

# Creating a Soulcentric Family Lifestyle in an Egocentric World

To be soulcentric is to seek out the ways soul attempts to guide our relationships and individual development. It is to envision the principal goal of maturation to be the conscious discovery and embodiment of our human soul — our unique place in the more-than-human world of mountains, rivers, critters, farms, businesses, and schools.

To be *egocentric* is to treat the self as an isolated, competitive entity, an autonomous agent with minimal relationship or obligation to other people or the larger world.

In an egocentric society, how can you, as a soulcentric parent of pre-teens, optimize the social, psychological, and educational environment in which your child learns and grows?

There are two things you can do: protect your family from egocentric influences, and create a soulcentric lifestyle. When enough families have done this, our culture will shift fundamentally and radically — with or without the support of governments, large corporations, schools, or religious organizations.

## Creating a Shelter from Egocentrism

- Minimize or eliminate children's exposure to TV. Most programming is bad enough, but the underlying message of the ads are worse (the way to personal happiness and social success is physical appearance, conformity, and commercial products). If you choose to continue living with a TV, use it rarely or only for viewing selected videos or high quality programs that occasionally appear on PBS or other networks. If your children do view any programs, watch them

*together*. Be aware of your desired outcome in watching the show and create a dialogue with your children around that theme.

- Limit video games and movies watched at home, too, for the reasons listed above, and because your children need to have plenty of time to exercise their own imaginations with other children, you, nature, books, and the arts.
- Be selective about which movies children see, video games they play, and music they hear at home and, to the extent possible, elsewhere, and make it a habit to talk to them about the values implied in particular films, games, and songs.
- Have a few nights a week when computers are off-limits and activities are encouraged that creatively rely on imagination, emotion, the senses, and independent critical thinking.
- Be discriminating about the books your children read and the stories you read or tell them. What sort of values and lessons are embedded? As Mary Pipher notes, “Most of the stories children hear are mass-produced to induce them to want good things instead of good lives.”<sup>1</sup>
- Limit the amount of time your kids spend in organized, high-pressure, winning-obsessed sports (so they don’t become preoccupied with aggressive competition and performance, and so they have time for all the other dimensions of growing).
- When contemplating the purchase of the latest technological wonder, ask first not about its affordability but about its effect on family life and sound childhood development.

- Avoid gifting your children with commercial toys and products. As much as possible, allow their rewards to be experiences naturally engendered by interacting imaginatively with the world — with other children, with you, with nature, and the arts. When you do give them “things,” let those be items that richly engage their imagination, senses, thinking, and feelings.

### **Creating a Soulcentric and Ecocentric Family Lifestyle**

- Give your children lots of exploration time in wild places; helping them to cultivate their relationships with their bodies, imaginations, and emotions; and tell them stories rich with virtues, values, ecocentric moral lessons, and imaginative possibilities.
- Cultivate in your children an awareness of and appreciation of all emotions — yours and theirs. Each emotion, when felt, respected, expressed, and explored holds a treasure, a gift, for the whole family.
- Hold regular family meetings to discuss important family issues — meetings in which authentic dialogue can take place. Learn and use a council format for these meetings.
- Spend time in nature with your children: Learn the different leaves, needles, seeds, fruit, and barks of trees; identify types and parts of flowers; draw or paint flowers, trees, animals, lakes, streams, forests, mountains; or make up songs and dances that celebrate natural things. You can also watch birds and mammals

(with and without binoculars); visit uncrowded beaches, forests, canyons, deserts; play hide and seek in those places; camp; or fish. Or you might collect feathers, bones, or stones where this is environmentally tenable; gather plants or fruit; or plant and tend a garden.

Nothing substitutes for frequent unmediated contact between children and wildlife in natural habitats, contact that is spontaneous, intimate, and visceral. The emphasis should not be on the rarely seen, aloof animals, but rather on the often smaller, more common wild beings — a flock of ducks, a swarm of termites, an army of leaf-cutting ants, a community of ground squirrels. This way, the child experiences the magic in nature everywhere, not merely in the exotic and rare. Also beware of traditional zoos that cage and traumatize animals, treating them as mere spectacles for human entertainment.

- Invaluable are nature stories told by elders with a lifetime of intimate relationships with the local plants and animals.
- If you have limited access to untamed nature, the next best thing might be “naturalized playgrounds” at schools, which use the landscape — its vegetation and materials — as the play setting, and are designed to be as wild as possible and to stimulate children’s natural curiosity, imagination, and wonder. Basic elements include water; indigenous vegetation; small animals; ponds and their aquatic life; butterflies and bugs; sand; natural places that children can sit in, on, under, lean against, and climb, and that provide shelter and shade; places that

offer socialization, privacy, and views; and structures and materials that can be changed and manipulated by children, including lots of loose parts.<sup>2</sup>

- Encourage active life-making rather than passive life-watching. For example, support kids in making music rather than just listening to it.
- Find opportunities in the community for the family to volunteer its time and talents in support of other people, animals, or habitats. This helps children feel good about themselves because they experience their usefulness and connection to a bigger world.
- Create ceremonies and rituals that celebrate your family relationships, significant human passages, the seasons, dawn and dusk, your home bioregion and its more-than-human-community, and Earth more generally.
- Develop ongoing relationships with sacred places, specific ones, both natural and cultural. Visit those places regularly as a family.
- Formal education: Over the past three or four decades, some public and private schools have remembered that the word *education* actually means to draw out (rather than fill up). These schools appreciate and accommodate different learning styles, invite children to think critically and creatively, emphasize project-based and place-based learning, and provide plenty of opportunities for feeling, imagining, and cultivating the senses. If you have the economic resources as well as the educational options in your community, carefully select the schools to which you send your children. If there is not yet a desirable school

in your community, seek out other parents who would join you in creating one.

Some parents are able to provide part-time or full-time home schooling.

- Cultivate a true community with like-minded neighbors, a community that includes people in as many stages of development as possible. Gather with others and explore the roles of education, politics, religion, food, ceremony, mythology, and cosmology within your community. Only through community and united action can we create a more ecologically sustainable and culturally sound world.

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