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The Cognitive Capacity Argument

Submitted by Sarah Fitz-Claridge on 7 September, 2003 - 11:31

Posted by **David Deutsch** on the TCS List on Mon, 15 Jul., 2002

A poster wrote:

It's is also usually the case that what people really mean is not that "children (or women, or people of color) cannot be trusted to make decisions for themselves" but that "children cannot be trusted to make what I feel is a good decision for themselves". In other words, the child might choose differently than I want him to.

Another poster replied:

This argument ignores the fact that women and people of color are mature adults while a 3 yr old isn't.

And *that* argument ignores the fact that a white man is white and male, while women and people of colour are darker-skinned and female.

You can make this guilt-by-association argument but that doesn't prove anything.

It's not a guilt-by-association argument. It's an illustration of the fact that no circular argument is ever valid. So, in particular, when arguing against the proposition that children are cognitively fully human, it is no more valid to appeal to the fact that they are not mature adults than it would be for a racist to appeal to the fact that negroes have dark skin. The reason why it is invalid is that in both cases the connection between the dark skin, or the non-adulthood on the one hand, and 'lack of cognitive ability' on the other, is the very thing that is in dispute.

Why not say the same about animals? Animals only seem cognitively deficient but really their not, and it's all a plot to deny them their rights? Fact is, kids seem to lack cognitive capacity, and the onus is on you guys to argue the contrary. Sorry if this sounds confrontational, I am interested in hearing your argument!!!

I disagree that children seem to lack cognitive capacity. Children who do not understand language, do understand it a few months later. Animals who do not understand language, still do not understand it a few months later. It seems that the difference here must be due to a difference between the thought processes of children who do not understand language, and animals. In other words, animals seem to lack a certain cognitive capacity that the children possess.

Now, where is there evidence of a similar difference between children and adults? It seems to me that the evidence is overwhelming that children differ from adults in knowledge and skills (any one of which differs just as much between one adult and another as between adults and children) but not in the capacity to think. If anything, to the extent that there is such a thing as generalised 'cognitive capacity', it seems obvious to me that children have much more of it than typical adults – the evidence being that children acquire complex knowledge very rapidly, while adults notoriously change very slowly, or not at all. And note that the current dispute is exclusively about cognitive processes *that cause changes* – for instance, the process of being persuaded not to do something disastrous, or to do something necessary.

to post comments

Comments

Cognitive capacities

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 21 November, 2003 - 22:51

This strikes to the heart of my misgivings regarding TCS. My bright and highly articulate six-year-old son recently expressed reluctance to go to the bathroom by himself, unless I came and waited in his bedroom. Why? Because of the monster in the bathroom. Now, as I interpreted this, either a) he sincerely believed that there was a monster in the bathroom, or b) he knew there was no monster in the bathroom, but wanted me to believe that he did believe it, so that I would do as he wished. If a),

he is delusional (by adult standards),

if b) he was employing emotional manipulation to get his way. I don't see how either approach is truly rational. If he'd said, "I would feel more comfortable if you waited in my room while I used the bathroom," I would have responded, "Yes, but papa is washing the dinner dishes right now, and that is a higher priority. You are entirely capable of using the bathroom without one of your fathers being in your bedroom. Thank you for asking so politely."

to post comments

Re: Cognitive capacities

Submitted by Pat on 22 November, 2003 - 07:13

It sounds like the son was quite rational to me, in light of the reply he knew he would receive if he asked politely. It appears to me that this child knew that if he explained the true reason, that it would not be a sufficient reason for the father, so he quite rationally invented one that might work.

I think the father in this case is the irrational one, at least when it comes to his priorities between supporting his son versus washing the dinner dishes. The dishes can easily be cleaned at anytime, but his son needs him **right now**.

Pat

to post comments

Needs vs wants

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 23 November, 2003 - 20:44

When my son _needs_ me - a scrape that needs bandaging, when he falls off his bike and needs comforting, when he's hungry and needs food - I am there.

Wanting to have a parent waiting in the next room while you urinate is not a rational need - it's an emotional desire. If he wanted me to sit in a chair in his bedroom while he fell asleep, I wouldn't do that, either. That would be age-appropriate for a younger child, but not for a six-year-old. He frequently uses the bathroom without adult attendance - there's no _reason_ for him to need it. Teaching him that he can get what he wants whenever he wants it does not seem like effective parenting to me.

to post comments

When my son _needs_ me - a sc

Submitted by guttaperk on 22 March, 2004 - 03:40

When my son _needs_ me - a scrape that needs bandaging, when he falls off his bike and needs comforting, when he's hungry and needs food - I am there. Wanting to have a parent waiting in the next room while you urinate is not a rational need - it's an emotional desire.

I don't see any important objective distinction between any of the above. The primary need in each case is emotional; it's just that you identify with some of the emotions and not others.

Teaching him that he can get what he wants whenever he wants it does not seem like effective parenting to me.

I don't see how responding to emotional needs that you don't identify with constitutes teaching him that there are no limits to your satisfaction of his desires.

to post comments

My two year old doesn't under

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 3 July, 2004 - 02:36

My two year old doesn't understand that if we don't go to the grocery store now we won't have milk. She just screams that she wants milk when we don't have it.

My two year old does not understand that it's unsafe for her to stay in the kiddie pool by herself while I go in to go pee-pee. She just throws a fit that she has to get out so I can relieve myself.

My two year old doesn't know that if she refuses to take her epilepsy medicine, she could have a seizure that kills her. She just hates taking it and runs away when I try to give it to her. No amount of explaining the consequences of not taking it will change her mind right now, because SHE'S TWO YEARS OLD! She doesn't think like I do, she doesn't have the life experience to understand cause and effect, and she doesn't understand what dead means! She doesn't even know when she's had a seizure!! (But boy, I do!)

So hell yes, I'm going to coerce her to do things. It's my job to take care of her and teach her from my life experience, and no amount of psychobabble from anyone else is going to change my mind about that. (Good) Parents teach their kids the things they need to know to survive in this world. They always have, and I hope they always will. Children are different from adults, and we can't expect toddlers to process information the way adults do.

[to post comments](#)

But like adults they just wan

Submitted by a readerasdfg (not verified) on 15 January, 2005 - 20:46

But like adults they just want their needs satisfied.

[to post comments](#)

Unimmediate cause and effect

Submitted by intyaina ontaro on 7 June, 2005 - 09:22

TCS parenting seems very interesting and I'm glad to have found this site. However...

A reader wrote: *"she doesn't have the life experience to understand cause and effect, and she doesn't understand what dead means!"*

This I think really gets right down to what I don't understand about the TCS parenting view. Very young children do not understand long term cause and effect. And good understanding of that seems (to me) to be in many cases a premise for being able to reach a compromise between the two people (the child and the adult).

As an adult I know that if my daughter doesn't eat, she'll get hungry at night. And I can't give her food at night because I need to sleep. (Because if I don't sleep I'll fall asleep in my job, which will eventually get me fired which will lead to consequences I know my daughter wouldn't like.) This is not something I can simply compromise by going to get ice cream or something, and I don't really see a way to explain this to a child that only sees the immediate situation.

So it doesn't have to be anything as serious as dying to make the point - children do not see long term cause and effect, and this causes an inability to rationally compromise some things with them.

And even when they start to understand long term cause and effect, they will not understand the subtle effects.

For example, what if my daughter decides she loves pizza, and wants to eat pizza every day? I'm sure she'd never get bored with that - foods with a lot of fat often taste much better. (Even I'd *want* to eat unhealthy foods all the

time.) But that will lead to bad consequences like getting fat and other health hazards. Now what if she will not accept that? I feel that by TCS view I'm supposed to accept that I'm fallible on this as well, and she has an opinion as an equal, and I should respect her wish of eating pizza because it will not have any consequences on me. I should trust her decision. But as a parent I cannot let her make that mistake, so I'm going to have to force her to eat healthy food she won't like that much because of reasons she will not understand.

So how can I consistently use TCS and convey to my daughter that I'm taking her seriously, if there actually are situations where I'll simply have to force my will on her?

Now I really, really want to understand the TCS approach, so I wish you can explain what I'm thinking wrong here. TCS seems like a really great idea and (contrary to the reader quoted above) I really don't think it's just "psychobabble" or anything like that. But this is a thing I do not understand about it, and I hope you can help me, so please reply to me. I'm very interested in discussing this.

[to post comments](#)

Unimmediate cause and effect

Submitted by sadie (not verified) on 21 March, 2006 - 03:15

Well, I'll try to answer your questions, intyaina ontaro.

I actually had a doctor tell me that the main ingredients in pizza (olive oil, tomatoes and mozzarella) are wonderful for you. He told me he regularly eats thin crust pizza with extra sauce and spinach topping.

My point is, if your daughter were to decide she wanted pizza every day forever, you could help her as well as satisfy your desire to keep her healthy. How about whole wheat crust, organic ingredients, pizza topped with spinach, broccoli, mushrooms, green peppers, carrots, tomatoes, chicken, lean sausage, pineapple, or other healthy stuff?

The issue is that we **are** fallible...so fallible that it might not occur to us that pizza can be incredibly healthy and we can, in fact, support our children rather than have a gut reaction of 'pizza=bad'. ;-)

Food at night--why not set up a selection of healthy, non-perishable items by her bed? Glass of water, whole wheat crackers, Cheerios, an apple, or whatever else you come up with.

When you drop the idea of forcing your will on your child, you find so many wonderful opportunities to learn more yourself (like things about health and nutrition you might not have known), use your creativity and enjoy being on your child's side as you help her seek out safe and healthy ways to meet her preferences. :-)

[to post comments](#)

unimmediate cause and effect

Submitted by YoungDad (not verified) on 29 May, 2007 - 16:58

What many adherents to the TCS method are not taking into consideration is not cognitive capacity, but the fact that effective decision making and morality are learned skills, not inherent qualities.

Effective decision making is learned and honed over time, therefore rational explanations to a two year old are good in the sense that they will ingrain in her the ability to rationally problem solve, but for the time being she does not have enough experience to do as much.

The suggestion that one cater to her eating desires entirely is also unfair. As a family people live together, the parent is a person too, making meals that cater to the two year olds wishes teaches her not to compromise, and makes the parent a slave.

And this response about a more healthy pizza doesn't take into consideration the fact that not all children prefer pizza, some want peanut butter and jelly, some want mac and cheese, and some want cookies. What are the solutions there? Should one just allow their child to become malnourished or diabetic?

[to post comments](#)

What about development?

Submitted by Developmentalist (not verified) on 7 September, 2007 - 18:00

Do you think development is merely the acquisition of knowledge and skills? There is nothing else? What about the physical changes in prefrontal cortex, myelination, just to name a few?

I agree that the argument that it is ok (even necessary) for adults to coerce children because children have different cognitive abilities is wrong, but a better argument against -- one showing some understanding of human development -- would be that different cognitive abilities do not necessitate the use of coercion.

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