



Wilhelm Reich's Work with Infants and Children: Then and Now

2020 Online Summer Conference

“He was a man of great contradictions, and I think that the pictures of him at the end of the illustration section show his different sides very clearly ... He was gentle with children – all through his life he maintained a wonderful immediate contact with children – and he was patient when he felt a situation or a person required patience. But he could [also] be the stern, impatient, awe-inspiring person of the final picture, especially with his assistants and co-workers.”

Reich's belief was that:

“every physician, teacher or social worker who will have to deal with children must show proof that he or she ... is sex-economically healthy and that he has acquired an exact knowledge of infantile and adolescent sexuality. That is, training in sex-economy must be obligatory for physicians and teacher.”

(Reich, MPF, Cpt. X; quoted in Sharaf, 1983, p. 321).

Reich's concerns about society were also centred more with the impact of the parents on the children:

“... there is still no law for the protection of new-born infants [either] against the parents' inability to bring up children or against the parents' neurotic influences.”



People in Trouble

In simple narrative form, [Reich] recounts his personal experiences with major social and political events and ideas, and reveals how these experiences gradually led him to an awareness of the deep significance of the human character structure in shaping and responding to the social process.

Reich's view was that:

“...the prevention of neuroses begins by excluding from the education of the child from his or her own parents, who have proven themselves to be the most unqualified educators.”

“But over the years he made much more of the contrast between the “natural family” and the “compulsive family than he did of the contrast between the family as educator and the state as educator.

The “natural family” was nothing more (or less) than the “lasting love relationship,” where the partners had children and were responsible for them in some not too clear combination with social facilities [available] such as day-care centres.

However, the fate of the children, if the relationship between the parents dissolved, was a question Reich never discussed in detail. And, as we shall see, subsequently, his relationship with his own children after his marriage with Annie dissolved was a source of great anguish to him”

(Sharaf, 1983, p. 142)





Boadella writes:

“At first [Reich] tended to leave to others the writing about children and their needs in specific detail, but later he got more and more absorbed in the life of the baby and young child, both personally and professionally.”

(David Boadella (1973). *Wilhelm Reich: The Evolution of his work*, p. 220)



A.S. Neill

“Just as in therapy, Reich was now concentrating on release of emotions and not ideas, fantasies, or the content of experiences, so – in education – his attention now became riveted by how the flow of feeling had come to be blocked in the first place and how this blockage might be prevented.”

(Sharaf, 1983, p. 325)



Reich with son Peter, taken around 1946



Reich, with Peter and Ilse Ollendorf on right;
With Eva and her partner / husband, Bill Moise;
probably taken at Organon in about 1949 -50

“I have throughout all of my lifetime loved infants and children and adolescents, and I also was always loved and understood by them. Infants used to smile at me because I had deep contact with them, and children of two or three very often used to become thoughtful and serious when they looked at me ... (This section concludes) ... I hope to have contributed my good share to their future happiness.”

A Quote from Wilhelm Reich's Last Will & Testament

“The fate of the human race will be shaped by the character structures of the “Children of the Future”. In their hands and hearts, the great decisions will lie. They will have to clean up the mess of this twentieth century. This concerns us who are living today in the middle of this great mess.”

Opening of the 2nd International Conference, Organon, 1950



Reich & Neill at Organon: 1947 or 1948

Yet [Reich] was so charitable about people. One of his sayings was: 'Everyone is right in some way'. But any attack on his work met with rage; there was no turning the other cheek when plague merchants smeared his work. He had a quick and strong temper and did not try to disguise or restrain it. With it went a wonderful capacity for softness and tenderness. To see him with his boy Peter, when he was five or six was a delight. I recall one day when Peter had been most difficult, anti-social, destructive, a real problem child. Reich was baffled and so was I. Suddenly he burst out laughing: 'Here we have the greatest schoolmaster in the world and the greatest psychologist ... and the two of us can't do a damn thing about the kid'.

Neill also said that Reich had said that he had no immediate hopes of his ideas being widely accepted in his lifetime.

“It will take a thousand years till humanity realises that it has taken the wrong path. Crimes and wars and cancer will one day be tackled by mankind as proofs of a wrong way of living”.

Letter: A.S. Neill to Wilhelm Reich: February 1950.

In: Placzec, (1981) *Record of a Friendship: The correspondence between Wilhelm Reich and A.S. Neill.*
(p. 272)

Reich replied very positively as his ...

“work in bio-energetics and prevention of armouring has, naturally, more and more been centered on newborn infants. The idea of organizing and building a home for infants and small children at Organon, where plenty of space is available and where the population is friendly, grew by leaps and bounds.”

“... up to the age of at least 5, the infants would need to be with their mothers for love and warmth. And even if they began at 5, I think mothers and fathers in N.Y. would hesitate to send their kids to a home [school] 500 miles away.”

Letter: A.S. Neill to Wilhelm Reich: February 1950.

In: Placzec, (1981) *Record of a Friendship: The correspondence between Wilhelm Reich and A.S. Neill.*
(p. 272)

Reich then wrote more about his plans for a school in Orgonon to be as a model and training school for the OIRC, for nursery and kindergarten teachers:

He describes OIRC course as being a great success with ideas:

“... grouped around two basic issues:

(a) the natural laws of self-regulation in newborn babies before the armouring sets in;

(b) the hate of armored living beings against the natural-given living principles in the baby.”

In: Placzec, (1981) *Record of a Friendship: The correspondence between Wilhelm Reich and A.S. Neill.*
(p. 273)

Reich wrote about the prevention of armouring:

*Prevention of armouring would not appear necessary **if** our children could grow up as nature or “God” has prescribed. It has been firmly established that organisms which function according to the law of nature are free of biopathies ... =>*

... However, before the discovery of the organismic orgone energy nobody knew what the “law of nature” looked like exactly. Like other animals, children are born everywhere without armoring. This constitutes the firmest foundation of mental hygiene, far better than any attempts at a later date to disarmor the human animal or to prevent armoring. Yet, this natural principle is continuously drowned out by other views which make it ineffective. We must ask how this could happen. There are several ways: ...”

This infant is not, as so many erroneously believe, an empty sack or a chemical machine into which everybody and anybody can pour his or her special ideas of what a human being ought to be. ... The basic task of all education, directed by interest in the child and not by interest in party programs, profit, church, etc., is to remove every obstacle in the way of this naturally given productivity and plasticity of the biological energy. ...
=>

Wilhelm Reich: *Children of the Future*, (p. 20)

=> ... Here, for the first time, we have found a positive and broad base of operation. These children will have to choose their own ways and determine their own fates. We must learn from them instead of forcing upon them our own cockeyed ideas and malicious practices, which have now been shown in every new generation to be most damaging and ridiculous. **LET THE CHILDREN THEMSELVES DECIDE THEIR OWN FUTURE.** Our task is to protect their natural powers to do so.”

Wilhelm Reich: *Children of the Future*, (p. 20)

There are many different ‘visions’ of possible “Children of the Future”. Most of these exist in science fiction; some of these exist in popular songs; some of these exist in poetry; many are idealistic; a few are dystopian; but all of these are – in essence – ‘visions’.

It is now increasingly necessary to have a more definitive re-assessment – an adoption of something like a ‘reality’ perspective – or even something of a revolutionary perspective – because, unsurprisingly, many of our present children are stating that they currently feel that they don’t have a future, or that we – the dominant adults – have effectively ‘stolen’ their future.

Courtenay Young (2020). *Children of the Future – Without a Future.*

Reich replied that he felt they should discontinue their ...

“... I propose that we stick to our work-democratic line which, applied to this special case, would mean the following: We are standing outside politics, working at the problem of the children of the future, and we do not drag in any political questions.”

Letter: Wilhelm Reich to A.S. Neill: September 1950.

In: Placzec, (1981) *Record of a Friendship: The correspondence between Wilhelm Reich and A.S. Neill.*
(p. 301)



From: Wilhelm Reich,
Listen, Little Man!

Send your politicians and diplomats packing

“If our parents, our tribesman, our authority figures, clearly expect us to be bad or antisocial or greedy or selfish or dirty or destructive or self-destructive, our social nature is such that we tend to meet the expectations of our elders. Whenever this reversal took place and our elders stopped expecting us to be social and expected us to be anti-social, just to put it in gross terms, that’s when the real ‘fall’ took place. And we’re paying for it dearly. ... =>

Jean Leidloff (1975). *The Continuum Concept: In search of happiness lost*. London: Penguin Arkana.

=> ... *The two words that I've arrived at to describe what we all need to feel about ourselves, children and adults, in order to perceive ourselves accurately, are 'worthy' and 'welcome'. If you don't feel worthy and welcome, you really won't know what to do with yourself. You won't know how to behave in a world of other people. You won't think you deserve to get what you need.*"

Jean Leidloff (1975). *The Continuum Concept: In search of happiness lost*. London: Penguin Arkana.



“I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear that I feel every day. We owe it, to the young people, to give them hope.”

Greta Thunberg, 2019



Greta Thunberg, 2019

"This is all wrong. I shouldn't be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope? How dare you! You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction. And all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!"

John Bowlby, states that:

“What is believed to be essential for mental health is that an infant and young child should experience a warm, intimate, and continuous relationship with (the) mother (or permanent mother substitute – one person who steadily ‘mothers’ him [i.e. the care-giver]) in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment”.

John Bowlby: (1951). *Maternal Care & Mental Health*: (p. 11)

What is therefore important to realize is that ...

No society can be regenerated except through the regeneration of the individual, who – in turn – is viewed as being largely the product of the social and educational environment that he or she exists in ... : i.e., lesser than their potential.

The existence of the community or collective depends on the support and endeavour of the individuals and the well-being of the individual can only take place within a supportive community. So, we have the beginnings of a potential pattern for the future and ... we really need to get that bit right as well.

“Children ... need adults who will protect them from the ever-ready molders of their world. They need adults who can help them to develop their own healthy controls, who can encourage them to explore their own unique endowments, who can know the limits of their own ego strengths and not allow programmers of any sort to infringe on those limits. Children need adults – in every walk of life – who care for children as [much as or better than] they care for themselves.”

Mr Rogers quote [my additions]

Reich also lists the basic requirements for designated educational and medical workers in this realm, “*Children of the Future*”, which were:

(1) to follow the principles of work democracy; (2) both utter humility and strong self-confidence; (3) interest in the welfare of future generations, as compared with present-day personal or professional friendships; (4) development of a clear rational hatred of the killer of life, no matter who or what he was; (5) firmness in the pursuit of truth and sharp self-criticism in the execution of this task; (6) restriction of the disease called “socialitis”, i.e. a sacrifice of one’s basic principles to social affiliations; (7) to keep two questions in mind when decisions are to be made: ‘What in the given situation is FOR and what is AGAINST the principle of the living and of natural self-regulation.’ The first has to be encouraged; the second has to be understood and, if possible, fought.

Wilhelm Reich: *Children of the Future*

We assume that in a newborn infant, an unwarped, highly plastic bioenergy system, emerges from the womb and from then on it will be influenced by a multitude of environmental impacts, which will begin to form the infant's specific type of reaction to pleasure and to sorrow.”

Reich then asks:

“What obstacles do we encounter if we decide to *let only the interest of the child, and nothing else, determine the course of events?*” [His italics]

Wilhelm Reich: *Children of the Future*.



“The therapeutic steps he took with Peter provided the essential principles upon which his later work with other infants was based.”

These steps were:

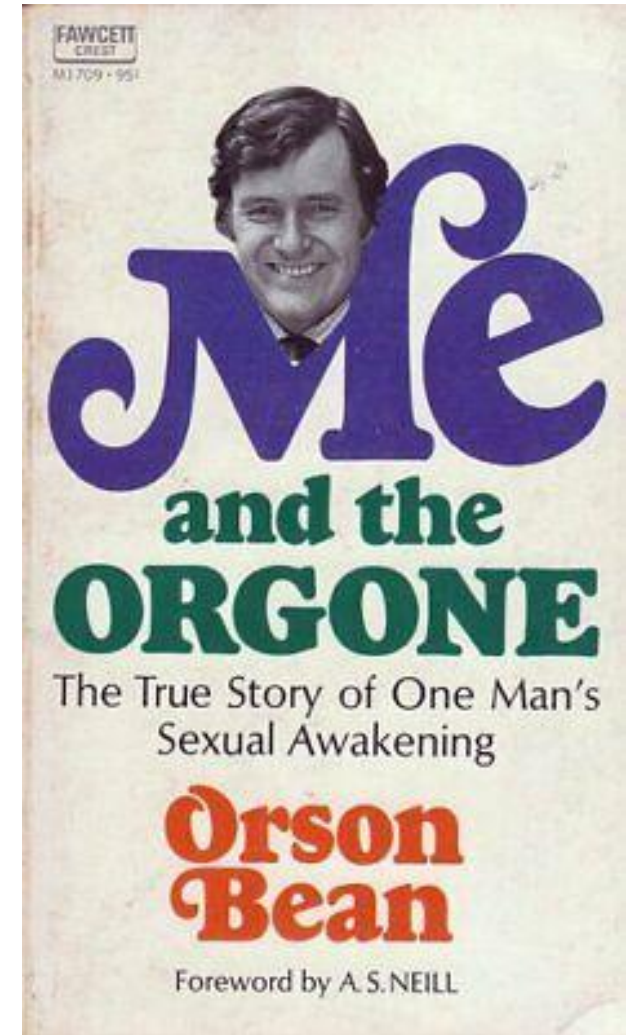
- (1) The child should be picked up and held whenever he cries;
- (2) Any muscular rigidities should be teased out, preferably as part of games with good eye contact and laughter;
- (3) A potential neurosis (like “falling anxiety”) can be ‘teased out’ by playing games that touch on that fear.

Reich had – in effect – developed a new method of child therapy:

“... a kind of “play therapy,” one derived from his long work with the bodily and emotional expression of adults and closely related to the energy functions he was studying in many different realms. Moreover, the kind of therapy he evolved was ideally suited for working with infants. Unlike the usual play therapy, it did not even require that the “patient” act out his fantasies in play and activities. All that Reich did was work directly with the emotional expression and the flow of energy through contact, body “games,” and muscle movement.”

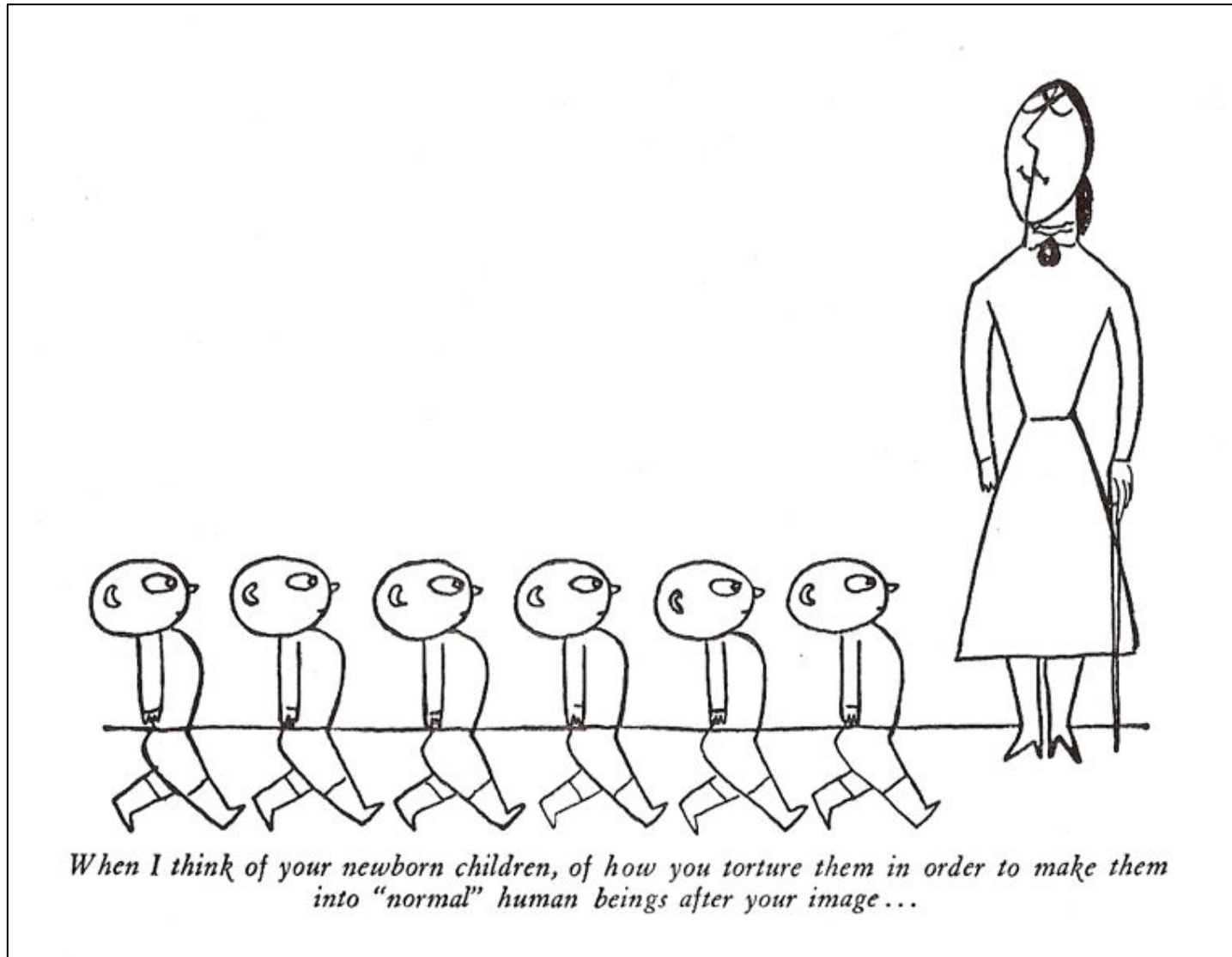
Until I read Neill's book, 'Summerhill,' I thought there were only two ways to bring up children, either with authoritarian discipline or with permissiveness. Either way, hopefully, applied with love. Now I know there is a third way: teaching a child self-regulation, not by coercion or by abandoning discipline, but by freedom with responsibility."

Orson Bean: *Me and the Orgone*.



“The tendency to explain rather than direct is part of a larger belief among progressive parents, rooted in the idea that critical thinking and learning are how we make (or should make) decisions, and it's an important practice that starts and can be facilitated at a young age. We encourage our kids to participate, as they are able, in decision making in our daily lives, and may even support them to challenge our and others' authority in situations where it's appropriate.”

Progressive Parenting:



Wilhelm Reich: *Listen Little Man!*



You think like a barrel, you educate like a barrel, you try to impose upon this life your barrel shape, your falseness, and your bitter hatred hidden behind your false smile

Wilhelm Reich: Listen Little Man!

“Once you know that you are somebody, that you have a correct opinion of your own. And that your field or factory have to serve life and not death, then you will be able to answer your question for yourself.

Your life will be good and secure when aliveness will mean more to you than security; love more than money; your freedom more than party line or public opinion; when the mood of Beethoven or Bach will be the mood of your total existence.

Wilhelm Reich: *Listen, Little Man!*

Children of the future age,
Reading this indignant page,
Know that in a former time,
Love, sweet love, was thought a crime.

William Blake: 'A Little Girl Lost':
from *Songs of Experience*

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