

Book Review

Cultivating Mindfulness to Raise Children Who Thrive: Why Human Connection from Before Birth Matters (2020) by Antonella Sansone. Routledge. 254 pages. ISBN-10: 978-1138-59823-2; ISBN-13: 978-1138-59827-0

Antonella Sansone is a researcher who has gifted us with her combined experiences with motherhood, her experiences living with the Himba—an African indigenous culture in Northern Namibia—“mindfulness retreats, mindfulness teaching training and practice and her research.” She is “passionate about ensuring support in the early years for every pregnancy and every baby” (p. vx). Sharing life with her husband and two children with the Himba people, Sansone had a “revelation that mothering among indigenous cultures supported by the entire community produced much healthier human souls than mothering practices in the modern West” (p. xv).

This book gave me a deeper understanding of what I have been learning in APPPAH. Human development and health begin even before conception. She presents scientific evidence in “epigenetics, interpersonal neuroscience, attachment, anthropology, and mindfulness” (p. xx), with citations and a bibliography, her own innate knowledge through her own pregnancies and births and acknowledging the primal wisdom of the Himbas shown in their community during pregnancy, with birth, and with their parenting. Their community supports and celebrates each family’s journey from conception to growing. What Sansone presents is the background relationship of stress to fetal, maternal, and family health and a call to all prenatal and perinatal providers to support the prenatal relationship between parents and fetus because this will affect the well-being of our society and Earth. She writes:

An important message of this book is that by promoting common-self mindfulness, we promote attuned relationships and secure attachments, thus moral capacities, health and well-being. The practice of mindfulness offers a way to restore human virtues to their full potential. It opens the way to eco-mindfulness, which views

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human beings as essential parts of a cooperative, not competitive, natural world. Raising awareness for all healthcare practitioners of the importance of how these human qualities affect perinatal mental health and bonding/attachments is crucial. (p. xxvii)

Sansone begins with wisdom that is seen in cultures in India, New Guinea, the Netsilik Eskimos, the bushmen of the Kalahari, the Ganda children of East Africa (Touching, by Ashley Montagu), and of course, the Himbas of South Africa. These babies are cradled, sung to, stroked, caressed, and carried by their mothers, other family members, and members of the community. She then correlates this loving and acceptance of new life to mental and physical health of the family. This wisdom, empathetic affectivity, relational engagement, intersubjectivity, compassion, and early human development are passed down to successive generations. Imagine if the Western world were educated in these concepts and supported preconception, pregnancy, birth, and family life. I'm thinking this is the way we all would like to live.... with equity, social responsibility, creative thinking, and respect.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health in its 1948 constitution as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO, 1948). Sansone's vision is:

...mindfulness-based programmes in pregnancy and community building, promoting parents' well-being and consciousness of the crucial period of their children's development and windows of opportunities as being part of the standard offerings for all expectant parents. By cultivating receptive attention, kindness, listening and compassion as a community, including healthcare practitioners and policy makers, as well as parents, not only can we prevent or mitigate the impact of parents' trauma and mental dysfunctions on children, but we can also enhance parental wisdom resources. In a technological digital society that contributes to the attention deficits in adults as well as children, we need to cultivate wholesome states and virtues, perhaps even using a little bit of technology such as video games as a tool, but only as a first introductory step, for example to listen to while driving. Changes will only be permanent with continued practice, ideally without the game, as it is the practice that engages our body, brain, genes and soul, thus our whole-being. (p. 200)

There is so much more to learn and accept in this glorious work Sansone has shared with us. Her book will be a reference for all my teaching: student nurses, birth doulas, childbirth education and others.

Thank you, Antonella. I am hoping you will publish articles and workbooks for parents and professionals. Look for mindfulness, yoga, and meditation courses and other resources listed online, or in person near you.

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