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## The Influence of Social Factors in Child Development

Erich Fromm  
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The goal of the education of children is not only to teach them, more or less intellectual knowledge, nor only to teach them virtues in the sense of honesty, courage, etc. The functions of any individual, within society, go far beyond the above mentioned: they must learn to work and to consume within the norms demanded by the means of production and the consumption patterns of their group and the society in which they live.

Let us take as an example, to illustrate our point: a primitive society, a tribe that lives on a small island in the middle of the ocean and where fishing is their only means of survival; let us also suppose that the species of fish in those waters require the fishermen's cooperation and we shall clearly see that the people of such an island must develop the wish to cooperate and the need for a peaceful coexistence. The same is true for certain types of exclusively agricultural societies. If, on the other hand, we use as an example a hunting or warring tribe, whose very life depends on hunting or on the conquest of other tribes, the required characterological traits of such societies will be those of aggression, combativeness and pride in individual prowess.

As a last example, let us take a feudal one: the members of the upper class had to develop a capacity for leadership, and we could add, the need to exploit others; he had to learn pride bordering on arrogance; he had to learn to find satisfaction in the life of the richness of his time and of waste. Whereas the members of the lower class had to develop the qualities of obedience and the patience necessary to bear misery.

During the 19th century, the main characterological traits, which at the same time were the main virtues of the middle classes, were the desire to accumulate and to economize; the desire to exploit others, particularly workers and peoples of other races, and a strong individualistic sense, aptly expressed in the phrase „my home is my castle.“

These characterological traits are fast disappearing in the 20th century and are no longer considered virtues, for in a society based on ever greater consumption, the individual must feel very satisfied consuming more and more, instead of in accumulating. And, in a society based on the cooperation of thousands of workers and employees within enterprises, what is required is team work, not selfish individualism.



Nevertheless, there remain certain common traits in the 19th and 20th centuries, such as the need to be punctual, orderly and trustworthy on the job; needs pertaining to modern industrial production, and which were practically non-existent, to any comparable degree, in the feudal society of some 300 years ago.

In order to function well, every society must have as its members, individuals who will act, almost automatically, in the way that particular society requires; in other words, *they must wish to do what they must do. If any of them had to decide, on a day by day basis if they want to be punctual or not, orderly or not, etc. they would probably decide, just as often as not, against the social demands, thus threatening the good functioning of their society. The individual must act almost automatically in keeping with the norms of his society; this means, that a social behavior trait must become a character trait.*

In every society, there are a group of character traits common to the majority of its members, we call this the „social character;“ its function is the survival of that society. From the individual's standpoint, its function is to prepare him to operate successfully within his society. Though the social character can be determined by many factors, its roots are built into the child by his parents; since their character conforms with the „social character,“ they mould the child's character accordingly. In this way, *the family becomes the psychological agent of society.*

As long as there are no basic changes in the social structure, this procedure functions harmoniously; yet when such changes occur, as they are happening nowadays all over the world, contradictions appear between the traditional social character and the new social demands for which the individual is ill-equipped. Parents, then, frequently feel impotent, they lose all authority and do not understand their children, often appealing for their assistance in a bewildering, dangerous and growing lack of responsibility. This new generation no longer understands the meaning of life, where to go, nor what to aspire to, for though at school and church they are taught the ancient virtues of humility and honesty, the young are immersed in a society centered on the wish for more money and consumption – which often means more waste. They feel out-dated with their education that by-passes new developments and their parents feel powerless for they are also disoriented and confused.

Till now, I have described only one aspect of the situation; the outcome of a society that needs to conform human beings who satisfy her needs; but humans are not a blank sheet of paper on which society writes the text; they have their own basic needs, which they share with all the human race; they need to relate to others; they need to feel rooted in a world they consider their own; they need to transcend their feelings to be a creature either by creating or by destroying; they must have their own sense of identity that allows them to say „I“ and to have a frame of orientation that gives some meaning to the world they live in. If a human being is completely unrelated, or is totally destructive, he would be insane.

For the social purpose, human beings must have the objective of their social character. For the ends of man, for his well-being and his self-realization, he must create a society that will fulfill the goals of the human race. A society will be a healthy society, if it tends towards the creation of a social character that approximates the universal human



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character; the more discrepancies there are between the social demands and the human demands, the worse-off that society will be. In this latter situation, man can only choose between a severe nervous breakdown or to change his society so that it can better fulfill the needs of universal man.

It is of utmost importance that today's parents do not lend themselves to be easily impressed by the social demands to be more successful and have more money and luxuries; they must think over carefully what to do they consider their values and ideals; what to do they consider to be the meaning of their lives and to not surrender so easily to their children and concede with their position that there are no universal values.

Mental illness is always a sign that basic human needs are not being satisfied; that there is a lack of love, a lack of reason for being, a lack of justice; that something important is missing and, because of this, pathological trends are developing. If parents really wish that their children be not only successful but also to be mentally healthy, they must consider as essential those norms and values that lead to mental health and not only those that lead to success.