

What About Socialization?

by Steve & Carol Ryerson

A question that is frequently asked of home school parents is “What about socialization?” This question is one of great importance, so let’s take a few moments to address it.

Webster’s New International Dictionary of 1920 defines socialization as “A becoming social; state of being social or socialized,” with socialize meaning “To render social; to incorporate in, or make subject to, the uses or influences of society.”

Funk and Wagnalls’ 1986 edition of their desktop dictionary defines socialization as the process of (1) placing under group or government control (2) making friendly, cooperative or sociable and (3) converting or adapting to the needs of a social group.

It is very important that people learn to cooperate with and understand each other. This certainly cannot be done if a child is cooped up all day by himself in a room doing book work. It is necessary to spend time with people to learn to get along with people. Notice that by definition, part of being socialized involves being subject to the influences of society.

In today’s society, children are generally sent off to an institutional school (public, parochial or Christian) where they spend their time with a group of other children who are all nearly the same age. There they are taught nearly the same thing, even though they are individuals who are not all ready for the same things at the same time, nor are their bents in the same direction. The children learn to like what their friends like and desire to do what their friends do, progressively discounting or rejecting parental input. Parents typically capitulate to the dictates of the group fearing that their children will be ostracized if they appear too different. The toy, clothing, and music marketers research and foster these tendencies. Most people in Western society have come to accept this broad situation as a part of growing up over which they have no control.

Let’s stop and think about that. The Bible, which many accept as God’s Word, has much to say about the basic issues of life, and it has served as the moral and legal foundation of western society for nearly 2000 years. What does it say about socialization?

Regarding the nature of a child, it says this: Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him. (Proverbs 22:15) In light of this truth, doesn’t it seem strange to say or think that the best way to make children with foolishness in their hearts fit for society is for them to spend large amounts of their time with other children who also have foolishness in their hearts?

Remember, part of the definition of socialize is ‘to make subject to the influences of society.’ That is exactly what happens in the institutional school setting. Children spend their days with each

other and gain the desire to be conformed to each other. If we are honest, we will all admit that children (as much as we want to think that our children are different) are not ready to be role models in standing up for what is right. They have not assimilated a solid value system, and they do not have the strength to resist the temptation to “go with the flow” of the crowd. In fact, one of the defining qualities of life in school is fitting in with the group.

The Bible cautions believers about that. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. (Romans 12:2) The Phillips translation of this verse expresses “transformed” as “squeeze you into its own mold.” So, Scripture tells us not to be conformed to our peers. Rather, we are to strive to be conformed to the image of our LORD.

So, how is this to be accomplished? He that walketh with wise men shall be wise; but a companion of fools shall be destroyed. (Proverbs 13:20) If our children are to become wise, they need to spend their time with those who are wise--- those they can learn from. Who is this to be?

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might, And these words which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. (Deuteronomy 6:4-7, and this is repeated in Deuteronomy 11:18-20)

Who is to teach the children? The LORD clearly said thy children and thine house. This is an unmistakable command to parents to teach their own children.

When are the parents to teach the children? All the time ~ when they get up in the morning, when they are in their houses, when they go places, and when they lie down at night.

Who is socializing the children in the context of this command? The parents are the ones incorporating the children into their world and influencing them directly as to how to live in this world and how to prepare for the next. The parents are involved in a thorough mentoring program wherein the child is not left to fend for himself regarding spiritual, moral, or legal issues. The child benefits from the security of knowing that the ones who care most about him can give solid answers and direction on any question he has. The Bible doesn't say that the parents themselves must have all the answers, nor does it say that they accomplish this process alone, but they are the major players. They can delegate some of the tasks at times, but they cannot delegate the responsibility.

Consider a passage in the New Testament: And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. (Ephesians 6:4) This verse is more specific on who is to train (nurture) the children. The fathers!

When we compare the Bible's standard for parenting with what is actually happening in society, we are not surprised at the problems we see in families today. Koray Tanfer of Batelle Memorial Institute and Frank Mott of Ohio State University collaborated on an excellent article summarizing data on fatherhood (“The Meaning of Fatherhood For Men,” prepared for NICHD Workshop “Improving Data on Male Fertility and Family Formation” at the Urban Institute, Washington D.C.,

January 16-17,1997). They say, "...changes in family patterns signal a weaker commitment of women to men and of men to women; a weaker commitment by the partners to their relationship; and very possibly a weaker commitment to their children. It is evident from these documented trends that women, and disproportionately men, are increasingly rejecting the conventional roles and obligations of a traditional family...conflicting evidence shows that, on the one hand, there are men who increasing [ly] view children and fatherhood primarily as nothing but responsibility and obligation, and on the other hand, there are men who emphasize the role of children as a source of meaning, happiness, and stability. Research has also shown that children are increasingly seen as interfering with the spousal relationship (Veroff, Douvan, and Kulka, 1981)."

The Bible's command is to "...bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." Certainly seeing your children as "...nothing but responsibility and obligation..." is contrary to that. Home schoolers take seriously their responsibility to train, nurture, and socialize their children in the right way. That is why they are willing to make sacrifices to be able to work with their children daily.

Consider these statistics that support the idea that children in homes with married parents are healthier and engage in less risky behavior than children in homes involving other living arrangements. A 1998 study found that girls who lived with their married biological parents in eighth grade were one-third as likely to have a premarital birth by grade 12 than were girls living in other family structures. A 1998 national study on drug abuse found that adolescents age 12-17 who live with their biological parents are the least likely to use illicit drugs. Adolescents who lived with their father only or with their father and stepmother are the most likely to use marijuana or other illicit drugs. A 1996 study of fourth-grade urban boys found that those living in a stepfamily or with a single mother at age 10 were more than twice as likely to be arrested by age 14 than were those living with both biological parents. (The Family Portrait, copyright 2002, Family Research Council of Washington D.C., pages 18 & 19)

Over and over in the Proverbs, sons are admonished to listen to their fathers and be wise, yet some have believed the notion that if our children spend most of their waking hours in the company of other children, they will become wise. How many children have strength to choose the wisdom of their fathers over the ideas of their peers? Have you tried to start a conversation with an average child or young person, only to discover that they are interested only in boys, girls, cars, clothes and sports? In fact, they don't know how to and in some cases have no desire to carry on a conversation with someone who is not their own age. Remember that part of socialization involves being influenced by society. Who do we want to influence our children? Those who will lead them toward the fluctuating and sometimes chaotic world, or those who will lead them to a solid Biblical concept of right and wrong that will become a foundation for their own homes of the future?

In another very practical vein, think for a moment about your own life. Since you have been out of school, how much of your time has been spent in the exclusive company of your age mates? I'm sure it has been very little. Real-life practice in socialization comes in the family where children are learning from their fathers and mothers as Scripture commands. Time is spent with brothers and sisters, thereby learning to interact with different ages and to take responsibility for younger ones. As home school families participate in various activities together, the children learn to get along with those outside of their own family, yet still a variety of age ranges. As these young people participate in various community-based activities, they interact in social settings with people of a variety of ages and backgrounds thus being provided socialization that is far more life-like than the institutional classroom.

A recent news article (Fox News, Friday, April 5, 2002 entitled “First Wave of Homeschoolers Comes of Age”) made some interesting points. The author Robin Wallace states, “Legal in all 50 states since the 1980’s homeschooling has often been criticized as a paranoid practice of right-wing religious fanatics that stunts children’s emotional growth. But as that first generation of homeschoolers settles into young adulthood, the criticism is proving unfounded. If anything, some experts say, the homeschoolers are proving to be better prepared for adulthood than their traditionally schooled peers.”

The article goes on to quote J. Gary Knowles, a University of Toronto researcher who has extensively interviewed adults who were homeschooled: “I think a lot of this stuff [about high school] is mythology, that maybe we’ve got a whole lot of falsehoods associated with schooling. We have all these weird rites of passage that are deemed important and many are quite dysfunctional.”

Mr. Knowles has found homeschoolers to be more self-reliant and focused. “They’re able to move into adulthood with a much better sense of self and have a very good sense as to what they want to do,” he said. Expressing concern about socialization, Knowles acknowledges he “...has found homeschooled adults to be no more or less engaged socially or politically than those with traditional educations.”

The article also states, “Curiously absent from homeschoolers as a group is something many presumed to be a part of every childhood ~ youthful angst and alienation. The burning desire to isolate and separate themselves from their parents just doesn’t seem to be there, researchers say.”

Two homeschoolers were named in the article, and they gave some of their observations on how their upbringing has affected them. Both referred to close relationships with parents. One of them, a 20-year-old college student, recalled “...enjoying two-hour conversations with his father every night...”

“Alienation between generations is a product of schooling,” says Knowles. “There is no reason for teen-agers to be alienated.”

Regarding college, he says, “...homeschoolers seem to have the discipline and maturity to quickly develop college-level study habits. They are not as easily distracted and are already accustomed to taking responsibility for themselves...I wouldn’t say homeschoolers are better educated, but they are better equipped to learn.”

We believe that we should stand against the pressure to segregate our young people too much by age. The thinking that abundant contact with other immature young people with undeveloped, ungodly value systems will somehow mature our children is wrong. As we are dealing with the foolishness in the hearts of our children and endeavoring to be wise examples for them, we must have clear goals in mind. Our goals and standards must come from the Word of God rather than the peer group. With fears of maladjusted young adults being laid aside even by secular researchers, it is time that we take seriously the Scripture and get back to the plan God laid out in the beginning ~ the family as the basis of socialization.