strong and vibrant life body during the years 7-12 and not have their astral body awakened

early. Early awakening of the astral body floods children with its teenage impulses at a time when they are still children and not ready to handle these forces.

Abstract thinking is an activity of the astral body. It is in the nature of abstract thinking to combust etheric forces.⁶ This is why reading for a long time can make one tired. This is also why too much abstract thinking is harmful during the second phase of childhood, which is the phase dedicated to development and strengthening of the child's etheric forces.⁷ In the years between 7 and 14, a person's life-store of etheric forces is being created; these are the forces that will support one's well-being and physical health for the rest of his or her life! So it is important to protect children in this phase of childhood from activities which weaken their etheric forces. All of the activities mentioned above, that help build emotional intelligence without intellectual conversations, are also activities that add to the vibrancy and strength of a child's life forces. In contrast, intellectual conversations (as well as digital media) use up the child's life forces. Too much talk and self-awareness during the elementary years produce a thinking that uses astral forces which eat the child's etheric forces—this is another adverse effect of an over-intellectual child rearing. It is important to protect children from activities which inhibit or

diminish the fullness and vibrancy of their life body.

Waldorf communities understand the critical need to develop strength in the etheric body in the second phase of childhood. As such, we have a unique responsibility to the next generation to educate parents about how to nourish and protect their children's etheric bodies so that their children will have the strength they need in their years of maturity! This seems especially

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urgent given that our world⁸ does not understand the importance of protecting children's life forces and is bursting with trends that work against a strong and healthy etheric in the child.⁹

Dorit Winter, a retired master Waldorf teacher and mentor, has written a book for parents and teachers about how to raise children to become what only human beings can be: self-directed, mature, free-thinking agents of positive moral action in the world. This is also a book

about fostering the emotional intelligence of the child, however one that is more in keeping with a Waldorf understanding of childhood. Ms. Winter focuses on developing healthy habits and a healthy parent-child and teacher-child relationship without recommending intellectual conversations with the child.

Reading Winter's book, *Train a Dog but Raise the Child*, is a bit like going for a hike in the mountains: at first you walk through dense forest enjoying the plants, rocks, and creatures that are in close view; then the trail mounts a hill and a panoramic vista unfolds that takes your breath away. There is plenty of food for thought in this unpretentious book, for parents and teachers alike. It is written without reference to Waldorf methods or the principles of the Waldorf approach to education, so that any reader will be able to relate to the truths and common sense of her approach.

The idea for *Train a Dog* emerged a few years ago while Winter was training her new dog, Scamp, to behave himself enough that the two of them could enjoy living together. Much was required for Scamp's training that reminded Winter of the training that first grade teachers engage in to help young children develop healthy classroom habits when they enter first grade. While being clear that training a dog and raising a child are two very different endeavors, and highlighting the immense potential in a child that a dog will never approach, Winter manages to weave in humorous anecdotes from her life with Scamp together with stories from her years in the classroom. The result is a compelling account of profoundly significant tenets of upbringing and education for parents and teachers who are striving to do right by the next generation.

From the beginning Winter insists that it is the responsibility of the guiding adults in each child's life, both teachers and parents, to look at themselves if something is not going well with the child. This requires "being a grownup," an achievement which is not a given even when someone reaches or surpasses the age of maturity. Being a grownup means, in part, that one can muster and hold a position of authority with children and not let them run their own lives or the lives of the adults who are guiding them. Children may have wills full of gusto that can daunt the wills of their parents and teachers, but Winter reminds us that children always lack judgment in varying degrees throughout childhood; hence there is a need for adults to take responsibility and an authoritative role in guiding the child.

Authority is a concept with such negative connotations for many parents that asking them to be an authority in relation to their child can be almost anathema. Many parent educators discuss the importance of parents' tolerating their

children's dislikes and encourage parents to insist on children doing things they don't want to do. Still, many parents want so much to have their own unmet emotional needs fulfilled through the parent-child relationship that the concept of parenting with authority, however loving, is not an easy one for them to take up.

Winter's book speaks to the difficulty that parents naturally have in relating with authority to their own children. The book deftly distinguishes the different roles of parents and

teachers and encourages parents and teachers to understand their different roles so that they can appreciate each other's perspectives as they collaborate.

The adult capacities which are needed to help children develop healthy habits in their early years are explored through the lens of Winter's escapades in training Scamp as well as through examples from her years of teaching and mentoring other

teachers. The importance of establishing good habits in the child is seen as central to healthy development. The capacities of firmness, fairness, consistency, and what it takes to really have these capacities (BE CONSISTENT, PRACTICE, HAVE CONSEQUENCES, NO EXCEPTIONS) are brought to life through illustrative stories. These picture the adult as loving authority without using heavy-handed methods while keeping children on track, with a quiet sense of humor in the background. Winter further brings balance to this call for form and order as she insists that the instilling of habits in a child must be done without suppressing that child's individuality. It is a child's individuality, after all, that becomes the free-thinking, mature, resilient, moral adult.

The author also explores the central need for objectivity. While she compassionately recognizes that parents have a much harder time being objective when considering their children's needs and behaviors, Winter suggests repeatedly that a

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dose of objectivity will carry parents a long way in being effective and serving their children's true developmental needs. Objectivity is also seen as an absolute necessity for the teacher.

Other important lessons learned over many years are explored or touched upon: how to shape children's behavior in positive directions using only a whisper or no words at all, accompanied by meaningful gestures that engage the child's interest; how to anticipate children's needs so as to keep order and avoid chaos; how to be a model worthy of admiration; how to lead through enthusiasm rather than fear; how to develop and gradually increase the capacity for concentration in children; how to give rewards that foster health in the child and help build a positive sense of self; how to choose consequences for misbehavior that are effective in preventing the next impulse toward inappropriate action; and how to help children have a healthy relationship to food.

All of the skills that the book explores require being comfortable with taking a position of authority when parenting or teaching children. They also involve being "cool," which means being detached from particular outcomes and also from the search for fulfillment of one's own ego needs. Winter repeatedly recognizes that this is more easily done by teachers than by parents, who have much more reason to be subjective, warm and invested in their own ego needs when relating to their children. Yet the benefits of cultivating a 'cool' approach even for parents are clear.

In fact, Winter suggests that an outwardly cool demeanor can be paired with an inwardly strong wish or intention in relation to a child and that the pairing of outward cool with inward warmth is what helps achieve positive outcomes for teachers and parents. Perhaps this is because the spiritual strength involved in managing such a pairing is unconsciously recognized by the child.

Inspired by seeing real spiritual strength in the adult, the child responds with deep admiration and is moved to trust and attune with that adult's guidance and direction. In neuroscience, this kind of activity is called "co-regulation": the adult's regulated, integrated neural state moves the child's neural networks into "resonance."

Another well-tackled question in the book concerns children's happiness and whether they will love the teachers and parents who are guiding them with authority. Winter

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recognizes that, in considering such questions, it is important to understand the changing consciousness and needs of the child from preschool through eighth grade (and beyond). What makes a preschooler happy is very different from what makes a fifth grader

or eighth grader happy. Whether the child is happy reflects in part the degree to which the child's true developmental needs are being met: Young children need freedom to move and play imaginatively; older children need deep engagement with their subjects and to be challenged by their teachers and parents. The bottom line seems to be: Children are happy when they have confidence in their teachers, and that confidence needs to be earned. The same goes for parents. It is a big responsibility to guide the next generation to adulthood! We have to be models worthy of imitation in the early years and worthy of admiration in the elementary years.

The remainder of the book opens our eyes to even bigger questions. How do we protect and foster the inner strength, vitality and spirits of our children in the face of cultural trends which interfere with or threaten their free and healthy development? Here Winter introduces us to researchers and experts who have examined several central areas of modern life that she suggests are wrecking havoc with children's inner lives:

- the penchant for frequent travel which leads to sensory overwhelm in a young child and to armoring, habituation, and suppression of self;
- competitive sports that can lead to hardening of the body and depression of the spirit;
- the ubiquity of technology so that children now live in a world of distracted adults as well as a world in which technology companies market to even very young children. As a result, many if not most children experience the digital world as: (1) alluring and addictive, (2) full of chaotic and intrusive sense impressions that regularly overwhelm their nervous systems and activate their lower brain centers (fight or flight), (3) a regular source of distraction, inattention, mindlessness and perforated concentration, and (4) detracting from the development of good judgment and moral values such as empathy and compassion.

There is much to contemplate in this grand finale of chapters: What makes for true sustenance in the world of the child? What will make for a future world reflecting the highest and best in the human being? How can human spiritual capacities be protected and strengthened? There is much for parents to decide if they dare confront a culture that seems increasingly inimical to deeper spiritual values.

Perhaps Winter will consider a sequel to provide even more of the hows and whys for parenting with loving authority, for it is clear that she has unique insights into the art of raising spiritually strong children.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Allan Schore, "Attachment, Affect Regulation and the Developing Right Brain: Linking Developmental Neuroscience to Pediatrics," *Pediatrics in Review*, June 2005.
- 2 Schore.
- 3 See especially Maurice Elias, Steven Tobias and Brian Friedlander, *Emotionally Intelligent Parenting* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999); John Gottman,

Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997); Harville Hendrix and Helen Hunt, *Giving the Love That Heals* (New York: Atria Books, 1997); Daniel J. Siegel and Mary Hartzell, *Parenting from the Inside Out* (Penguin Books, 2004); and Daniel J. Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson, *The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind* (New York: Bantam Books, 2012), *No-Drama Discipline* (London: Scribe Publications, 2015), and *The Yes Brain: How to Cultivate Courage, Curiosity, and Resilience In Your Child* (New York: Bantam Books, 2018).

- 4 See especially Kim John Payne and Lisa Ross, *Simplicity Parenting* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2010), and Kim John Payne, *The Soul of Discipline* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2015).
- 5 Musical activities that are nourishing to the etheric include singing and playing instruments and listening to music that is not amplified or played on electronic instruments.
- 6 Our bodies have both anabolic and catabolic processes. Anabolic processes build up the body; catabolic processes tear down the body, releasing energy. Thinking is a catabolic process in which etheric forces are metabolized so that the process of thinking can occur.
- 7 Pictorial thinking, however, is strengthening to the etheric. Pictorial thinking is found, for example, in stories and imaginative activities.
- 8 The First World, at least.
- 9 Loss of imaginative play due to over-scheduling children after school; the so-called Nature Deficit Disorder that is a growing phenomenon; children's increasing access to all forms of digital media; and depletion of the soil and nutrient loss in our food supply due to the widespread use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides are some of these trends.

Cindy Brooks is a California licensed marriage and family therapist, a trained Waldorf early childhood teacher, and a Waldorf-inspired parent educator. She is co-author of *Discovering Joy in Parenting: The First Seven Years and other Waldorf-inspired parenting materials*. She lives in Aptos, CA. For more information about her parent education work, see www.inspiredfamilylife.com