

Hold on to Your Kids: Why Parents Need to Matter More Than Peers

By Gordon Neufeld and Gabor Maté
Reviewed by Elizabeth Madson Ankeny

When my children were born, I knew eventually there would be times when they wouldn't want to talk to me. I realized I needed to introduce them to strong, caring adults. Because if my children didn't want to talk to me, they could go to those nurturing adults to get the counsel or the support they might need.

When my wise friend Bea shared these words as we discussed parenting, she anticipated the premise of *Hold on to Your Kids: Why Parents Need to Matter More than Peers* (Neufeld & Maté, 2005); we must connect our children with nurturing adults.

Neufeld and Maté argue that given contemporary cultural and economic changes, children have lost their orientation toward the adults in their lives and have replaced it with peers. Harkening to Bowlby's (1969; 1982) classic study of the subject, Neufeld and Maté explain that attachment provides a firm foundation for parenting and a context for child-rearing:

When a child seeks contact and closeness with us, we become empowered as a nurturer, a comforter, a guide, a model, a teacher, or a coach. For a child well attached to us, we are her home base from which to venture into the world, her retreat to fall back to, her fountainhead of inspirations. (p. 6)

Although the volume's title suggests that it is written for parents, the audience should extend to teachers and other members of the caring professions (social, corrections, and rehabilitation workers; counselors; and psychologists). We are well aware of the increasing incidence (or at least recognition) of ADHD, emotional disorders, bullying, shunning, and vio-

lence among our youth. In addition, children have become secretive and hostile in their own homes. The authors describe how these concerns relate to misaligned attachment.

Why have seemingly normative parental connections been replaced with signs of detachment? Neufeld and Maté explain parents and children have not changed as much as the culture in which parenthood takes place. Children's attachments to parents no longer receive necessary support from culture and society; as a result, children are forming attachments that compete with parental connections, thus challenging primary caregivers with divided loyalties. For example, the natural parental desire to develop children's social competence by arranging out-of-home experiences (play dates, day care, preschool) may, in fact, be "setting up our children's peers to replace us" (p. 235). Such activities become what the authors call "peer oriented."

Hold on to Your Kids is organized into five parts. In the first three parts of the book, Neufeld and Maté meticulously explore the problem of "holding on"; in the last two sections they propose promising solutions. The authors generate reader interest by interspersing real-life stories from both personal and professional experiences.

In the first part of the book, Neufeld and Maté explain that, "parent-child relationships that at the beginning are powerful and fully nurturing can become undermined as our children move out into a world that no longer appreciates or reinforces the attachment bond" (p. 7). Peer attachments have come to replace relationships with adults as our children's sources of orientation. While it is not unnatural for children to connect with their peers, the concern lies in the fact that children have become the dominant influence in one another's development.

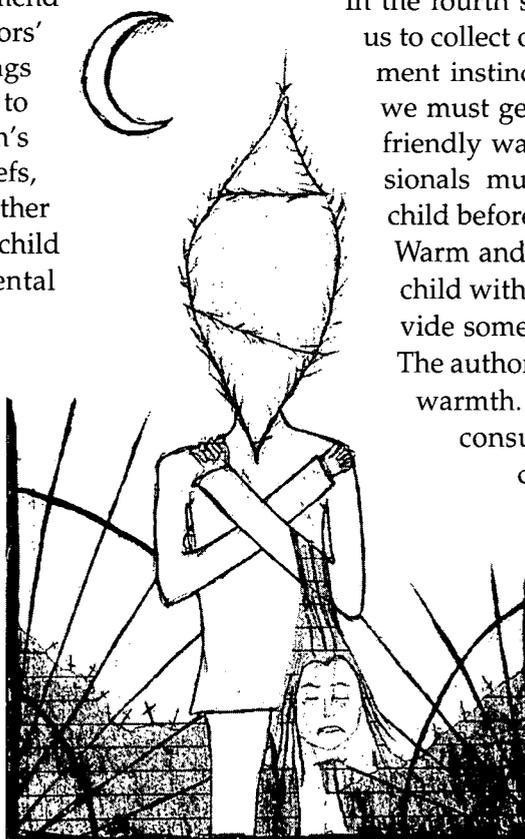
Parents and educators can easily become blinded by the effects of peer orientation. Witnessing our children traveling with a pack of friends, we look on with pride, patting ourselves on the back for raising such socially adept offspring. Even as they grow distant from us, we falsely attribute this change to their growing independence, self-sufficiency, and social precociousness—in other words, we view it as something normal and even desirable. While I hold to the importance of producing independent offspring, Neufeld and Maté offer us another perspective to consider—that we have sacrificed healthy attachments on the altar of independence and peer culture. I recommend that readers juxtapose the authors' viewpoint with research findings suggesting that parents continue to influence factors in their children's lives such as preferences, beliefs, and political stance, as well as other research findings indicating that child care does not promote parental detachment.

In the second part of the book, Neufeld and Maté clarify that the root of the change to exaggerated peer loyalties is the lack of parental power, not the absence of love, knowledge, commitment, or skill. "The power we have lost is the power to command our children's attention, to solicit their good intentions, to evoke their deference, and secure their cooperation" (p. 49). Therefore, peer orientation and all of its ramifications disenfranchise adults from peer-oriented

children. Peer orientation diminishes the child's attention to adults because adults are not top priority in the attention hierarchy of peer-oriented children.

In a third subdivision, the authors explain why peer orientation stunts children's growth. A peer-oriented child loses the natural shield against stress provided by parents. Without this shield and the coinciding detachment from parents, children and adolescents may close down emotionally for protection's sake. Neufeld and Maté elaborate, "To shut down emotions is to lose an indispensable part of who we are. Emotions are what make life worthwhile, exciting, challenging, and meaningful. They drive our explorations of the world, motivate our discoveries, and fuel our growth" (p. 109). As their emotions shut down, the authors claim that in a "flight from vulnerability," peer-oriented children become invulnerable. No longer do they observe life as brimming with possibility, their own lives as filled with potential, and the world as a place of hope and promise. The authors comment, "No wonder so many of them these days are being treated for depression, anxiety, and other disorders" (p. 109).

In the fourth section, Neufeld and Maté direct us to collect our children, engaging the attachment instincts, via four distinct steps. First, we must get in the child's face or space in a friendly way. Parents, teachers, and professionals must aim to consciously collect a child before caring for her or instructing her. Warm and friendly engagement provides a child with assurance. Second, we must provide something for the child to hold on to. The authors suggest physical expressions of warmth. I encourage interested readers to consult Ashley Montagu's seminal classic, *Touching* (1986), to learn more about the values of tactile experience and its effect on development. There are circumstances where physical expressions would not be appropriate; however, the ultimate gift is "to make a child feel invited to exist in our presence exactly as he is, to express our delight in his very being" (p. 184) so the child will have something to



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hold on to. Third, we must invite appropriate levels of dependence. Arguing with those who prematurely promote independence, the authors pledge that the only way children become independent is through being dependent, in the sense that Bowlby (1992) meant when he employed the term attachment. We must have confidence that getting children to be independent is nature's task and not ours. The fourth thing we must do to collect our children is to act as their compass point, their guide. The authors ask us to remember that children need guides, for which we are their best resource. "The more we orient them in terms of time and space, people and happenings, meanings, and circumstances, the more inclined they are to keep us close" (p. 191).

In the fifth part of the book, Neufeld and Maté speak directly to preventing children's over-reliance on peers. They suggest that as adults we should not be so concerned about children getting along with one another. Instead, we should focus on cultivating relationships with the adults in our children's lives and valuing "children's becoming able to hold on to themselves when interacting with others. All the socializing in the world could never bring a child to this point. Only a viable relationship with nurturing adults can give birth to true independence and individuality" (p. 243). The authors further contend that children need a relationship with themselves far more than they need relationships with peers.

Neufeld and Maté conclude with suggestions for building what they call an "attachment village." The authors submit that those who are forty and older can remember when villages of attachment were a reality. Neighbors acted as surrogate parents, the neighborhood grocer knew the children, as did the family doctor, and the extended family helped care for them. The authors maintain that these attachment villages can be restored by implementing such strategies as fostering relationships with children and adult friends who care about them, implementing family socialization activities, designing neighborhoods so that there are places that people of all ages can gather, and making the evening meal a sacred time when the family gathers to share the events of the day. *Hold on to Your Kids* inspires parents and professionals to develop an attachment community in homes, neighborhoods, schools, and clinics.

Neufeld and Maté contend that schools contribute to peer orientation by assigning overwhelmed teachers to large classes. As a result, children are expected to seek connections with one another. The authors further suggest that "teacher training completely ignores attachment; thus educators learn about teaching subjects but not about the essential importance of connected relationships to the learning process of young human beings" (p. 34). School rules and regulations tend to keep children out of the classroom before classes begin, depriving them of adult contact. Likewise, children spend recess and lunchtime with their peers. The remark about teacher training may strike some as something of a straw man, but the importance of attachment in the development of mental health cannot be overstated.

For readers interested in applying some of the suggested solutions in this book into the school setting, I further recommend Nel Noddings' *The Challenge to Care in Schools* (2005). For example, Noddings suggests meal time at schools should include "tables at which adults from the community and students might sit together, eat, and engage in civilized conversation" (p. 65).

Neufeld and Maté place the responsibility directly on us, not their peers, to collect our children, reestablish a caring adult hierarchy, and hold on to our children until our work is done, when they can hold on to themselves. *Hold on to Your Kids* is vital reading for adults who must strive to reestablish relationships with the children in their lives.

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