A PARENTING DILEMMA
When Children’s Rights for Nurturance and Self-Determination Conflict

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Parents are confronted with the dilemmas of children’s rights in our society. When people become parents they take on a new role which involves the responsibility of recognizing the rights of children whose needs and capabilities are rapidly changing. While millions of Americans per year become parents, there are indications that parents have feelings of uncertainty and insecurity. The increasing number of child-care manuals published and purchased1 is a reflection of this, as is the clinical attention given by nurses, social workers, educators and psychologists to parenting problems.

Part of the parenting responsibility is in recognizing that children have a right to be provided with an environment which facilitates their growth and development into fully-functioning and actualized people. This is an awesome charge which presents many dilemmas; one of which is: Can parents facilitate development of their children into good decisionmakers and at the same time protect them from the harmful consequences of their own decisions? This article will address, from philosophical and empirical perspectives, the nurturance and self-determination rights of children as they apply to this parenting dilemma.

Rights of children have been conceptualized on a continuum from actual to potential.2 Children’s actual rights are those which are currently held and which are legally recognized, while their potential rights are those which are possible but not guaranteed. An example of an actual right is the right to an education at the state’s expense. An example of a potential right is the right to receive a nutritious breakfast.

The potential rights have further been conceptualized and labeled as belonging to two different orientations, nurturance and self-determination.3 Nurturance rights are those rights which advocate the extension to children of special goods and services or the extension of goods and services currently received only by adults. Examples of nurturance rights are the right to be protected from neglect and the right to be provided with jobs. Self-determination rights are those which advocate that children be allowed to make decisions and to have control over their own lives. Examples of self-determination rights are the rights to decide what time to go to bed and the right to refuse medical treatment. Parents’ responsibility to facilitate children’s development into good decisionmakers and to protect them from the consequences of their own decisions falls somewhere between nurturance and self-determination. The extent to which children are allowed to make decisions for themselves is self-determination and the extent to which they are protected from the harmful consequences of their decisions is nurturance. The dilemma is: How can parents do both at the same time?

The literature on the potential rights of children reveals little philosophical controversy about nurturance. For example, the protection of dependent and helpless children was a major issue addressed by the first White House Conference in 1909.4 In 1959, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted a declaration of children’s rights which stated that children are entitled to “special safeguards and care.”5 In 1975, The Pediatric Bill of Rights was endorsed by the National Association of Children’s Hospitals and related institutions and it proclaimed that every child has the right to “health protection,” “periodic
allowing very young children to make all their decisions, and the rationale that children are as wise as adults who learn by suffering the consequences of their own mistakes. Farson clearly recognizes that harm can come from children’s wrong decisions and justifies recommending that parents not protect them on the basis that this will facilitate their development into good decisionmakers. His logic is open to criticism for several reasons. Children—not to mention adults—may not always learn from a wrong decision without educational intervention and guidance. Children in the earliest stages of cognitive development are incapable of recognizing the cause-effect relationship between the reactions and the resulting consequences. Even after developing an understanding of cause and effect, the ability to generalize learning to new situations requires a higher level of cognitive development than young children have.

A view toward the restrictive end of the self-determination continuum is presented by G.L. Arthur. His philosophy maintains that children do not have self-determination rights until they are proven capable of receiving them from adults. Arthur claims that children do not have “equal liberty” and come into the world being allowed no choices. His criterion for extending freedom of choice to children is, “When he, (the child) can recognize each alternative, forecast its consequences, and compare the advantages and disadvantages.” An underlying rationale for this opinion is that children, if unrestrained, will make decisions which bring unnecessary harm to themselves and to others. An implication of this perspective, if applied to people of all ages, would result in a population without freedom to choose. People who make decisions will also make mistakes, and children, like adults, should be free to make mistakes.

Both the restrictive and permissive ends of the self-determination continuum of children’s rights agree on one point: Childrearing should result in an individual who can make good decisions. The controversy which can confuse parents is whether that is accomplished by allowing children to make all decisions or by allowing children to make no decisions. As in most controversies, the answer probably lies somewhere between the two positions. There exists a small body of research on the potential rights of children. An important beginning was made by Wrightsman, Rogers, and Percy when they developed a scale to measure attitudes toward the rights of children. Likert-type questions measured general attitudes toward self-determination, general attitudes toward nurturance, and attitudes toward self-determination and nurturance in five content areas of children’s rights: health, education-information, safety-care, economic, and legal-judicial-political. Research with this scale—Children’s Rights Attitude Scale—has consistently revealed greater willingness to extend nurturance rights to children than to extend self-determination rights. Rogers and Wrightsman reported that undergraduate students, high school juniors and seniors, and adults in continuing education classes held more favorable attitudes toward granting nurturance rights than toward granting self-determination rights to 10 to 14-year-old children. Parks-Rogers and Rogers found undergraduate students to be more willing to extend nurturance than self-determination rights, regardless of the age of the child referent. Parks’ data from undergraduate student nurses revealed a greater willingness to extend health nurturance rights than health self-determination rights. Grisso and Ring reported middle-class parents to be favorable toward extending legal-judicial-political and education self-determination rights. The data from these investigators are consistent with the absence of philosophical controversy between nurturing children and allowing children to make decisions.

Research on the factors which influence and which are related to people’s attitudes toward the rights
of children has recently been reported. For example, age of the child referent has been reported to influence attitudes toward nurturance and self-determination rights.\textsuperscript{13}

In the Parks-Rogers and Rogers investigation, attitudes toward nurturance and attitudes toward self-determination were found to be dependent upon the age of the child which the participants were instructed to think about when completing the Children's Rights Attitude Scale.\textsuperscript{14} In this experimental study, undergraduates were randomly assigned to one of four groups and instructed to think about children of a specific age group when responding to the nurturance and self-determination attitude scale. The four child referent groups utilized were: 6 to 8-year-olds; 9 to 11-year-olds; 12 to 14-year-olds, and 15 to 17-year-olds. With increased age of the child, participants were increasingly favorable toward extending children the rights to make decisions and to exercise control over their own lives.

Attitudes toward self-determination rights for 6 to 8-year-olds were not significantly different from those toward 9 to 11-year-olds. There were, however, significant self-determination attitudinal differences among the 9 to 11-year-old group, the 12 to 14-year-old group, and the 15 to 17-year-old group. Using the conceptualization of self-determination as a permissive to restrictive continuum, these age-related findings can be interpreted as a reflection of the restrictive perspective. The attitude that older children should be allowed to make more decisions than younger children could reflect the belief that children gradually become capable of making good decisions. With respect to attitudes toward nurturance, results of the investigation indicated that participants were more willing to grant rights to special goods and services—goods and services currently held by adults only—to the two oldest groups than to the two youngest groups. This finding was interpreted as reflecting the thinking that children's needs during adolescence are more diverse than their needs during middle childhood.

A factor not included in previously-reported studies, perceived experience with children, was investigated by Parks.\textsuperscript{17} Participants were 65 childless undergraduate nursing students. The health nurturance and self-determination subscales of the Children's Rights Attitude Scale were administered and participants were instructed to think of a 10-year-old middle-class male child. To measure perceived experience with children, participants were asked to rate their amount of overall experience with children on a 1 (none) to 5 (extensive) scale. Results revealed a small but significant positive relationship between attitudes toward nurturance rights and perceived experience with children—the more extensive the perceived experience with children, then the more willingness to extend health nurturance rights.

Complementary to the adult attitudinal research on potential children's rights are investigations of children's perceptions and understanding of their actual rights. Factors which predict level of children's understandings have been studied, and age-grade level and social economic status have consistently emerged as significant. In a descriptive study first, third, fifth, and seventh-graders from both lower-working class and high-income homes were interviewed.\textsuperscript{18} Children in higher grades had a more sophisticated comprehension of their rights than children in lower grades. High social-economic-status children provided a more mature perspective about their rights than did low social-economic-status children.

These findings were interpreted as indicating that cognitive-functioning level and experience with rights are important factors in children's perceptions of their rights. Furthermore, Melton concluded that children should receive education about their actual self-determination rights\textsuperscript{19} and discussed the implementation of a curriculum by school systems.\textsuperscript{20} While Melton investigated children's comprehension of a broad spectrum of rights,\textsuperscript{21} Grisso and Manoogian focused their investigations only on a juvenile's ability to understand the actual legal rights as stated in the "Miranda" warnings.\textsuperscript{22} They described deficiencies of comprehension and reported factors which predict level of understanding (e.g., age, IQ, race, and social-economic status). Implicit in the Grisso and Manoogian studies\textsuperscript{23} and in Grisso's other publications\textsuperscript{24} is the opinion that children should not have self-determination rights without an accompanying consideration for their nurturance rights and that children are sometimes incapable of making good decisions. The problem with this orientation and with some of the empirical findings—for example, IQ is a better predictor of understanding of the "Miranda" warnings than Age\textsuperscript{25}—is their applicability to an argument for extreme restriction of self-determination rights. A possible implication is the use of a competence criterion to determine not only which children may receive self-determination rights, but also to determine which adults may not receive them.

An overview of the research on children's rights reveals attention to attitudes toward potential children's rights of those people who will be in a position to nurture and control children and attention to
comprehension of actual rights of children. Further understanding of children's rights awaits research addressing such issues as: (1) parents' attitudes toward children's rights and their corresponding child-rearing behavior; (2) children's ability to make good decisions, and (3) the effect of child-rearing behavior on children's ability to make good decisions.

Footnotes
3Ibid.
8Ibid.
11Rogers and Wrightsman, op. cit.
15Parks-Rogers and Rogers, op. cit.
16Ibid.
17Parks, op. cit.
19Ibid.
21Melton, op. cit.
23Ibid.
25Grisso and Manoogian, op. cit.

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