

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

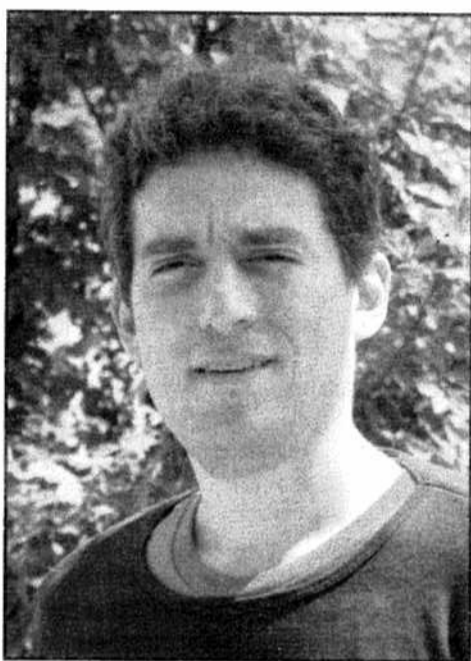
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Watering one seed (or one child) at a time

As I have been planting seeds for more than a month, I have witnessed the incredible emergence of life that takes place when a small seed (e.g., broccoli seeds are about a third of the size of a grain of rice) transforms into roots and a few leaves; the first leaves are known as "cotyledon" and they serve as food for the plant's future growth. Sometimes, this amazing process occurs in only a week's time. Other times, the seed's development is delayed over a month or so after which, seemingly out of the blue, it does "its thing" (likely in response to the availability water and a certain level of heat).

The first few leaves don't guarantee the success of a plant only a good start. In order for this "baby" plant to grow to be a full-sized, seed-producing biological entity, it will need sufficient moisture and temperatures while avoiding extremes. It will also need access to nutrients in the soil. In other words, it needs to be nurtured. If environmental conditions aren't favorable, then its growth will be stunted and it might not make it to full maturity (thus making it an endpoint in nature's tree of life). Farmers understand this and do what they can to maximize the likelihood of the plant's success (through fertilizing the soil, watering, and eliminating pests).

Our personal success depends on similar circumstances. We also need a healthy start (via prenatal care and a mother in good physical condition). Once born, we benefit greatly from our mother's milk (which contains essential antibodies that cannot be found in synthetic formula) and a loving connection with those around us (particularly our mother). As a toddler, we continue to require quality nourishment and familial support. Since the brain is growing throughout a child's life, it is important for children to have many opportunities to engage in a stimulating environment; that is, a good diet isn't enough to get the brain organized to reach its full potential. Once in school, a child needs additional support from his teachers and the community as a whole (depending on how the child interacts with it—through sports teams, after school programs, Boy/Girl Scouts, etc.). As a child becomes a young adult, he/she will likely rebel to some extent from parents and authority figures. It now becomes important to provide nurturing opportunities at every area in this young person's daily life. Left unstimulated, teenagers often find ways to entertain themselves. As we know from experience, unsupervised teenagers can end up getting into things that are potentially harmful to them. Lessons learned the "hard way" can lead young adults down unproductive paths that don't benefit society and often cost everyone dearly. Thus, it is very important that society take an active role in ensuring that as few youth as possible fall into this trap. In summary then, just as seeds and seedlings depend



on light, water and nutrients, children need emotional and physical support and resources to develop into productive and healthy adults.

So in terms of "watering" our children, how are we doing? Certain signs suggest that we need to do much better. Too many children go without health insurance (nearly 10 million). Too many of our teenagers are getting pregnant (or impregnating other teens). Too many children have type II diabetes—a preventable illness based on poor diets and insufficient exercise. Too many children still have elevated lead levels (which leads to learning and other neurological problems) and asthma. Too many children are dropping out of high school. Too many children are on prescription drugs. And, far too many children are addicts of one sort or another (be it drugs, alcohol, video games, etc.). So, clearly, we need to do something different. But what?

While answers to this question are many, focusing on all of them at once usually leaves one feeling quite helpless. Where do we start? I recommend a multi-faceted approach. Yet, perhaps, more importantly, I am convinced that it is going to take nearly all of us to make significant progress. We all need to begin working with kids of all ages. We need to reach out, become a coach or a tutor, a friend or confidant, a benefactor (e.g., make sure a kid you know has the resources to go to a supportive summer camp or play for a baseball team—those uniforms aren't free), or a volunteer at a community center. Others need to work on cleaning up our environment so that air, water, soil, and toys aren't dangerous to our kids. Others can help get local governments and local organizations to work together so that we have more outdoor parks for kids to play in and more community centers where youth can get the vital support they need.

We can do this now. Let's get busy watering.

