

March 1, 1993 (Vol. 8, no. 13)

Dear Colleague:

Chimpanzees who demonstrate amazing powers of symbolic thinking in the lab--under human probing--do not display these same powers in the wild. Out there in the wild, they can't afford the luxury of abstract cogitation: all the brain they have must be engaged fully in the complexities of social adaptation, which is necessary to survival. Now, humans are better abstract thinkers than chimpanzees for a couple of reasons. One is our bigger brain and the other, just as important, is our exceptionally long childhood, which is an extended period of social irresponsibility. Young humans, unlike other young animals, can afford to use almost all their brain power for philosophical and scientific, rather than merely social, ends. For this intellectual bent to flower, however, adults must consistently encourage it. More than other animals, young humans enjoy intimate association with adults for a prolonged period of time, learning from them. You see what I am getting at. Peer learning is strictly for the chimpanzees! More accurately, peer learning--learning about the world as distinct from learning skills of social manipulation--is minimal among young children, say, up to the age of the mid-teens. Thereafter, it increases. At college age they do indeed learn from their peers, perhaps even more so than they do from their profs, as they hold all night sessions on Lacan's literary theory and the best method for dating Pleistocene sediments.

One of the most damaging educational myths in America is that of learning from one's age-peers. It is a pernicious form of egalitarianism which gives rise to the comforting idea that adults don't have to be around their offspring much, nurturing their intellectual aspiration, helping them in their studies. Broken families are regrettable, but, hey!, children learn from other children! They do. Even young children do. They learn at best street smarts, power politics and the social facts of life--that is, who is stronger and must be deferred to, who weaker and can be teased. They learn, in other words, what young chimpanzees learn. What they do not learn is the feeding habits of dinosaurs, why stars sparkle, the meaning of moral excellence.

Best wishes,

*Z. Ju*