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Prioritizing Kids in the Anarchist Community

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Recently I attended the Permanent Autonomous Zone conference in Louisville, KY where I participated in my first parenting workshop. Even though I go to several conferences a year, this was the first time I saw a parenting workshop offered. Unfortunately, it wasn't even scheduled, but was a guerrilla workshop set up by a mama from Detroit. Why did it take so long for me to come upon a workshop like this? Why is it that a bunch of self proclaimed anarchists in this "movement" for social and political change are not prioritizing family and community?

I am the mother of a 3-year-old kid, miss Anaya Cassidy Kelly. Anaya goes with me almost everywhere. She is by my side at meetings, workshops, benefits, during volunteering, demos, consciousness raisings, protests and other events. You name it, and if I was there, chances are Anaya was too. That kid has sat through the most annoying and frustrating of consensus-based meetings where even I was whiny and tired by the end. Anaya has to put up with a lot having an activist as a mama.

This is complicated by the fact that she has a mama who is working within a "movement" that tends to marginalize both the parents and children within it. Often I am left with the feeling that, within the anarchist community, kids are seen as fun little things to have around as long as someone else takes care of them and they don't inconvenience people by taking them away from the "real work" they could be doing. The amount of cluelessness and hypocrisy that we, as parents, find ourselves surrounded by as we struggle to both work for change and raise our kids is astounding. We must do our work in a "movement" not inclusive of children.

Locally, this plays out in several ways, including how children are treated, how child care is handled and the unrelenting judgment passed on the hardworking folks who are parenting, I would like to think that these problems just apply to my local community, but in conversations with parents from different parts of the country there are definite patterns in the ways that children and families are looked at and treated in our supposedly "radical" communities.

Childcare

Unless a workshop or action is planned specifically by the local NOW chapter or women's liberation group, there is simply no childcare. Some organizers claim that their events are to be held in a "child-friendly" environment. Though the thought is nice, it simply does not occur to them that parents would like to concentrate on the subject at hand rather than constantly entertaining kids to keep them quiet enough to not disrupt the meeting. Having to get up every 15

minutes to take her/him to the bathroom and to leave early because our kid(s) has/have simply lost their patience makes it difficult to concentrate. When I go to a meeting or an event, I want to be able to participate in what it going on. My child does not necessarily enjoy events just because they are held in “child-friendly” spaces.

Over the summer, I went to an event set up by the local women’s health collective. There were about four kids at the workshop, and though it was nice to not feel like the children were unwelcome, the mothers spent more time entertaining the kids and keeping them out of the pads and speculums (little kids love breaking plastic speculums, let me tell you) that we really didn’t give our total attention to the workshop on D.I.Y. women’s healthcare.

It’s also frustrating when events promise childcare, yet when parents show up with their kids, there is none to be found, as happened here in Florida at last year’s Youth Liberation Conference. Apparently there were two people set up to “bottom-line” the childcare, yet when the conference came, the parents of the three kids who showed up were out of luck. There was no space set aside for kids, no activities set up and no volunteers signed up to watch them! As it turned out, before each of the workshops that I wanted to attend, I would have to wander around with the kids, asking people to please volunteer to do childcare. Instead, I ended up with the responsibility of setting up childcare, I ended up with this stupid feeling of guilt because I was daring to take people’s precious time away from the workshops to watch my kid.

Good childcare at events and conferences makes the lives of parents and kids much easier. Kids get to be kids and be as loud and silly and rambunctious as they want to be, and the parents actually get to participate fully in the event, as happened at the National Conference on Organized Resistance. From the moment I dropped Anaya off before each workshop to the moment I picked her up she was getting constant one-on-one attention. She totally enjoyed being able to hang out with other kids who were just as weird as she was, and I felt relaxed enough to go and enjoy the conference. It was great!

Despite the reliable childcare, I was still left with the feeling that the kids were being a bit slighted. At NCOR I went to workshops which informed not just my organizing, but how I perceived the world. Why is it that we expect people to reach a certain age before they are worthy of getting certain information? I have never been to a workshop, conference or other event where there have been workshops or activities for kids under the age of ten. Why are we, as anarchists, waiting until our kids are alienated teenagers before introducing them to politics? Consensus decision making, mutual aid and direct democracy are just as important for three year olds and how they live their lives as they are to us! (What do you think sharing is all about?) Kids also need conflict resolution skills so that they can

participate just as fully in problem solving in our communities as we do. How awesome would it be if our kids under the age of 10 were already aware of and challenging patriarchy, white supremacy, heterosexism and gender norms? I feel as though anarchists are underestimating and short-changing our up and coming generations.

Helpful Advice or Anarcho-Purism?

Probably every parent I know is her/his own worst critic when it comes to parenting. As a parent I am constantly questioning myself as to whether I am making the best choices for my child and as to whether our relationship is a positive one. As an activist I am very sure of my politics and am ready to discuss those politics with anyone who is interested and willing to share ideas with me. Conversely, as a parent, I am constantly questioning almost every decision I make. This stems from both social pressures and self-criticism as I try to apply my politics, ethics and principles to my parenting and can cause me quite a bit of stress.

The stress is only amplified when people feel that they have a right to pass judgment on my parenting. Parents throughout the anarchist community feel unfairly judged. One mother told me of a guy in our community who decided that it would be okay to tell her that he didn't think that she should let her daughter watch TV. and that she was obviously feeding her daughter terribly. The fact that this guy has never had to try and raise a child as a single parent and has not had to feed both himself and a child on one income was of course not an issue in his mind. Who cares that you can get a whole load of dishes washed and several rooms cleaned during one video, as long as we are perfect parents and spending every moment that we have as parents participating in "quality time" with our children? Instead of feeling the need to pass judgment on this mother, why didn't the guy just offer to take the child a couple of afternoons a week so that the mother could get chores done and, gasp, actually have some time to relax by herself once in a while.

One woman in my community told me that I am not spending enough time with Anaya. The fact that I am trying to finish school, keep a local organization going, run weekly activist trainings and workshops, and volunteer in our local infoshop simultaneously was, of course, not an issue. Instead of volunteering to take on one or more of these tasks, the woman felt it would be more useful to tell me I had my priorities mixed up, leaving me feeling like shit and without an answer to how things could change.

I often hear from non-parents about parental discipline. Several people in my community think that kids just don't need rules and that any type of boundaries are coercive and authoritarian. Forget the fact that kids feel safer and thrive in structured environments and are much happier and easier to get along with when they have regular bedtimes and naptimes. Most of the folks I hear advice like this from have not had much experience with kids, yet the advice keeps coming. Once, someone heard my friend and nanny tell Anaya that she could not do something. The guy and his partner were to watch Anaya for me the next afternoon, and he felt the need to inform my friend that he certainly would not use such "authoritarian" techniques when he watched Anaya.

It's time that, instead of judging those of us raising kids, people start incorporating the kids in our communities into their own lives. I hope people will keep these ideas in mind, and in the future, anarchist parents will not feel so marginalized while trying to do work within this "movement."

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