

The Moral Education Needed Today: Decolonizing Childhood and Reconnecting Children



Darcia Narvaez

Abstract The human psyche has been colonized by existing industrialized-corporate-military-economic powers that push us away from connection. Today in high income nations like the USA, children grow up unnested and disconnected, not only from other people but from the natural world. Without nested companionship, children grow without the deep social bonding and nature connection characteristic of our ancestors. Instead, children learn to resonate with archetypal forms of abandonment, growing up dysregulated and disconnected, becoming more self-protective than open-minded or openhearted, unlike the adults from societies where our evolved nest is provided. Because our species-typical developmental system or nest is denied for most children, they grow up anxious, seeking remedies in addictions, including control or addictions. Virtue development is simultaneously thwarted. Many children in the USA arrive at school after a toxically stressful childhood with dysregulated neurobiologies (e.g., overreactive stress response) and underdeveloped sociality. Educators can help meet students' needs for calmness, belonging, and connection by mimicking our ancestral context for raising healthy and happy children. In our ancestral context, humans are lovers of the earth, beauty and wholeness. Getting back to respect the other-than-humans is critical for ecological health. Ideas and efforts to educate for reconnection to nature are spreading.

1 The Setting

Civilization likes to tout itself on solving longstanding human problems (e.g., Pinker, 2011). However, knowledge of our deep history shows the opposite to be true. Civilization has brought about declining health, epidemics, war, slavery, colonization, species extermination—all problems that continue to plague the world (Wells, 2010). For some millennia, grain-dependent societies have decimated their land base, undermined the balance of local ecologies, and claimed the lands of others, enslaving or

D. Narvaez (✉)
University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN, USA
e-mail: dnarvaez@nd.edu

destroying anything in the way (Zerzan, 2018). Although the Chinese and others traveled the world long before, when Europeans developed technologies for successful marine navigation, they went out to colonize the world, eliminating what they did not recognize or honor (Turner, 1994). Sanctioned by the Doctrine of Discovery and the Law of Corporations (Kyd, 1793), the hegemonic attitude toward the rest of the world continues today among high-income countries and their global institutions promoting capital over every other value (e.g., World Trade Organization; Wallach & Woodall, 2004). Like capitalism earlier, neoliberalism has been forced on the globe, accompanied by vices turned into virtues and rewarded: dishonesty, greed, envy, lust, pettiness, vulgarity, cruelty (Mueller, 2002), creating vast material inequality, and inequality in human well-being (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011). An extraction and consumerist ideology requires a disconnection from the earth community to dominate, control, and exterminate the unwanted, thwarting evolution's "design" of a diversity of species, "endless forms most beautiful" (Darwin, 1859). Instead, the dominant culture seeks to standardize and homogenize human beings along with everything else, eliminating the biocultural diversity of the planet's evolutionary history (Zerzan, 2018). The dominating powers have brought about the "death of birth" and the sixth mass extinction, as argued by Wilson (1992) and Kolbert (2014). And so, because of a shifted baseline about what is normal and an expectation of "progress" (Narvaez, 2019c), we are at the brink of planetary disaster for ours and many other species.

2 The Human Cost

The human psyche has been colonized by existing industrialized-corporate-military-economic powers though the initial domestication of the human spirit which may have begun with settled agriculture and the enslavement of weed species (particular grains, domesticable animals) (Martin, 1992, 1999). Most humans resisted domestication for most of human history (Zerzan, 2018). However, the relentless robbery of the commons over millennia by elites (Bollier, 2014; Polanyi, 2001) and forced human enslavement as part of civilization's need for labor began a vast colonization of human spirit that we experience today, furthered by industrialization—which instigated the perception of human beings as machines, and extended the ravaging capitalism of today (Moore, 2015).

The misunderstanding extends to humanity's place on the earth. In recent centuries and especially among industrialized nations, assumptions about human nature, human beingness, and human development are narrowly anthropocentric. The rest of the earth, the other-than-human, is perceived as only a stage for human activity (Kohák, 2000) rather than a web of relationships among persons, only some of whom are human (Harvey, 2017). In the dominant paradigm from the West, humans are perceived to be more like machines than relational creatures with spirits and insight-consciousness (Bohm, 1994). Morality too has become disembodied and

often disconnected as intellect and reasoning are emphasized over emotion and intuition development, relational capacities, communal imagination, and holistic virtue (Narvaez, 2016).

But civilization is not our original heritage. What is typically ignored is that the human genus has been around for 6 million years and the species homo for about 2 million years. For 99 percent of our existence, humans lived as small-band hunter gatherers, still in existence with members numbering from 5 to 50 (Fry, 2006). These societies lived in “immediate-return” economies where collected or hunted food was consumed right away. These people moved periodically along well-tread migratory routes, shifted in and out of collectives at will, and lived sustainably or perished. Several of these groups have been around for 100,000–150,000 years (Lee & Daly, 2005; Suzman, 2017), living largely peacefully and durably (Fry, 2013). Importantly, these societies provide our species-typical child raising approach, as nested and connected members of the earth community, which may be necessary to reverse the planetary damage underway.

3 Child Raising

For some time, civilizations have moved away from our species-typical way of growing optimal human beings. Babies arrive very immature so the species evolved intensive caregiving in early life (the evolved developmental niche or nest; EDN; Narvaez, 2014),¹ when neurobiological systems are highly immature and require extensive support for proper development (e.g., Narvaez, 2018; Narvaez et al., 2013; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). As a result, we are “biosocial becomings” (Ingold, 2013) and self-organize around our experiences, resonating with the states and overtures of our caregivers (Trevarthen, 2001). Civilization has degraded its provision of the EDN, ignoring or minimizing our species’ basic needs, shifting human nature toward self-protectionism (Narvaez, 2016, 2019a, 2019b, 2019d, 2019e).

Without nested companionship, children grow without the deep social bonding and nature connection characteristic of our ancestors. Instead, children learn to resonate with archetypal forms of abandonment, growing up dysregulated and disconnected, becoming more self-protective than open-minded or openhearted, unlike the adults from societies where the EDN is provided (Ingold, 2005; Konner, 2005; Narvaez, 2014). Thus, instead of helping young children grow and develop their evolved inner guidance system with community support, the dominant industrialized cultures have engineered childhood away from growing the inner compass, instilling fear

¹ The Evolved Developmental Niche (EDN) for human beings is only slightly different from their social mammalian line’s developmental system, which emerged between 20 and 40 million years ago. Humanity’s EDN includes soothing perinatal experiences, breastfeeding for several years, and throughout childhood: responsive relationships including with a set of alloparents, affectionate touch, positive climate, self-directed play, and nature connection (Hewlett & Lamb, 2005; Narvaez, 2014).

and anxiety, altering the course of children's development and requiring external sanctions to control the dysregulated persons that result.

Worldview is affected by the lack of the EDN (Narvaez, 2019). The multi-generational experience of dysregulated individuals influences the perceptions of human nature. Whereas in societies that provide the EDN human nature is presumed basically good and an ongoing development throughout life (Sahlins, 2008), EDN-degraded societies assume that the dysregulated individuals they produce are representative of human nature generally (e.g., Hobbes, 1651/2010). They often fail to understand that in the absence of companionship (EDN) care, humans become destructive (Clark, 1990). Children's lives have been twisted away from species-normal experiences to those that foster peonage of empire. We take this for granted now. We make children and expectant mothers afraid and undermine their bonding and relational trust. Children's temperament and personalities form around self-protection. We force everyone to comply with the system or be punished. No other animal abuses its offspring with punishments and coercions or engineers their offspring as do hierarchical human societies.

Significantly, children are no longer given role models of optimal human functioning with all capacities developed (and instead, in the USA, most media role models are violent). The experiences and narratives adults provide have become very narrow and derisive of anything outside of dominating and consuming a materialistic, manifest world. Children are surrounded by anthropocentric role models aimed at achievement and material gain rather than facilitating bio-communities to flourish. In the deadening prison, that is civilized society today, children spend their time from a young age in front of screens (Turkle, 2017). This draws children away from their own center and makes them ever dependent on outside stimulation and direction. The way humans are bio-socially constructed has worsened with the development of media that interferes with young children's brain and social development as they become far more attached to cell phones rather than to faces and face-to-face games. In this process, individuals grow up with little sense of freedom, autonomy and wholeness.

Children are self-organizing, meaning makers from what they experience and as social mammals evolved to expect a highly supportive developmental system (Narvaez, 2014). Our children and the adults they become have been signaling that things are not right for generations. But there is no way to fix the current crises with more of the same, with manipulations and fixes of disordered children and adults. Instead, we must return to our heritages of honoring children, providing the evolved nest to all, ensuring that everyone's basic needs are met. The solution is to return to the sustainable ways—attitudes, skills, perception, worldview—of our sustainable ancestors. To do this, we must decolonize and reconnect our children.

4 Moral Education as Reconnecting Children

Getting along with others, including other-than-humans, cooperatively was a key adaptation of our ancestors and fundamental to virtue (Narvaez et al., 2019). But cooperation has not been considered necessary to foster through modern education where the focus has been largely on developing cognitive faculties, often at the expense of affective, intuitive, creative, and cooperative sensibilities (though see recent moves in the USA toward social and emotional learning [SEL] programming in schools; e.g., Elias et al., 2016).

Though we are innately prepared for cooperation, many of its skills must be fostered by supportive experience—which the EDN provides in early life as layers of neurobiological systems are shaped for life, through epigenetics and other mechanisms (Narvaez, 2012). If the postnatal period is socially stressful and poorly responsive, the neurobiological structures of mature personhood will be foundationally undermined (Narvaez, 2014). The gaps in foundational capacities are initially masked but emerge later when other layers meant to be built on top of earlier layers reveal the weak or nonexistent “floors below” (Knudsen, 2004). Or, the gaps emerge under stress, leading to a cacistatic response (too much or too little), less adaptive than the flexible responses of an intelligent creature.

Facing a classroom of anxious, depressed, or dysregulated students, educators can provide a sustaining classroom environment (Narvaez, 2010; Narvaez & Bock, 2014). They can guide pupils in learning self-calming practices, such as belly breathing. At the same time, class activities can help students build social skills and social bonding with classmates. Educators can help students understand their fuller connections, to the community and to the natural world, mimicking as much as possible our ancestral formula for raising healthy, happy children (Narvaez, 2014).

In our ancestral context, nature and village provided the moral education “classroom.” Childhood evolved to be a time of play and exploration with no socially induced fear. Children were able to self-organize within the evolved nest where basic needs were met for high autonomy, belongingness, competence, and social purpose. Life took place within a particular natural landscape where children learned to be cooperative with nature’s laws, developing the virtues needed for band life: social attunement, consideration, enjoyment, imagination; virtues that extended to the other-than-human persons in the local landscape. Virtue was necessary for survival. The non-industrialized world continues to show a broader sense of human insight-intelligence and consciousness, one that connects with the local natural world and universal energies, centering individuals and communities in developing socio-emotional and ecological intelligences that allow for living durably with the landscape. Restoring an Indigenous worldview² in education may be fundamental for planetary flourishing (Four Arrows, 2016; Four Arrows & Narvaez, 2015).

² The Indigenous worldview is one of two worldviews (Redfield, 1953). It considers the cosmos moral, connected, sacred and sentient whereas the dominant worldview considers the cosmos amoral, fragmented and disenchanting. The two worldviews hold contrasting assumptions which affect attitudes beliefs and behavior (Four Arrows & Narvaez, 2022).

Within schooling, decolonizing and reconnecting children means giving them back their power to grow themselves with a supportive community that provides virtuous role models and non-coercive mentoring (Montessori, 1966). It means giving space to individual growth trajectories following the built-in evolved logic of development (Steiner, 2003). Like all animal offspring, children have built-in guidance systems for developing their full capacities when given appropriate role models and support. Honoring children's biological imperative means not forcing literacy training but waiting for the child herself to initiate it (Shepard, 1998). Immersed experience in living life is expected by children's innate developmental course, not reading about life. Building knowhow skills in multiple domains, especially those of passionate interest, should be the focus of childhood until adolescence. Schooling approaches that tend to follow the child's own developmental course include Montessori (Seldin, 2006), Reggio Emilia (Edwards et al., 2012), Sudbury (Gray, 2013), and Waldorf (Steiner, 2003). All these approaches point to play as the primary activity of childhood (Sahlberg & Doyle, 2019). Honoring individuality within schools means letting the children decide how to spend their time, with fast amounts of play expected and supported (Gray, 2013). Neuroscience supports this but so does over 30 million years of social mammalian heritage (and longer; Burghardt, 2005). Adults who did not play as children are more stiff-minded and aggressive, not having built the neurobiological structures for flexible responsiveness that marks intelligence (Narvaez, 2014). These approaches put children's needs first, making it more likely that they will grow into healthy, creative citizens.

5 Nature Connection

In our ancestral context, humans are lovers of the earth, beauty and wholeness. For example, Indigenous science considers humans as multifaceted beings comprised of body, mind, heart, and spirit who live in a world of many persons, including humans and the other-than-humans, a view that aligns with most articulated and unarticulated views around the world, and pre-Enlightenment perspectives in the Western world (Cajete, 2000; Harvey, 2017). Over millennia, civilization's distrust of nature and organic human nature increased alongside earth destruction leading to the environmental and spiritual crises faced today (Merchant, 2003). Getting back to respect the other-than-humans is critical for ecological health. Ideas and efforts to reconnect humans to nature are spreading. Jon Young and his team's work on nature connection may be an exemplar—they use community music making, rituals and trance to routinely let go of (not grasping) grudges, stress, and grief (Young, 2019). Schooling too can intentionally support nature connection (Sobel, 2015) and help children grow into earth-respecting creatures.

References

- Bohm, D. (1994). *Thought as a system*. Routledge.
- Bollier, D. (2014). *Think like a commoner: A short introduction to the life of the commons*. New Society Publishers.
- Burghardt, G. M. (2005). *The genesis of animal play: Testing the limits*. MIT Press.
- Cajete, G. (2000). *Native science*. Clear Light Publishers.
- Clark, M. E. (1990). Meaningful social bonding as a universal human need. In J. Burton (Ed.), *Conflict: Human needs theory* (pp. 34–59). St. Martin's Press.
- Darwin, C. (1859/1962). *The origin of species*. Collier Books.
- Edwards, C., Gandini, L., & Forman, G. (Eds.). (2012). *The hundred languages of children: The Reggio Emilia experiences in transformation* (3rd ed.). Praeger.
- Eisler, R., & Fry, D. P. (2019). *Nurturing our humanity*. Oxford University Press.
- Elias, M. J., Ferrito, J. J., & Mocerri, D. C. (2016). *The other side of the report card: Assessing students' social, emotional, and character development*. Corwin.
- Arrows, F. (2016). *Point of departure*. Information Age Publishing.
- Arrows, F., & Narvaez, D. (2015). Reclaiming our Indigenous worldview: A more authentic baseline for social/ecological justice work in education. In N. E. McCrary & E. W. Ross (Eds.), *Working for social justice inside and outside the classroom: A community of teachers, researchers, and activists* (pp. 93–112). Peter Lang.
- Arrows, F., & Narvaez, D. (2022). *Restoring the kinship worldview: Indigenous voices introduce 28 precepts for rebalancing life on planet earth*. North Atlantic Books.
- Fromm, E. (1955). *The sane society*. Rinehart and Winston Inc.
- Fry, D. P. (2006). *The human potential for peace: An anthropological challenge to assumptions about war and violence*. Oxford University Press.
- Fry, D. (Ed.). (2013). *War, peace and human nature*. Oxford University Press.
- Gray, P. (2013). *Free to learn: Why unleashing the instinct to play will make our children happier, more self-reliant and better students for life*. Basic Books.
- Harvey, G. (2017). *Animism: Respecting the living world* (2nd ed.). C. Hurst & Co.
- Hewlett, B. S., & Lamb, M. E. (2005). *Hunter-gatherer childhoods: Evolutionary, developmental and cultural perspectives*. Aldine.
- Hobbes, T. (1651/2010) *Leviathan* (Rev. ed., A. P. Martinich & B. Battiste, Eds.). Broadview Press.
- Ingold, T. (2005). On the social relations of the hunter-gatherer band. In R.B. Lee & R. Daly (Eds.), *The Cambridge encyclopedia of hunters and gatherers* (pp. 399–410). Cambridge University Press.
- Ingold, T. (2013). Prospect. In T. Ingold & G. Palsson (Eds.), *Biosocial becomings: Integrating social and biological anthropology* (pp. 1–21). Cambridge University Press.
- Knudsen, E. I. (2004). Sensitive periods in the development of the brain and behavior. *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*, 16(8), 1412–1425.
- Kohák, E. (2000). *The green halo: A bird's eye view of ecological ethics*. Open Court.
- Kolbert, E. (2014). *The sixth extinction: An unnatural history*. Henry Holt.
- Konner, M. (2005). Hunter-gatherer infancy and childhood: The !Kung and others. In B. Hewlett & M. Lamb (Eds.), *Hunter-gatherer childhoods: Evolutionary, developmental and cultural perspectives* (pp. 19–64). Aldine Transaction.
- Kyd, S. (1793–1794). *A treatise on the law of corporations*. J. Butterworth.
- Lee, R. B., & Daly, R. (Eds.). (2005). *The Cambridge encyclopedia of hunters and gatherers*. Cambridge University Press.
- Martin, C. L. (1992). *In the spirit*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Martin, C. L. (1999). *The way of the human being*. Yale University Press.
- Merchant, C. (2003). *Reinventing Eden: The fate of nature in Western culture*. Routledge.
- Miller, J. P. (2008). *The holistic curriculum* (2nd ed.). University of Toronto Press.
- Montessori, M. (1966). *The secret of childhood*. Ballantine Books.
- Moore, J. (2015). *Capitalism in the web of life: Ecology and the accumulation of capital*. Versa.

- Mueller, J. Z. (2002). *The mind in the market: Capitalism in modern European thought*. Knopf.
- Narvaez, D. (2010). Building a sustaining classroom climate for purposeful ethical citizenship. In T. Lovat & R. Toomey (Eds.), *International research handbook of values education and student wellbeing* (pp. 659–674). Springer.
- Narvaez, D. (2012). Moral neuroeducation from early life through the lifespan. *Neuroethics*, 5(2), 145–157.
- Narvaez, D. (2014). *Neurobiology and the development of human morality: Evolution, culture and wisdom*. W. W. Norton.
- Narvaez, D. (Ed.). (2018). *Basic needs, wellbeing and morality: Fulfilling human potential*. Palgrave-MacMillan.
- Narvaez, D. (2016). *Embodied morality: Protectionism, engagement and imagination*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Narvaez, D. (2019a). Evolution, childhood and the moral self. In R. Gipps & M. Lacewing (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of philosophy and psychoanalysis* (pp. 637–659). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198789703.013.39>
- Narvaez, D. (2019b). Humility in four forms: Intrapersonal, interpersonal, community, and ecological. In J. Wright (Ed.), *Humility* (pp. 117–145). In book series, *Multidisciplinary perspectives on virtues* (N. Snow & D. Narvaez, series eds.). Oxford University Press.
- Narvaez, D. (2019c). In search of baselines: Why psychology needs cognitive archaeology. In T. Henley, M. Rossano, & E. Kardas (Eds.), *Handbook of cognitive archaeology: A psychological framework*. Routledge.
- Narvaez, D. (2019d). Moral development and moral values: Evolutionary and neurobiological influences. In D. P. McAdams, R. L. Shiner, & J. L. Tackett (Eds.), *Handbook of personality* (pp. 345–363). Guilford.
- Narvaez, D. (2019e). Original practices for becoming and being human. In D. Narvaez, Four Arrows, E. Halton, B. Collier, & G. Enderle (Eds.), *Indigenous sustainable wisdom: First Nation knowhow for global flourishing* (pp. 90–110). Peter Lang.
- Narvaez, D., & Bock, T. (2014). Developing ethical expertise and moral personalities. In L. Nucci & D. Narvaez (Eds.), *Handbook of moral and character education* (2nd ed., pp. 140–158). Routledge.
- Narvaez, D., Four Arrows, Halton, E., Collier, B., Enderle, G., & Nozick, R. (2019). People and planet in need of sustainable wisdom. In D. Narvaez, Four Arrows, E. Halton, B. Collier, & G. Enderle (Eds.), *Indigenous sustainable wisdom: First Nation knowhow for global flourishing* (pp. 1–24). Peter Lang.
- Narvaez, D., Panksepp, J., Schore, A., & Gleason, T. (Eds.). (2013). *Evolution, early experience and human development: From research to practice and policy*. Oxford University Press.
- Pinker, S. (2011). *The better angels of our nature*. Viking.
- Polanyi, K. (2001). *The great transformation: The political and economic origins of our time* (2nd ed.). Beacon Press.
- Redfield, R. (1953). *The primitive world and its transformations*. Cornell University Press.
- Sahlins, M. (2008). *The Western illusion of human nature*. Prickly Paradigm Press.
- Sahlberg, P., & Doyle, W. (2019). *Let the children play: How more play will save our schools and help children thrive*. Oxford University Press.
- Seldin, T. (2006). *How to raise an amazing child the Montessori way*. DK Publishing.
- Shepard, P. (1998). *Coming home to the Pleistocene* (F. R. Shepard, Ed.). Island Press/Shearwater Books.
- Shonkoff, J. P., & Phillips, D. A. (2000). *From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*. National Research Council, Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development. National Academy Press.
- Sobel, D. (2015). *Nature preschools and forest kindergartens: The handbook for outdoor learning*. Redleaf Press.
- Steiner, R. (2003). *Soul economy: Body, soul, and spirit in Waldorf education*. Steiner Books.

- Suzman, J. (2017). *Affluence without abundance: The disappearing world of the Bushmen*. Bloomsbury.
- Trevarthen, C. (2001). Intrinsic motives for companionship in understanding: Their origin, development and significance for infant mental health. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 22(1–2), 95–131.
- Turkle, S. (2017). *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. Basic Books.
- Turner, F. (1994). *Beyond geography: The Western spirit against the wilderness*. Rutgers University Press.
- Wallach, L., & Woodall, P. (2004). *Whose trade organization?: The comprehensive guide to the WTO*. The New Press.
- Wells, S. (2010). *Pandora's seed: The unforeseen cost of civilization*. Random House.
- Wilkinson, R., & Pickett, K. (2011). *The spirit level: Why greater equality makes societies stronger*. Bloomsbury.
- Wilkinson, R., & Pickett, K. (2019). *The inner level: How more equal societies reduce stress, restore sanity and improve everyone's well-being*. Penguin.
- Wilson, E. O. (1992). *The diversity of life*. Penguin.
- Young, J. (2019). Connection modeling metrics for deep nature-connection, mentoring and culture repair. In D. Narvaez, Four Arrows, E. Halton, B. Collier, G. Enderle (Eds.), *Indigenous sustainable wisdom: First Nation know-how for global flourishing* (pp. 219–243). Peter Lang.
- Zerzan, J. (2018) *A people's history of civilization*. Feral House.

Darcia Narvaez is Professor Emerita of Psychology at the University of Notre Dame who focuses on moral development and flourishing from an interdisciplinary perspective, integrating anthropology, neuroscience, clinical, developmental, and educational sciences. Dr. Narvaez's current research explores how early life experience influences well-being and moral character in children and adults. She is a fellow of the American Psychological Association, the American Educational Research Association, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science and is former editor of the *Journal of Moral Education*. She has published numerous articles and chapters, and more than 20 books. A recent book, *Neurobiology and the Development of Human Morality: Evolution, Culture and Wisdom*, won the 2015 William James Book Award from the American Psychological Association and the 2017 Expanded Reason Award. She writes a blog for Psychology Today ("Moral Landscapes") and hosts the webpage EvolvedNest.org.