Learning Guided by Others

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Anthropologists who study children in traditional societies almost universally note the absence or great rarity of adults teaching children in the village setting. Children are encouraged to learn on their own. This chapter teases out those instances where, in the view of adults, independent learning is not sufficient. In some situations, adult intervention—usually falling short of “teaching”—is deemed necessary. The chapter focuses on four very general issues. At what age is the child targeted for a course correction or intervention to facilitate his or her development and socialization? What is the substance or goal of this intervention? What should the child be doing that he or she isn’t doing already? As we shall see, two very broad goals are to socialize children to “fit in” and to facilitate the child’s becoming a contributor to the family, providing a return on the family’s investment. How does the adult intervene? What strategies are used to change the child’s behavior? Lastly, what general principle or theory guides these course corrections in the individual’s path through childhood? These themes are woven throughout the chapter, which is organized to follow the child from infancy through adolescence.

The Absence of Teaching

Early ethnographic studies of childhood (Fortes 1938; Raum 1940) noted, with some degree of wonder, the near total absence of children
being taught (in the explanatory, didactic sense) by adults. Gaskins and Paradise (chapter 5, this volume) elaborate on what anthropologists do see—observational learning—but one has no difficulty finding many pointed examples from the literature of adults denying the efficacy of teaching, including:

- Among Nyaka foragers, in southern India, “parents do not feel the need to ‘socialize’ their children and do not believe that parents’ activities greatly affect their children’s development” (Hewlett and Lamb 2005, 10). Young people learn their skills from direct experience, in the company of other children or other adults” (Bird-David 2005, 96).

- On Sarawak, the Punan Bah “see little point in any systematic teaching of small children, due to the belief that only from the age of about five . . . will children have the ability to reason. . . . Still even from that time on socialization practices are rather incidental. Adults rely more on setting children a good example than on formal instruction” (Nicolaisen 1988, 205).

The view that children will become competent adults largely through their own initiative is accompanied by a fairly consistent “ethnotheory” of developmentally appropriate actions on the part of children and their caretakers. A key component of that ethnotheory is to match intervention or teaching to the family’s needs and ability level of the child. Hence, adults may intervene early in a child’s development to persuade him or her to behave in a socially acceptable manner, but they may wait until quite late in a child’s development to ensure that he or she can make a useful contribution to the family garden. In the first case, the family may accelerate learning, while in the latter, they are content to wait until the child is ready to learn. We begin our explication of this theory with infancy.

**Infants Are Not Seen as Learners**

The educated elite in modern, industrialized societies share an ethnotheory of development specifying that teaching and learning should begin at birth or even in utero (Keller 2007, 127; Kim and Choi 1994).
In other societies, and indeed in Western cultures until recently, these nascent capacities of the infant have been ignored or denied. In fact, the most common model of infant care in the ethnographic record prescribes isolation (Munroe 2005) and quiet (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1976, 277), immobility (Leighton and Kluckhohn 1948; Friedl 1997, 83), a constantly full tummy, and lots of restful repose (Tronick, Thomas, and Daltabuit, 1994). Not surprisingly then, playing with, talking to, or stimulating infants in the interest of awakening their capacity as learners is specifically rejected.

• Among the Liberian Kpelle, “mothers carry their babies on their backs and nurse them frequently but do so without really paying much direct attention to them; they continue working or . . . socializing” (Erchak 1992, 50).

• The Bonerate baby “is handled in a relaxed . . . manner . . . but also at times unemotional, almost apathetic . . . mothers do not establish eye contact with their nursing babies. . . . Toddlers are nursed quickly, without overt emotional expression. . . . [Since] 60 percent of all children die . . . the major goal . . . is to keep them alive [not] enculturation” (Broch 1990, 19, 31).

This period of quiescence and passivity does not always or even usually end once the infant begins crawling. While current thinking in developmental psychology sees this as a critical period for learning and exploration, villages or camps are not “child proofed.” There are too many hazards in the environment—many of which could be fatal—to permit the infant free range (Draper and Cashdan 1988, 342; Hill and Hurtado 1996, 154). “Crawling and toddling are not periods of exploration and learning for a Baining (New Britain Island) child; they are periods of passivity” (Fajans 1997, 89; see also Toren 1990, 172).

The general picture, then, is one in which the very young are not stimulated, played with, or talked to (Lancy 2007); they are not “ready” to learn and, indeed, might be harmed by any attempt to invade what is often seen as a fragile psyche. However, in the majority of societies, the end of infancy is accompanied by the first overt and often painful “lesson.” Almost without exception, infants are nursed on demand until the mother
becomes pregnant. Hence, the child must be quickly transitioned from this state of extreme dependency to give way to a new baby. This first lesson is examined in the next section.

**Facilitating Independence**

Infants constitute an enormous burden on their caretakers. Nursing is energetically costly, as is the toll taken by having to carry the infant—especially for far-ranging foragers. These costs are primarily borne by the child’s mother, who not incidentally is usually the prime breadwinner and, perhaps, pregnant with the next infant (Wiley 2004). The Yoruba are quite typical in averring “mothers and grandmothers [prefer] wiry and agile babies who learn to walk early” (Zeitlin 1996, 412). Not surprisingly, we do find societies that sanction strategies designed to lessen this burden. “Kogi [Columbia] children are prodded and continuously encouraged to accelerate their sensory-motor development” (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1976, 277). A Ugandan baby at 3 months old is bundled in a cloth and placed in a hole in the ground to support the baby’s spine “for about fifteen minutes a day, until able to sit unsupported” (Ainsworth 1967, 321). The Nso of the Cameroons believe that a “standing baby . . . makes less work for the mother” (Keller 2007, 124). Another practice is to dandle an infant on one’s lap while the child pushes off vigorously (Takada 2005). Studies show that the “stepping” reflex is accentuated by such practices and leads, reliably, to the child walking at an earlier age (Zelazo, Zelazo, and Kolb 1972). Failure to intervene in this fashion may be seen as threatening the child’s motor development (Harkness and Super 1991).

Weaning that is sometimes early—long before the child might initiate it—and severe is widely reported. “A [Luo] woman who is pregnant is supposed to stop breastfeeding, since it is believed that . . . the milk will be poisonous to the nursing baby and will cause it to get the illness ledho” (Cosminsky 1985, 38). Numerous ethnographic accounts show mothers imposing early and abrupt termination of breastfeeding (Fouts 2004, 138). On the other hand, extended nursing may be condemned as prolonging the infancy stage, resulting in a “weak, simpering” adult (Turner 1987, 107).

One widespread tactic to hasten independence is a phenomenon referred to as “toddler rejection” (Weisner and Gallimore 1977, 176;
see also Howard 1972, 117; Levy 1973, 454). Essentially, the toddler is “shooed away” from adult company; for example, Hawaiian “children are expected to function in a separate sphere that only overlaps that of adults at the peripheries” (Gallimore, Boggs, and Jordan 1974, 119). “With the arrival of the next sibling, dénanola (infancy) is over. Now, play begins . . . and membership in a social group of peers is taken to be critical to . . . the forgetting of the breast to which the toddler has had free access for nearly two years or more. As one [Mandinka] mother put it, ‘Now she must turn to play’” (Whittemore 1989, 92).

Aside from freeing up the mother for other pursuits, sending toddlers off in the company of sibling caretakers and playmates is seen as an essential component of their socialization. For example, in rural Bengal, “Little girls accompany older girls in gathering, and they gradually learn the needed skills” (Rohner and Chaki-Sircar 1988, 33). Marquesan mothers see toddlers as developing skills because they want to hang out with and emulate their older siblings. By imitating their sibling caretakers, “toddlers learn to run, feed and dress themselves, go outside to urinate and defecate, and help with household chores” (Martini and Kirkpatrick 1992, 124). Similarly, in the eastern New Guinea highlands, Fore children are expected to focus their attention as learners on older children, not adults (Sorenson 1976).

It follows that if mothers must “evict” their weanlings,⁶ they must have some hope that others will take up the slack. Indeed, Sarah Hrdy (2009) argues persuasively that humans are “cooperative breeders,” meaning that our success as a species has depended on the distribution of child care over a cohort of relatives—alloparents. Hence, the next important lesson—after independence—is how to behave properly toward those of higher rank (e.g., everyone else). Many societies take quite deliberate steps to prepare children for their debut in adult company.

**Teaching Speech, Kin Terms, and Manners**

In the highlands of Papua New Guinea, Kaluli mothers do not hold their babies en face to elicit a response, as direct eye contact is associated with the practice of witchcraft. Rather, they hold their babies in front of themselves and, ventriloquist-like, make them “speak” to passersby (Schieffelin 1990). This pragmatic attitude toward making the child
socially acceptable is often magnified by concerns that an “ignorant, willful” child threatens the family’s social standing. Baining parents “claim to be ashamed of their children’s public behavior” (Fajans 1997, 54). As we survey the ethnographic record, we find that the most frequent mention of explicit teaching occurs in conjunction with preparing the child to function within a complex web of social obligations (Demuth 1986, 75). Illustrative examples include the following:

- “The Rotuman child is subtly instructed in kin relations: ‘Why don’t you go outside and play with Fatiaki, he is your sasigi.’ or ‘You must show respect to Samuela, he is your o’fa’” (Howard 1970, 37).

- The Javanese mother repeats “polite” kin terms over and over and corrects her child’s mistakes, urging proper etiquette. Hence, “children little more than a year old . . . go through a polite bow and say an approximation of the high word for good-bye” (Geertz 1961, 100).

- Kwara’ae caregivers “tell the child what to say, line by line. . . . Encoded in repeating routines is information on kin terms and relationships and on polite ways of conversing” (Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 1989, 62).

- “From an early age, [West African Beng] children are taught the words for all of their relatives. Everyone must be addressed properly and greeted every morning and evening” (Gottlieb 2000, 83).

Aside from learning about kin terms and relations, the young child is subject to a variety of lessons on manners. Instruction “in Tikopia in matters of etiquette and decorum begins almost before the child can fully understand what is required of it” (Firth 1970, 79). These injunctions range from the proper hand for eating versus ablution to table manners to sharing. For example, Papel (West Africa) children are offered a desirable item and then immediately told to pass it on to another, particularly a sibling (Einarsdottir 2004, 94). Failure to relinquish the treat will lead to teasing and ridicule (Loudon 1970; Riesman 1992; Schieffelin 1986). The
!Kung display remarkable affection and indulgence toward their children, tolerating violent temper tantrums, for example. But they go to considerable lengths to teach even the very young the basic system of reciprocity and exchange (hxaro) (Bakeman et al. 1990, 796).

Nevertheless, these examples of rather direct instruction are uncommon. Other, more indirect teaching tactics are widely employed. A number of societies—particularly in the Pacific and Asia—stimulate the development of a package of emotions, including shame, shyness, and guilt (Fung 1999, 203; Martini and Kirkpatrick 1992, 203) to better control the child’s behavior (see chapter 11, this volume). Javanese cultivate the emotion of “isin . . . (shame, shyness, embarrassment, guilt) [so] that at any formal public occasion [children] are exceedingly quiet and well-behaved and will sit docilely . . . through hours and hours of formal speeches” (Geertz 1961, 113). On Fiji, the same emotions “are inculcated in the child by ridicule, mockery, laughter, or plain disapproval” (Toren 1990, 183). To get a Japanese child to stop doing something, the mother will claim to be saddened by the behavior (Fogel, Stevenson, and Messinger 1992). Far from harming the child emotionally—a view held in the West—Chinese parents, for example, believe that “shame is an essential social and moral emotion, a virtue” (Li, Wang, and Fischer 2004, 794).

As the child matures, community members may subtly invoke shame (and an alteration in the child’s behavior) via the use of an apt proverb (Messing 1985, 207–8; Raum 1940, 218; Read 1960, 44–45). Folktales also send not-so-subtle warnings. The Piaroa live along the tributaries of the Orinoco in the highlands of Venezuela and share an ethos of nonviolence. Among the duties of the shaman, or wizard, is the telling of folktales, which “have high pedagogical value for the Piaroa . . . the tales tell of characters whose out-of-control behavior leads to their own unhappiness and personal disaster, and sometime to danger for others” (Overing 1988, 179). Indonesian puppet theater takes this kind of pedagogy to a higher level where the objectives and means of instruction are taken very seriously (Hobart 1988, 134).

Folklore offers to children idealized models of citizenship by showing the awful things that happen to those who transgress (Lancy 1996, 125). But there are harsher means of controlling behavior. Among the Navajo, “children are told that if they misbehave the big gray Yeibichai will carry them off and eat them,” and in children’s autobiographies
there is evidence that these threats are effective (Leighton and Kluckhohn 1948, 51). Among Bena-Bena tribesmen in Papua New Guinea, “both boys and girls are threatened ‘in fun’ with axes and knives and they run crying in terror” (Langness 1981, 16).

Corporal punishment represents an escalation in the severity with which a child’s error or waywardness is treated. A broad survey of the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF) found that corporal punishment of children “occurs as a frequent or typical technique of discipline in societies in all major regions of the world” (Ember and Ember 2005, 609). A few foraging societies specifically condemn it (Endicott 1992, 286), but most adults would endorse the Wogeo practice of beating children “only so they can learn” (Hogbin 1970, 144). So central is corporal punishment in folk theories of child-rearing that parents are considered too closely attached and sentimental toward their children to function as their teachers (Alber 2004, 41; Lutz 1983, 252). On Fiji, a doting, affectionate mother will delay her child’s development, and children “brought up by their [adoring] grandmothers . . . are often said to be either presumptuous and ‘too inquisitive’ or ‘childish’ and unable to take on the tasks proper to their age” (Toren 1990, 172). It is widely believed that, at least for certain skills or certain recalcitrant children, learning will not occur without the application of punishment. Given this rather fearsome arsenal of behavior modification tactics, it shouldn’t surprise us to learn that on Tonga and elsewhere, children may prefer to “show respect by remaining on the periphery of adult activities” (Morton 1996, 90).

Ideally then, with some prodding, or deliberate instruction in a few cases, the child learns to behave in a way that won’t embarrass his or her parents and to stay unobtrusively in the background. Beyond the obvious goal of shaping children to fit in, Bobbi Low’s (1989) ethnology, aggregating over numerous studies such as those just cited, reveals broad relationships between child-rearing practices and preferred mating and reproduction patterns.

Native Theories of Learning and Intelligence

A central reason for the evident reluctance to teach children—aside from what might be termed “social survival” skills—is that, even at 4 years old, they may be viewed as uneducable. It is not until 5 or later that children
are assumed to acquire sense. “The child before he is five or six is said to be durung djawa . . . not yet Javanese . . . not yet civilized, not yet able to control emotions . . . not yet able to speak with the proper respectful circumlocutions . . . he does not yet understand, therefore . . . there is no point in forcing him to be what he is not” (Geertz 1961, 105).

Examples of young children treated as being essentially uneducable are legion in the ethnographic record. For Fulani (West African) pastoralists: “It is when children begin to develop haYYillo (social sense) that adults in turn change their expectations and behavior” (Riesman 1992, 130). Kipsigis children aren’t expected to demonstrate ng’omnotet (intelligence) until the age of about 6 (Harkness and Super 1985, 223). Interestingly, sense is not signaled by the child’s display of knowledge or through questioning adults—in marked contrast to popular notions of intelligence in middle-class Euro-American society.8 “In a Mayan community . . . children are taught to avoid challenging an adult with a display of greater knowledge by telling them something” (Rogoff 1990, 60). Tongan children who “interrupt or offer advice to adults without being asked may be accused of being fie poto (thinking themselves clever)” (Morton 1996, 90).

“Intelligence” in the village is associated with qualities like self-sufficiency, obedience, respect toward elders, attention to detail, willingness to work, and effective management of younger siblings and livestock (Wober 1972). For the Kipsigis (Kenya), children are said to have sense when they not only can take care of themselves but can undertake certain routine chores—watering the cows, sweeping the house—without supervision (Harkness and Super 1985). A child who has demonstrated such initiative around the house may be tested by being sent on a distant errand—such as delivering a message. In one foraging society—the Huaorani—adults are delighted when the child begins carrying a basket to gather food she or he will later share (Rival 2000, 116). A study in several Guatemalan villages showed that children could be reliably ranked on the basis of this native theory of “IQ” (Nerlove et al. 1974, 265).

Of course, initiative on the child’s part may not always be welcomed. For foraging people, Draper and Cashden (1988) note, “the nature of adult work is such that children cannot easily be incorporated into it” (348). Foraging requires arduous treks through difficult terrain, and accompanying children would be an insuperable burden. In fact, one finds a surprising number of anecdotes in the literature suggesting that children
may as likely be discouraged in attempting certain tasks as supported in their fledgling efforts. These range from cases of girls making attempts to weave (Lancy 1996, 149–53; Pope-Edwards 2005, 91; Reichard 1934, 38), children prevented from handling grain for fear they’ll let it spill on the ground (Bock and Johnson 2004), children prevented from messing up planted rows in the garden (Polak 2003, 126), Inuit boys kept some distance from the prey during a hunt so they won’t scare it off (Matthiasson 1979, 74), to Bonerate children discouraged from “helping” with fishing activities because their rambunctiousness frightens the fish away (Broch 1990, 85).

The cases just mentioned highlight unwelcome precocity. But children who take the initiative to carry out tasks that are useful, within their competence level, and unlikely to cause damage or harm are appreciated. As we discuss in the next section, most domains of adult work have an inherent hierarchical structure—affording children a stepwise curriculum to work their way through.

The Chore Curriculum

It is striking how much of the culture, the village “curriculum,” is laid out for all children to observe. This contrasts dramatically with the U.S. “core” curriculum concealed in classrooms, textbooks, and lessons taught by “certified” teachers. The second and closely related point is that a child’s initial steps on the road to mastery of the village chore curriculum often pass through play (see chapter 6, this volume):

- “The social role play of [Guatemalan village] girls most frequently involves the mundane daily routine work of their mothers” (Nerlove et al. 1974, 275).
- A Yanomamō boy at age 5 “plays with a small bow and a reed-like arrow that his father or brother has made for him” (Peters 1998, 90).
- Touareg boys, who will eventually learn to herd camel, first care for a young goat that they treat like a playmate (Spittler 1998, 343).
THE ROLE OF ADULTS IN CHILDREN’S LEARNING

• A young Conambo girl “plays with clay, making coils, pinch pots, and miniature animals while her mother builds . . . vessels” (Bowser and Patton 2008, 110).

Adults contribute to this initial stage primarily by serving as willing role models and only occasionally go further, for example, by supplying the child with scaled-down tools. This might include giving a little girl a tiny basin and setting it on a coiled “cheater” on top of her head so she might fetch water (Read 1960, 85). The “advantage of the miniature vessel used is that from an early age girls are able to perform all the necessary manipulations without help” (Raum 1940, 196).

As suggested earlier, adults are probably casually observing these play scenes for evidence of persistence, appropriate social interaction, leadership, and emotional stability—in short, signs of emerging sense. They will act on their assessment by sending the child on an errand: “Run and fetch me” is one of the commonest phrases heard addressed to young children in Tikopia” (Firth 1970, 80). Kpelle adults speak approvingly of child messengers. Little children were always welcome in other people’s homes and no suspicion would attach to them. A well-behaved, polite child earned the attention of potential foster parents and praise for the family’s diligence in curbing asocial tendencies (Lancy 1996, 76). Delivering messages and presents (and bringing back gossip!) segues easily into marketing. The “errand” curriculum incorporates many “grades,” from carrying messages at age 5 to marketing produce, hard bargaining, and making change for customers by age 11 (Lancy 1996, 156). There is an obvious trade-off here between the child’s age and maturity and the consequences for his or her failure to carry out the task.

Tasks that are graded or scaled in difficulty are a core feature of the chore curriculum. Among the island-dwelling Bonerate of southwest Sulawesi, “When children are from five to six years old they are delegated their first chores. . . . The assignments are, however, always adjusted to their physical age and mental maturity. . . . The children are still not regarded as capable of heavy work such as most agricultural labor, [or] netfishing, and other activities that require physical strength” (Broch 1990, 79).

Scaling in the chore curriculum depends on four factors. First, that all other things being equal, children reliably grow into greater strength,
dexterity, and intellectual prowess. Second, children eagerly pursue more challenging undertakings without prompting. Third, they spend most of their time in the proximity of slightly older children who act simultaneously as caretakers, role models, and teachers (see chapter 6). Fourth, the village task environment is sufficiently complex so that a scaling from easier to harder is readily apparent. If, for example, we unpack the following description, we can readily envision a scale of difficulty with many levels: “[Bengali] girls often roam around the village area, collecting mushrooms and greens from the edges of ponds . . . collecting fuel, wood, twigs, and cow dung for home consumption and for sale” (Rohner and Chaki-Sircar 1988, 31). And there is ample evidence that young learners benefit from closely observing the next higher skill levels; for example, Amhara boys are said to trail after young males “like retainers follow a feudal lord” (Messing 1985, 213). On the other hand, these same boys may find a chilly welcome in the vicinity of adults. Among the Touareg, for a boy to query an adult male, even about something as highly valued as camels, would be seen as a breach of etiquette and sign of disrespect (Spittler 1998, 247).

Girls are kept in closer proximity to their mothers, where they can observe the women’s work, emulate their behavior, and lighten their burdens (see chapter 12, this volume). As they “pitch in,” girls can expect to be engaged in conversation with their mother that provides strategic information regarding the task at hand (Paradise and Rogoff 2009, 117). Their errands take them (usually in company) to the village water source to obtain water, or to the bush to gather firewood. But errand runners are more likely to be boys than girls, not because girls are any less reliable, on the contrary, but because girls’ “radius of movement shrinks rapidly, for propriety’s sake” (Friedl 1997, 7–8). A girl’s most valuable contribution to the household is her care for younger siblings; this is less often a son’s contribution. In a careful survey of nearly 200 societies, Weisner and Gallimore (1977) found that infants and toddlers were in the care of siblings as much as and sometimes more than they were under their mother’s care. A 3-year-old will seek to hold her newborn brother and be permitted to do so, under supervision, for short periods. As the two age, she will become responsible for longer periods of care and meet a wider array of needs, including dressing, feeding, delousing, and above all, entertaining (Rindstedt and Aronsson 2003, 8). At age 8, we might find her caring for
several younger siblings, out of sight of her mother, perhaps taking them to a pond to bathe them and clean off any urine or excrement (Rohner and Chaki-Sircar 1988, 70–71). Years later, she may be “proudly possessive of the achievements and exploits of younger brothers and sisters who had been [her] special responsibility” (Elmendorf 1976, 94).

Gardening also incorporates the stepwise character of the chore curriculum, as meticulously documented by Barbara Polak (2003) in her study of Bamana (Mali) bean cultivation. She describes the discrete roles of 3- to 11-year-old siblings, which range from picking a few beans to place in a calabash—at age 3—to harvesting an adult portion and supervising younger siblings—at 11 (130–2). While adults are absent from this scene, in another study of planting—this time sorghum—Polak (n.d.) shows that, in a complex sequence of component skills, an adult intervenes only when the learners get hung up on the most difficult submaneuver. Among the Warao, where canoe-making is the sine qua non of survival, and boys expect to be mentored by their fathers, “there in not much verbal instruction . . . but the father does correct the hand of his son and does teach him how to overcome the pain in his wrist from working with the adze” (Wilbert 1976, 323). This very limited, strategic instruction is most commonly seen during the craft apprenticeship (see below).

Adults may also serve a motivating role. A child’s initial attempts at doing useful work, like gardening, may attract a parent’s attention: “Praise is probably the most effective spur to industry, and I was constantly hearing zeal rewarded with approval” (Hogbin 1970, 148). Kaoka men “may allocate plots to their sons and speak of the growing yams as their own harvest” (Hogbin 1969, 39; see also Whiting 1941, 47). In the Sepik area of Papua New Guinea, we learn: “Children’s initial efforts at subsistence work are recognized by giving them food . . . enthusiastic praise and by calling other people’s attention to [the] child” (Barlow 2001, 86). Hopi girls who’ve learned to grind corn with a nice smooth rhythm are “shown off” to visitors (Hough 1915, 63). “Whenever a [Netsilik] girl catches her first salmon or sews her first pair of socks, [or] a boy kills his first goose or traps his first fox, the community is given notice” (Balikci 1970, 45).

On the other hand, a child’s failure to complete assigned chores will earn rebuke. If the Kaoka boy neglects the young pig he’s been assigned to care for, he will be severely chastised (Hogbin 1969, 39). A Sebei mother condemns a daughter who isn’t up to the mark by saying, “I hope that
you have stomach pains and dysentery” (Goldschmidt 1986, 259). The daughter’s failure redounds on the mother, who is charged by the community with overseeing the girl’s development into a competent, hard-working, and marriageable woman. A Kwoma youngster will come under increased scrutiny when approaching middle childhood. Ordered to carry out household chores, the child will be beaten and scolded by the parents and other adults “for being lax about them” (Whiting 1941, 56). If a child is permitted to shirk responsibility, she or he will “inevitably emerge as an adult with few prospects and without the respect of the community” (Wenger 1989, 93). Consequently, a child who neglects chores or seems slow to master the chore curriculum is subject to community-wide censure, hazing by peers, barbed proverbs, and targeted folktales. On Java, the tale of two girls—*Bawang Putih* “Red Onion” and *Brambang Abang* “White Garlic”—may be used strategically. When Red Onion grew up, she turned out fine, but White Garlic “grew up stupid, unable to do anything useful, because all she had done all her life was play” (Geertz 1961, 43).

Nevertheless, because children are usually keen to help out and to demonstrate their nascent skill, and because somewhat older role models are usually available, “students” master the various chore curricula with very little adult intervention. However, as children tackle more complex tasks—such as those involved in crafts—they may need more explicit adult role models and guides.

**Facilitating Craftsmanship**

Among the Tapirapé forest dwellers of Brazil, a pre-adolescent boy will move into the men’s quarters and is expected “to learn the male manual arts—how to weave baskets, how to make a bow and straight arrows, how to fabricate the spirit masks that the men wear in different ceremonies, and other handicrafts. However, [there is never] any express attempt on the part of an older man to teach a young boy such pursuits. On the other hand, the *takana* is the place where adult men generally work, and a boy has ample chance to watch them at it” (Wagley 1977, 150).

In the high Andes, Bolin (2006) reports that weaving is very much a part of the village curriculum: “Children are not taught to spin or weave. Rather, they observe family members who have mastered these crafts and imitate them directly” (99). Studies of the acquisition of a potter’s
repertoire among the Bella of southwestern Niger reveal that “learning is not a particularly visible process. One is seldom confronted with situations where knowledge is explicitly transmitted from a teacher to an apprentice” (Gosselain 2008, 158). These cases reflect what Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to as “legitimate peripheral participation.” There is the tacit recognition by competent adults that children need opportunities to observe skilled work and, through trial and error and lots of practice, attempt to replicate it. The adults, if they think the child is mature and motivated sufficiently, may supply materials or the loan of tools to assist this effort. On the other hand, a busy adult may as well chase the aspirant basket-maker away (Gladwin and Sarason 1953, 414). In any case, active instruction is not evident.

Photo 7.1 shows one step in the construction of a felt textile common to Kyrgyzstan. At this point, the mother is engaged in some finish work and is aided by her elder daughter while younger ones observe. Earlier in the process, all three girls (sans mother) completed the task of crushing the wool and expressing water; still earlier, the mother created the design while the three girls observed.

In a few cases, craft production may be transmitted through a more formal apprenticeship. Dioula (Côte d’Ivoire) apprentice weavers will be supervised by their father or uncle through a long, multistage process. An
important distinction is that in an apprenticeship, an adult has made a specific, contractual commitment to transmit his or her skill—for remuneration. At age 8, the apprentice weaver will wind thread onto bobbins for hours at a time. Next he will stretch the warp on the ground before it is transferred to the loom. He may also be permitted to weave plain, undyed strips. After about three years of this more menial work, actual instruction begins in earnest when the master sits beside the boy at the loom and begins to demonstrate some simple patterns, which the novice copies. By the time the novice is deemed proficient enough to learn how
to prepare the warp, he may be 18 years old and have produced a great many woven goods. These are appropriated by the master as payment for the training (Tanon 1994). Indeed, one of the main reasons that the apprenticeship is so lengthy is the opportunity to take full advantage of the novice’s uncompensated labor.

Among the Tukolor of Senegal, “Some fathers prefer that another weaver should train their sons after they have acquired some basic skills since they feel that they will not exert enough discipline in training” (Dilley 1989, 188). The notion that parents may not be stern enough to function as their child’s teacher is common in the literature (Goody 2006, 254). Another common theme, well illustrated among the Tukolor, is the existence of a body of secrets and lore parallel to the more mechanical skill inventory. This material is closely guarded and the clever apprentice is expected to winkle it out of the master or other senior craftsmen (Dilley 1989, 190; McNaughton 1988, xvi).

There is, in short, a tension inherent in the apprenticeship because, we would argue, adults are so loath to serve as teachers and youngsters resist playing a subordinate’s role. Singleton’s (1989) ethnography of a Japanese pottery workshop portrays a relationship rife with the hauteur of rank: “When an apprentice presumes to ask the master a question, he will be asked why he has not been watching the potter at work, or the answer would be obvious” (Singleton 1989, 26). Similarly, in the training of master minaret builders in Yemen, “Curses and derogatory remarks—as opposed to explanation—were the most common form of communication from ‘teacher’ to ‘learner’”(Marchand 2001, 144).

Another theme in the literature on apprenticeship concerns the amount of freedom novices have to exercise innovation and creativity. Among Dii potters of Cameroon, girls are apprenticed to their mothers. “Initiative and trial and error are forbidden; every gesture must follow the mother’s pattern. Corporal punishments (spanking, forced eating of clay) are used to ensure that rules are respected, and verbal humiliations are very common. . . . Good behavior is rarely noticed, but errors are always pointed out in public. This treatment puts a lot of pressure on the apprentices, who tend to be quite nervous when working in their mothers’ company” (Wallaert-Pêtre 2008, 190–1).10

As with the Dii potters, the Hausa weaving apprenticeship “is very rigid and conservative. The apprentice is not expected to innovate, alter,
change or improve upon anything. He is to copy the master’s techniques . . . exactly” (Defenbaugh 1989, 173). Similar rigidity is observed in the training of West African blacksmiths (Coy 1989; McNaughton 1988) and in the production of grater boards by Baniwa tribesmen in northwest Amazonia (Chernela 2008, 145). Contrasting cases can be found among Conambo (tropical eastern Ecuador) potters, where creativity is valued and young potters are free to acquire styles and decorative ideas from others (Bowser and Patton 2008). Likewise younger Fali (Cameroon) potters are always trying out new ideas and aren’t afraid to fail. “Personal gratification is important and overrides the judgment of other potters . . . leading to a diversity of production and style” (Wallaert-Pêtre 2001, 483, 489). In the Chiapas Highlands of Mexico, there has been a transition in the handwoven products over the last 30 years as daughters learning traditional patterns under their mother’s tutelage now learn on their own and produce novel market-driven designs (Greenfield 2004). In fact, there is growing evidence that the more conservative apprenticeship programs actually lead to the decline of the craft as demand for traditional products wanes (Friedl 1997, 4; Wallaert-Pêtre 2008, 187).

While formal apprenticeships are not common, they are striking in both the wide commonality of their structure and in the fact that they reflect formal means of instruction. As children develop, the community continues to rely largely on the informal interaction inherent in family life and group work to transmit skills and values. We have seen how children as young as 3 readily accept their assignments in the chore curriculum and, later, apprentice themselves to acquire more complex skills. The transition to adulthood is fairly seamless. Learning social conventions is stressed from an early age and “fitting in” is rarely a problem.

Managing Adolescence

Earlier in the chapter, we identified a period in the child’s life when, in some societies, the child’s behavior is quite deliberately shaped to conform to a more “proper” or mature form of social interaction. Adolescence is the second point in the life cycle where we may see this very deliberate, even coercive intervention to bend the youth to social expectations. In most societies, as they mature physically and acquire the gender-appropriate repertoire of adult competencies, children pass briefly through adoles-
cence and settle comfortably into the roles of spouse, parent, and provider. However, in approximately half of the societies in the ethnographic record, adolescents must pass through a rite of passage (Schlegel and Berry 1979) which, in effect, certifies them as ready to begin mating and forming their own family (Vizedom and Zais 1976). Montgomery discusses initiation as a rite of passage from a gender socialization perspective (chapter 12, this volume), but we touch on it briefly here because it represents a significant investment by the community in children’s socialization.

Like apprenticeship, the rite of passage is one of the very few cases of formal education (Lancy 1996, 163–78) in the village setting. Not that these rites incorporate the transmission of practical skills. Rather, they force adolescents through dramatic and usually painful experiences (circumcision, clitoridectomy, body scarification, penetration of the nasal septum or ear lobe) designed to impress on them respect for the legal and spiritual authorities in the community and the values they espouse (Lancy 1975). “The dominant theme of the initiation is that of an ordeal—trial and proof of maturity” (Goldschmidt 1986, 95–96).

Among West African Mende farmers, the girls’ initiation is organized by the Sande women’s secret society, and a few, important lessons are conveyed: “One of the most dramatic ritual elements . . . is clitoridectomy. . . . Sande women explain that this makes women ‘clean’ . . . [also] the pain . . . is a metaphor for the pain of childbirth. . . . [Another] important element in the ritual process of Sande initiation is fattening. Beauty, prosperity, health and fertility are explicitly linked to fatness” (MacCormack 1994, 111–2). Similarly, the Bemba (Zimbabwe) girls’ initiation process, chisungu, is replete with sexual imagery, to underscore the woman’s role as breeder (Richards 1956, 65). Another common theme is the role of the woman as provider (Guss 1982, 264).

Historically, pastoralist societies in Africa were noted for their readiness to attack neighboring groups in raids to secure cattle and women. This may lead to the creation of warrior subcultures which young men are inducted into (Gilmore 2001, 209). The process of joining the Masai warrior elite, becoming a moran, includes circumcision where a “flinch or even the bat of an eyelid as primitive razor sears into flesh is interpreted . . . as a desire to run away and [this loss of] honour . . . can never be redeemed” (Spencer 1970, 134). Throughout central and northern Papua New Guinea, elaborate rites of passage separate boys from their mothers.
and make them “manly,” and teach them to despise and lord it over women and enemy tribesmen. The first stage in this initiation includes days of hazing, fasting, beating, sleeplessness, and sudden surprises. This is followed by forced nose-bleeding to remove female contaminates. The process is violent, painful, and frightening (Herdt 1990, 376). The senior males assert their superiority over the youth while inculcating the moral imperative of male dominance. To this end, they will make use of “secrets,” including sacred terms, rituals, locations, and objects such as masks. These “secrets” are denied to women on pain of death (Tuzin 1980, 26).

In the absence of a warrior subculture, adults may yet feel the necessity of curbing or taming their obstreperous and “self-centered” adolescents (Weisfeld 1999, 106). Canela tribesmen from Brazil publicly chastise and humiliate wayward youth (Crocker and Crocker 1994, 37). Don Talayesva—who grew up in a conservative Hopi village—confesses in his autobiography to being quite “naughty” as a boy. So, when he was initiated into the Katchina society with his age group, his father arranged for him to be taught a lesson by having the Whipper Katsinas give him extra blows with the sharp-spined ocotillo whips to “drive the evil from [his] mind, so that he may grow up to be a good and wise man” (Simmons 1942, 80).

Because childhood is a time of relative freedom, societies have evolved mechanisms to guide youth onto the straight and narrow path of sober, responsible adulthood. A secondary theme in the ethnographic literature is that boys, associating exclusively with women throughout childhood, are weak and contaminated and must be forcibly strengthened and purged. Both motives can be found embedded in the rites of passage that serve to correct the youth’s trajectory. The teaching/learning process is better described as indoctrination than education (Lancy 1975). The lessons may be few but they are deeply learned.

**Summing Up**

Before shifting focus to the contemporary scene, we’d like to review what might be concluded from a survey of children’s guided acquisition of cultural practices. The common elements found in ethnotheories of child socialization include that children learn best on their own and that this initiative frees up adults from serving as teachers. The entire community
and its surroundings are seen as the “classroom,” and the “curriculum” is displayed as an “open book.” It also includes the core idea of “readiness”—that at certain times in the life cycle, intervening to assist the child to greater knowledge or skill will be most efficient. Four periods are at least loosely demarcated in the ethnotheories that people use to structure socialization, namely infancy, toddlerhood or early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence. Not much cultural learning is expected to occur in infancy; rather, steps are taken to secure and shelter the child. In early childhood, limited and very strategic intervention is called for in some societies, to accelerate independence and/or to accelerate the child’s assuming “correct” social behavior, including appropriate language. Otherwise, toddlers are expected to learn from emulating peers, through observation, and in play. Adults don’t feel the need to intervene nor even to monitor closely the child’s progress in personal hygiene, motor development, or speech, to name a few examples.

In middle childhood, through various changes in behavior (e.g., greater maturity and common sense), children signal two things to adults. First, they indicate they are ready to deploy the broad knowledge they have been independently acquiring in early childhood in carrying out useful activities such as errand running or baby minding. Second, they indicate they are ready to learn new skills, skills heretofore beyond their capacity or that required some degree of intervention by a busy adult. Again, however, the onus to acquire these skills rests primarily on the child.

In adolescence, there may arise the need for more deliberate instruction by adults. There are two general areas where this might occur: apprenticeship in the production of craft items and the initiation rite. In both situations, children must subordinate themselves to a master or senior member of the same sex. In both situations, obedience and the learning of lore are important, and some degree of verbal and physical abuse is considered essential in the teaching process, which is why parents aren’t favored as teachers.

Contemporary Challenges to the Village Learning Model

Throughout this chapter, we have used the ethnographic present and tried to distill the patterns widely recorded by anthropologists who’ve observed
childhood in non-Western societies beginning with Malinowski in 1914 (LeVine 2007). However, those patterns have been rudely shattered in many cases. Here we will briefly review the major disruptive forces and how they have affected what children are learning and from whom.

Most obviously, overpopulation, poverty, environmental degradation, civil strife, and epidemic disease (HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis) have conspired to force even very young children to fend for themselves and/or earn a meager wage to support their families. In undertaking work that pays a wage, however meager, children may lose the opportunity to observe and learn from adults carrying on traditional subsistence activities. We can only assume that if children are picking coffee or weaving rugs for hours each day, their opportunities to acquire the full panoply of the village curriculum are, therefore, limited. On the other hand, the obviously innate ability of children to learn through observation and from slightly older peers is certainly adaptive for survival in the streets (see chapter 17, this volume).

Schooling was thought to be the elixir that would transform and modernize village life, but this has rarely happened. The practices that worked so effectively to transmit the traditional culture don’t transfer well to the school (Philips 1983). For example, the villagers’ ethnotheory dictates that parents grant children autonomy to learn on their own, which leads them to a posture of “noninterference” in their children’s schooling (Dehyle 1992; Levin 1992; Matthiasson 1979). Children are ill prepared to cope with the demands of classroom learning while also removed for most of the day from the community. Peruvian Shipbo children are kept “from learning their environment and own culture, [while acquiring] only minimal skills for life in town” (Hern 1992, 36). Inuit children “whose parents at the same age were already hunters or wives now continue to carry their books to school daily, awaiting the time when they can step into the ‘real’ world of adulthood” (Matthiasson 1979, 73).

Modernization often means that the skills of adults are no longer viewed as relevant (Friedl 1997, 4). Hence, their stature in the eyes of youth is diminished (Goody 1989, 239). This “drift” from conformity with the village social structure has been arrested in the past by a rite of passage. But these rites have also gone by the boards (Biersack 1998, 87). Among the Bumbita Arapesh, village youth have rebelled against the hegemony of senior males, refusing to subject themselves to the customary
initiation rites. Their exit from the traditional socialization pattern has had a broad impact on the life of the community (Leavitt 1998, 178). During the long civil war in Angola, among the Tchokwe, “children were abducted . . . to fight [hence] the initiation rituals and systematic preparation of young people to become responsible adults ceased. A whole generation was seriously affected” (Honawana 2006, 43).

Social change is accelerating in the world’s rural communities, and children are most affected. Their fate is uncertain. The migration of manufacturing in search of the lowest wage scale has dramatically increased demand for child labor (Kenny 2007) and the number of formerly village-resident children earning a wage from such labor is vastly greater than the tiny fraction earning a living from skills learned in school (Serpell 1993, 10). However, children’s ability to learn unaided may be a boon in rapidly adapting to new opportunities, and they may be in a position to assist their kin in adjusting to change (Orellana 2009).

A Note on Methodology

The methodology we have employed in surveying the ethnographic record, assembling illustrative cases, and teasing out broad patterns is referred to as ethnology. As a scientific method, ethnology is the comparative analysis of data compiled from the hundreds of in-depth ethnographic studies of individual societies. These analyses often focus on the search for biologically based or universal aspects of cultural patterns, cultural invariants (Voget 1975).

Franz Boas, as director of the American Ethnological Association, is often credited with the founding of the U.S. ethnological tradition. While Boas had demonstrated the value of an inductive approach where broad patterns of human behavior could be discerned from the ethnographic record, accessing that record was a challenge. George Murdock was among those at the Yale Institute of Human Relations who recognized the need for a better organizational system for the growing body of ethnographic material. In 1950, he announced the creation of the Human Relations Area Files, or HRAF. HRAF provides access to a systematic compilation of ethnographic material, initially on index cards, then on microfiche, CD-ROM, and now wholly online. Organized into nine geographic regions, it includes thousands of documents (Roe 2007, 48).
An indexed classification system of subjects or Outline of Cultural Materials (OCM) enables searches of full-text documents within the collection. Each paragraph within each text has been cross-referenced with a three-digit OCM, which enables the user to search a large range of topics across and within texts (HRAF 2008; Roe 2007). HRAF not only provides a comprehensive and searchable archive but, through the painstaking efforts of many scholars, it also includes “codes” or variables that have been reliably assigned to large, standardized samples or subsets of the larger corpus. Barry and Paxon’s (1971) efforts are exemplary in this regard. Working with a sample of 168 societies, they were able to reliably code for systematic comparison dozens of child-care practices such as sleeping proximity, bodily contact, carrying technique, and postpartum sex taboo. Data coders found that some ethnographers were thorough in providing accounts relating to infancy and childhood while others were mute on the subject.

Several landmark studies in the anthropology of childhood have utilized the HRAF archive, such as the Weisner and Gallimore (1977) study cited above. Barbara Rogoff and colleagues selected 50 cases from the HRAF archive that provided extensive information about childhood in an effort to illuminate the transition points in children’s development and the age ranges at which children were assigned various roles and responsibilities. Roles and responsibilities were assigned to 27 categories, and they found that “a modal cultural assignment of social responsibility” occurred in the 5–7 age range (Rogoff et al. 1975, 365). Other transitions occurred at puberty (e.g., sexual attraction and complete adoption of adult clothing). As a last example, we would cite Katharine MacDonald’s (2007) seminal study on children learning to obtain game from hunting and trapping, described more fully in chapter 15 of this volume. Like MacDonald’s study, our own research has used both the “thumbing through books and journals in the library approach” (Roe 2007, 50) and HRAF (Lancy 2007, 2008; Lancy and Grove 2009).

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Notes

1. We have only found three examples in the literature of teaching with a capital T. They are (1) the quite explicit and elaborate system for teaching kin relations and etiquette found on Kwara’ae in the Solomon Islands (Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 1989); (2) the similarly explicit and mandatory transmission of food taboos by parents to offspring among the Ituri people in the Congo (Auinger 2000); and (3) the training of navigators in the Caroline islands (Gladwin 1970).


3. As Montgomery discusses in chapter 12 of this volume, there nevertheless may be quite subtle and implicit lessons conveyed to the infant regarding gender and status.

4. I’m grateful to Suzanne Gaskins (personal communication) for pointing out the conflict between hastening the child’s independence in order to unburden caretakers versus exposing the mobile but not yet sufficiently cautious child to environmental hazards, as noted in the previous section.

5. This emphasis on accelerated motor development in many East African societies can be contrasted with a complete indifference toward speech development (Harkness and Super 1991, 227).

6. While independence is universally valued, there is considerable variability in the child’s “territory.” Marquesan children are encouraged to range far from home (Martini and Kirkpatrick 1992), whereas Mayan children are expected to remain within the mother’s hearing (Gaskins 2006).

7. This emphasis on scare tactics and corporal punishment to control the child’s behavior probably accounts, in part, for the paucity of evidence for children learning directly from adults. This assertion arises from one of the earliest conclusions about the way humans learn (Yerkes and Dodson 1908). This 100-year-old notion is described as: “animals seem to learn more when they are in a state of moderate arousal than when they are in states of either low arousal or high arousal (an inverted-U-shaped learning curve)” (Byrnes 2001, 86). In other words, the high arousal associated with scaring or punishing children does not—in spite of folk wisdom to the contrary—create ideal conditions for learning.

8. “American middle-class parents are very proactive about encouraging their children to talk, and to talk early. . . . We put such emphasis on talking early, presumably because we view this as a sign of intelligence” (Quinn 2005, 479).

9. We concur with Goodnow’s (1990, 279–80) skeptical review of Vygostkian models that show adults patiently reorganizing tasks and assisting unskilled children in their attempts at learning complex skills. The ethnographic record
contains many more instances of would-be child “apprentices” being rebuffed than invited.

10. We would argue that the harsh, punitive tone of the apprenticeship makes sense as a means of quickly weeding out novices who lack the skill and motivation to persist. The time available for a craftsperson to invest in teaching is extremely limited and they are loath to waste it.

11. For a listing of HRAF OCM codes, see www.yale.edu/hrafo/outline.htm.

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