

Jesper Juul's foreword to
"Kids' Skills – playful and practical solution-finding with children" (Spanish
edition)

When I read this book the first time I was both impressed and embarrassed. I had to ask myself why on earth I and others have not been able to draw the same logical conclusions from the facts that we are all familiar with, facts that also form the foundation of this book, namely that children do not like to be a problem or have problems, they don't know how to handle them, and last but not least, they are always eager to learn new things.

In my experience the crucial difference between Ben Furman's approach and our traditional attempts to help, support and cure children is that this never makes kids feel of value to their primary adults. No matter how kind and empathic we are troubled children always feel that they are a burden. With this approach their self-esteem can grow from day one.

Childhood is a long learning process. During this time, children explore themselves and their surroundings 24/7. For the most part adults call this research activity 'play', as if it would fall under a quite different category than that adults call 'learning'.

Similarly, children often develop, for diverse reasons, various behaviors, which appear and feel quite different when they are seen from the outside, as compared to when they are seen from the inside. To an ever greater degree adults label these behaviors 'problems'; and it's almost spooky how quickly we move from saying that a child has a problem, to labeling the child as a problem child – and consequently giving it a completely new social identity and allowing experts to take over.

This book demonstrates that children can overcome many of these so-called 'problems' better and quicker when we approach them differently; when instead of calling them problems, we call them learning processes and when children become project managers of their own learning processes, working closely with their social network and using their professional helper as a guide and coach.

This is obviously a great advantage not only for the children themselves, but also for teachers and other involved caretakers who become able to do what they are already good at – steering learning processes, instead of trying to be some sort of mini-therapists.

The book describes a new way of working with children where the child, among other things, is asked to name a number of supporters from within their social network – a teacher, some friends, a grandmother – not to forget the parents. With the right kind of coaching, this means that the parents will get a new task, involving new behaviors, that will replace their old, and often less appropriate behaviors and thereby strengthen their self-confidence as parents.

Our therapeutic focus has traditionally been on spotlighting the parents' inappropriate behavior, and through the use of insight, understanding and offering new experiences to them, we have tried to change their behavior for the benefit of the child and the relationship between child and parents. More often than not, this approach has a negative effect on the parents' self-confidence and self-esteem, an effect, which often makes it more difficult for them to change their behavior.

With the Kids'Skills method the parents of the child obtain a sensible answer to their persistent question: "So what should we do about it?" and such an answer is obviously of great help not only to parents, but also to professionals who may also be stuck with well-intended, but unhelpful attempts to help.

It is precisely this – the support of the social network – that is at the heart of the Kids'Skills method, which is so much more than just a new and smart way of manipulating children. In one of our conversations Ben Furman said to me that when children's self-destructive behavior changes as a result of Kids'Skills, it is, in fact, just a 'fortunate side effect' of the method. The important thing is what happens within the child's network, the improvement in the quality of the child's relationships with other people who are ultimately the most critical factor in determining whether children will succeed to integrate their new learning into their personal development.

The method requires much from professionals who coach children's learning processes in this manner. First of all, they need to have confidence that children can change. Secondly, they need to be able to tune in to the child's own speed of learning and, thirdly, they need to be willing to play and to reach out to the child's social network in order to mobilize and stabilize it. Kids'Skills is a method of change based on the children's terms; it invites adults to join the child's universe instead of focusing on the child's symptoms. Some professionals will be likely to find it difficult to let go of the traditional problem focused approach, but for those who have confidence in children's ability to be responsible and creative, and who understand the meaning of the quality of primary relationships for children, it is a gift.

This book and its philosophy are very valuable for parents as well. In my experience with many families it helps parents to realize that a lot of everyday conflicts with babies, children and even tweens are much better solved, when parents realize that their child does not have a developmental problem but rather yet one more skill to learn.

Jesper Juul