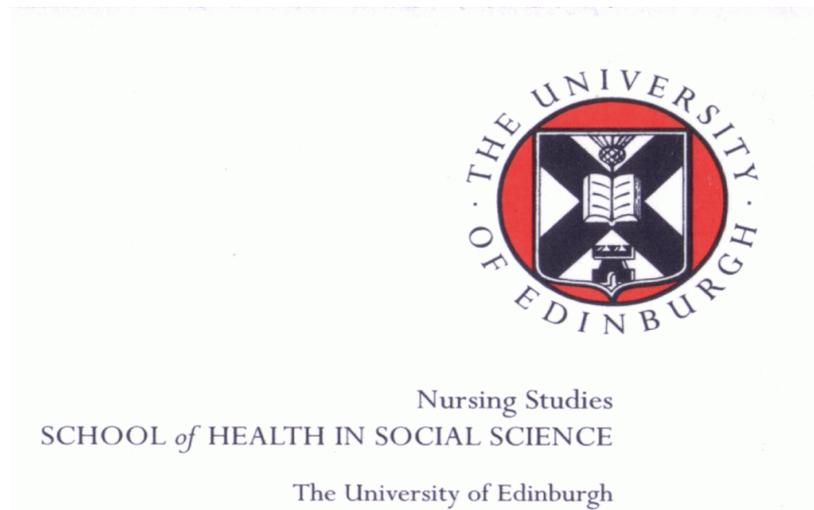


# Love as a moral system: the relational space of self-confident children

Desmond Ryan



Thanks for giving me the chance to share some of my work. I would like to present it as a kind of snapshot of children in two cultures, who have got to different places because, among other things, they started from different places. I shall be descriptive for most of the time, about what I found, with a little bit of concept-work at the end, when thinking about implications for practice and policy.

## **ADVANCE ORGANIZER:**

1. After a quick review of how I came to be in Spain researching self-confident children,
2. I shall present my condensed description of the 'self-confident child system', unpacking its pattern of positive mutual relations between children and family, school, and friends.
3. I shall then contrast the ideal model with a less successful example, where children do not benefit greatly from their relationships, giving as an example mothers from Dundee talking about their school experience.
4. Moving to address the practice and policy implications, I shall present a model of Full-Spectrum Life that has been commissioned to help frame concern with human beings in a holistic way,
5. and I shall conclude by asking some questions about the historical and political circumstances that may be affecting our capacity to give our children a Full-Spectrum Childhood.

Where did the research come from?

1. Scotland & the problem of teenage pregnancy in its  
social context

“The problem of teenage pregnancies in Dundee  
City is serious, remains difficult to understand  
and I intend to commission some research to go  
deeper into the issues.”

(Report of the Tayside Health Board CAMO/Director of Public Health  
1997)

This research was done in 1998, submitted in 1999, and web-published in 2001, since when it has been continuously available. I recently referenced it in a submission to the Holyrood Working Party – it wasn't referred to.

[www.desmondryan.com](http://www.desmondryan.com) *click on teenage pregnancy*

Directorio <http://www.shortal.com/desmond/dundee/> 

shortal | Page Maker |  Exit |  New |  Copy |  List |  Manage |  Home |  Send Email |  Help | Sat 21 Jan 2006

**Desmond Ryan**  
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**Distributed Parenting**

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## Distributed Parenting

### Teenage pregnancy in post-industrial areas in a social medicine perspective

#### *A medical theory of social pain*

**Desmond Ryan**



High rates of teenage pregnancy have nothing to do with sex, everything to do with society. The UK epidemiology shows a clear association between high rates and communities in industrial decline. Epidemiology, however, leaves the community aetiology as a 'black box': the background factors are known, the outcomes are known, but the intervening social processes are not known. This document opens the window on some social processes.  
**It proposes that...**

You can read this document in 2 ways:

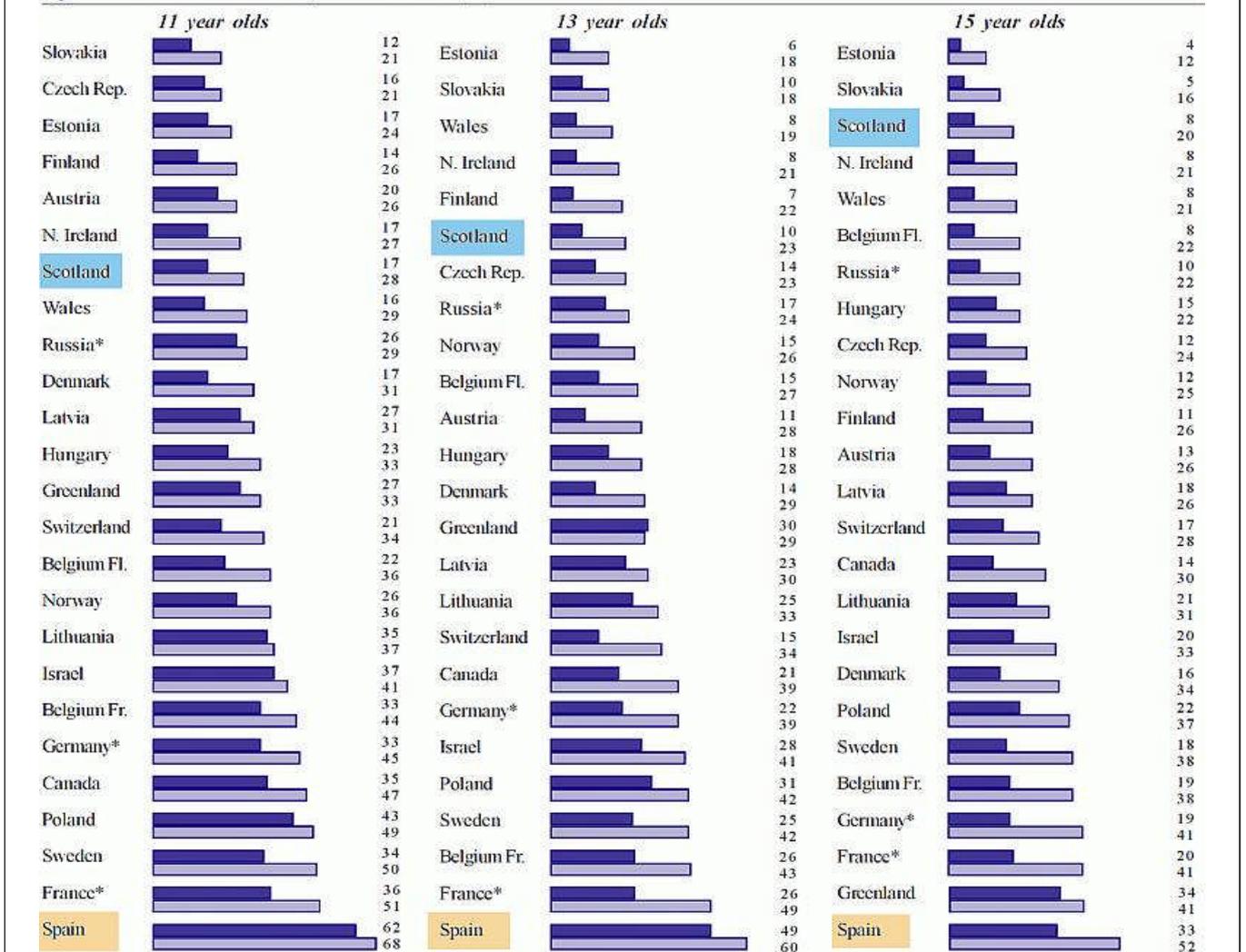
1. The text links (underlined in left panel) give the fastest access. You see regular web pages (html).  
*These web pages have 2 disadvantages: they omit the author's footnotes, and they have low-level typographic formatting.*
2. For a fully formatted version of a chapter or the whole document (including the author's footnotes), click on the Adobe Acrobat (.pdf) link .

*By right-clicking on the .pdf link and choosing "Save target as" (IE) or "Save link as" (Netscape), you can save the file without having to wait for it to load into your browser window. (Don't have the Adobe Acrobat reader? Get it free by clicking here)*

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**Figure 6.8** Students who always felt confident (%)



Teenage mothers are widely acknowledged to have low self-esteem. One significant outcome from the Dundee research was coming across this research by the WHO Europe (1996) on self-confidence in young people. Other people were working on the more generally perceived Scottish problem of low confidence - first Alex Yellowlees and Bill McFarlan, then Carol Craig...

- ▶ new mental health act
- ▶ news
- ▶ what are mental health problems?
- ▶ information service
- ▶ The Point
- ▶ benefits advice
- ▶ briefings
- ▶ publications
- ▶ SAMH services
- ▶ support SAMH
- ▶ SAMH principles
- ▶ contact details
- ▶ job vacancies
- ▶ links

## Building a Confident Scotland

As a nation we are racked with self-doubt, dwelling on what might go wrong rather than what might succeed. For Scots, success is met with indifference or jealousy, confidence is labelled arrogance and risk avoided for fear of failure. According to Confident Scotland, a new movement dedicated to improving Scotland's self-confidence, our national well-being is damaged by low self-esteem.

Confident Scotland was formed when broadcaster and communication specialist Bill McFarlan and Psychiatrist Dr Alex Yellowlees had, what they describe, as 'a meeting of minds'. Coming from entirely different perspectives, they had both become increasingly convinced that a host of Scotland's problems could be put down to a fundamental lack of self-esteem.

### More appropriate

With one of the worst health records in Europe, a declining population, low levels of entrepreneurial activity and productivity they believe that low self-esteem is crippling the country. There is perhaps no more appropriate example of this than our spiralling suicide and anti-depressant prescription rates.

Until low self-esteem is addressed at a national level, Confident Scotland believes that health and education initiatives, like those currently being planned by the Scottish Executive to tackle suicide, will have limited success.

### Realistic goals

Various pieces of research have identified self-esteem as a key factor in a number of mental health problems including suicide in young men, anxiety disorders, depression and eating disorders.

According to Dr Yellowlees, Medical Director at The Priory Hospital in Glasgow and expert in self-esteem: "A healthy sense of self-esteem is a virtual inner gold mine." He believes that it impacts on all aspects of our daily lives, from our sense of mental and physical well-being, to our independence and autonomy as well as our ability to set and achieve realistic goals in our work and personal life.

The issue is complicated, according to Confident Scotland, by a common tendency to mistake high self-esteem for arrogance. This leads to reluctance on the part of successful people with high self-esteem to act as role models for fear of being labelled arrogant.

So how do you go about changing the ingrained thought processes of a nation? The plan is to use a number of methods with initial efforts focussing on creating a national debate around the issues.

### Stirs passions

Judging by the lively response to a feature article in the Herald this may not be too difficult - this subject stirs passions. For many people the fact that Scots have a great history of innovation and business acumen means that we can't possibly have a problem now. The campaign may even be labelled as unpatronic or, alternatively, taken as a personal attack by individuals who may themselves have low self-esteem. Clearly it will need to be handled sensitively.

### Ripple out effect

Other efforts will be largely dependant on accessing external funding and support, for example, teaching positive self-esteem in schools, using role models to support a national media campaign, developing health strategies that take account of the importance of self-esteem, and working directly with large groups from all sectors of society to promote positive self-esteem. Part of the approach is based on creating a 'ripple out' effect by developing the self-esteem of key individuals like educators and leaders of business and community. They could then, in turn, enhance the self-esteem of the many people they work with.

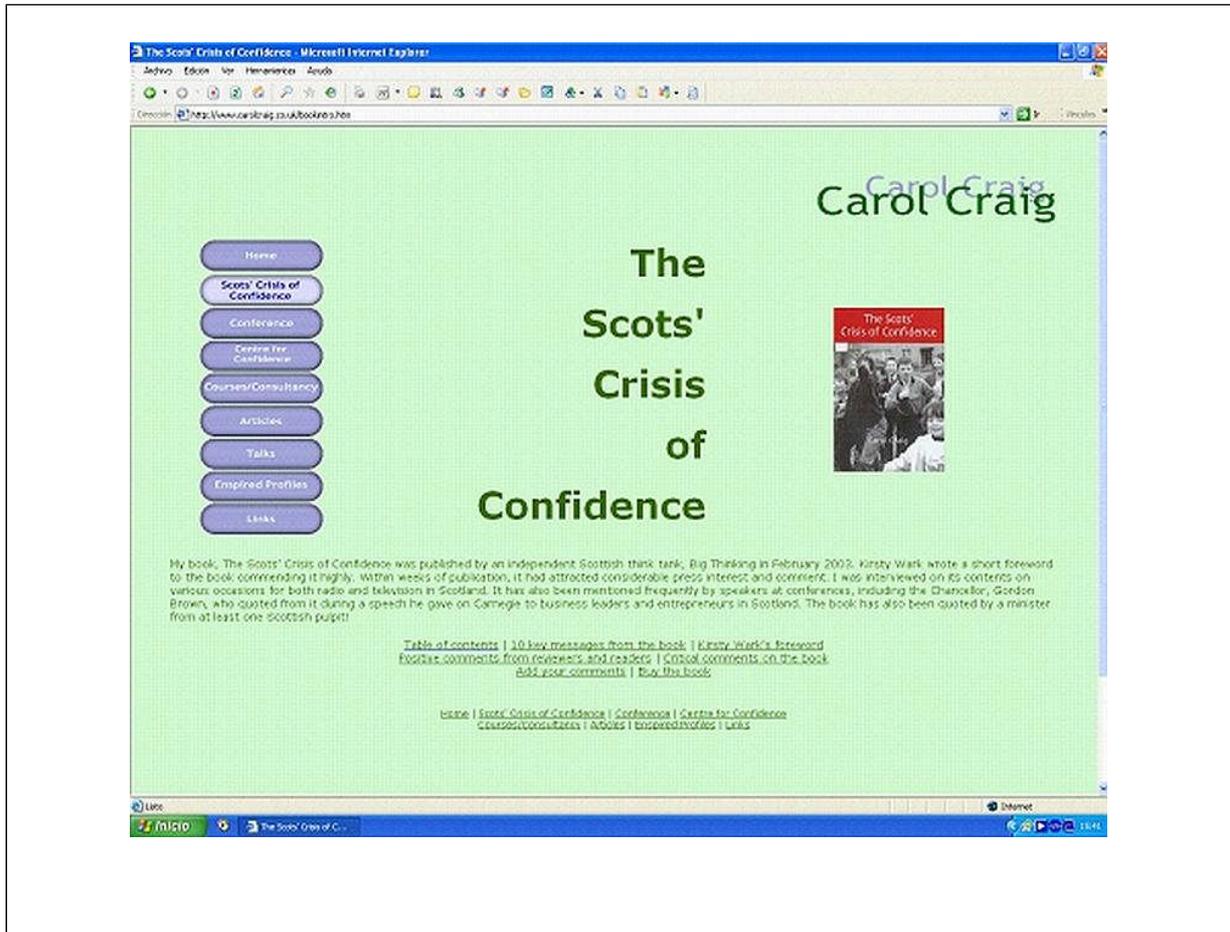
### Positive effects

Dr Yellowlees who, has specialised in the impact of low-self esteem on eating disorders, believes that enhancing self-esteem could have positive effects for a range of mental health problems in Scotland.

"Self-esteem lies at the very core of our psychological functioning. A deep sense of personal regard, respect and love enables us to relate to others with appropriate love and respect. We are less likely to distort reality in our dealings with others if we do not have to defend a fragile and vulnerable sense of poor self-worth."

He believes that we cannot underestimate the importance of self-esteem: "We ignore self-esteem at our peril since it influences our health, decisions, and happiness whether we are aware of it or not. Self-esteem is an essential requirement for life more than ever before in history."

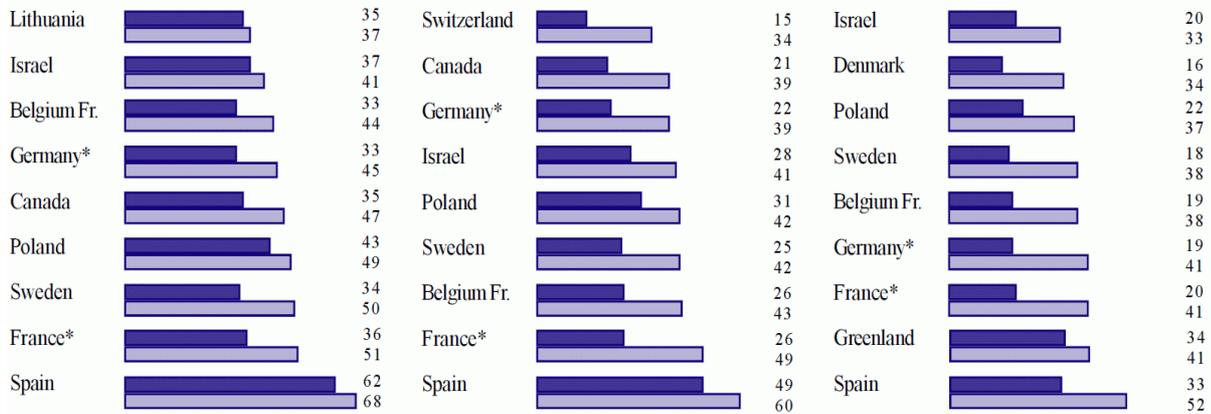
The Yellowlees-McFarlan initiative was sponsored by the Scottish Association for Mental Health, which still exists. But the Confident Scotland website appears to be moribund, e.g. "Update on the health & wellbeing coming soon... "



the Centre for **Confidence** and Well-Being was launched in December 2004. Since about 2010 Carol Craig has moved on from this issue.

Where did the research come from?  
 2. Scotland & Spain  
 as settings for self-confident children

**Fig. 6.8 Students who always felt confident (top third)**  
 (WHO Europe study on *The Health of Youth 1996*)



My interest was in the other end of the table: the Spanish, top at all three ages.  
 What were they doing? **Why not find out?!**

## Valencia, Spain



In 2005 I was invited to take up a visiting fellowship in the Department of Social Work and Social Services at the University of Valencia, through which I secured a small grant (€12k, c. £9k) to fund an interviewer for a three-school study (2006) on self-confident children. Otherwise the study was self-funded.

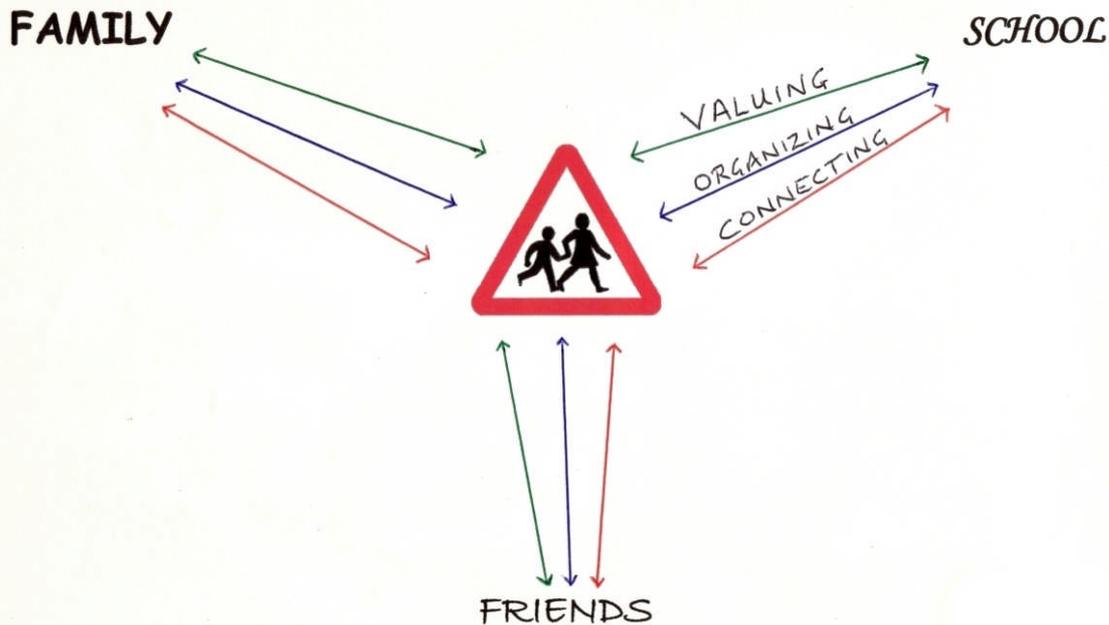
## **The research on confident children**

- Based in University of Valencia Social Services dept.
- Part-funded by Regional Public Health Department
- 45 interviews March-June 2006
- 3 schools, chosen by socio-econ. level of parents
- in each, 15 12-14s selected by teachers as self-confident acc. to given criteria (age, circs.-challenged, peer group)
- Parental written agreement
- Interviewer a 26 yr. old female social worker
- Interviewed in school during school day
- Recorded & transcribed by interviewer
- Checked by DPR May-September 2006
- Public Presentation in Valencia May 2008

This is the bare bones of the research method – if interested please come back in the discussion.

Most important thing to say is that the interviews were not done in the way I requested, so the 'sociological map' that I was looking for never appeared. What did appear, while going through the transcripts, was the sudden realization that I was being presented with a view of the children's world as lived-experience. My fairy-tale castle of sociological categories lay in ruins – Valentian Love is what replaced it.

## VALENTIAL LOVE AS A DYNAMIC SYSTEM



'Valentia love': integrational-developmental energies in the metamorphosing holon of the adolescent system

A. **THIS IS 'the confident child'** – i.e. the **field of mutual relations** in which the child is held while 'advancing towards independence', never to be achieved (Winnicott). Notice my symbol for the child is two children in relationship – in my view we are a multiplicity of selves.

B. I call it 'valentia' because it is a field which creates strength, power, capacity – valere (Latin) = to avail, to be strong/stout/vigorous, do well, to have the power to do, to be efficacious. 'Vale' = stay in good health/'fare well' (cf. 'valediction')

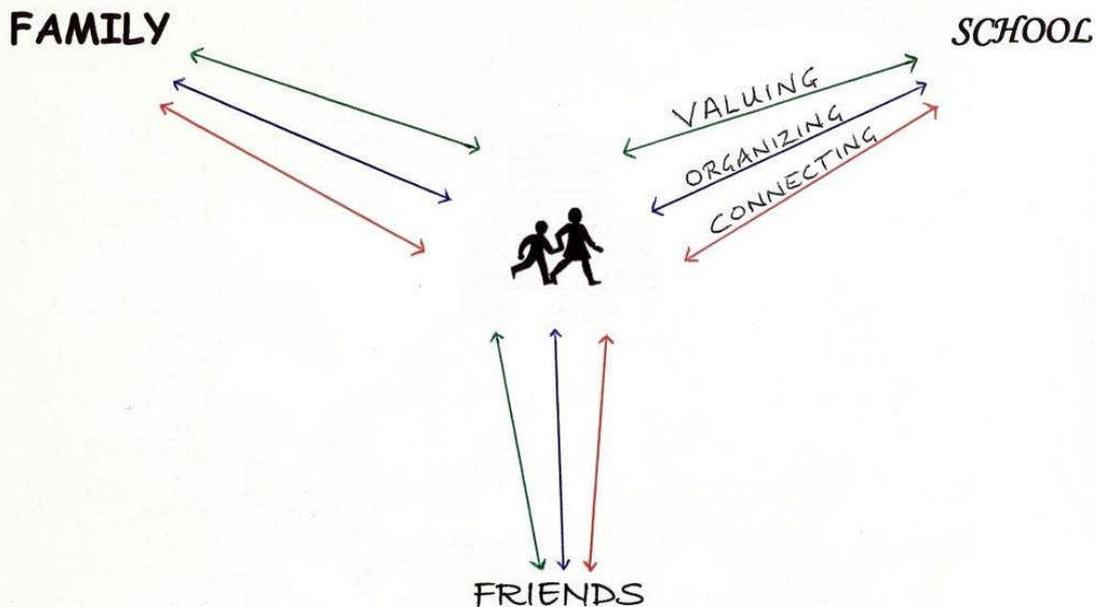
C. The arrows indicate **dynamic relational energies**. 'Connecting' the most fundamental, the forming/maintaining of a bond that was in some degree personal; 'organizing' was a surprise, discovering how much of what happened in their lives was a result of their own initiative and decision; and 'valuing', another surprise, discovering how much value they had for others to do things for them, but also how this was often relational, two-way, reciprocal. They were valued by their teachers, but they also valued their teachers. NB that these energies are directable, i.e. create POWER (Guardini) – there is power all around this field, which the child can use and has to respond to – for example, how often the child took over the interview, told Nela what they wanted her to know.

1. Since Valentia Love as a field is what characterises self-confident children, we might conclude that self-confidence is at base confidence in others. Not 'self-confidence' but 'Co-confidence'! Confidence in self is a system-property, not an individual one, and therefore it is co-constructed by all participants.

2. 'Valencies' - Because we are made for relationship, the mature person (even the mature child) welcomes interdependence. So, we are 'open' **NEXT SLIDE NOW** .....so that we can connect with others and the world, and hence we are open to the learning and re-organization entailed by knowing others, as free & creative like ourselves. The VLC interviews are children reporting on their learning-lives. They have the confidence to learn because they are assured of love.

## Valential Love – more about development than risk

### VALENTIAL LOVE AS A DYNAMIC SYSTEM



\*Valential love\*: integrational-developmental energies in the metamorphosing holon of the adolescent system

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1. **'Valencies'** - Because we are made for relationship, the mature person (even the mature child) welcomes interdependence.

2. Another reason for removing the safety warning is to point up the tension for us here [i.e. Scotland], of **Development vs. Risk**. In health language, **Valential Love**, being concerned with helping the child to thrive and do well through encouragement, to acquire a strong constitution, is working in the **positive dimension** of immunology (boosting resilience, resistance, latent power reserves (Faber)), rather than **the defensive dimension** of protection against risk. At the macro level, Valencia in 2006 was not a risk society, but a developmental society, catching up and showing the world that it was a leading European city.

## Some cases

- The 'moral-space-manager': a head-teacher of an entire community
- The *pandilla* as peer group: safe, positive, long-term, starts early (c. 12 yrs.). Very important e.g. Yolanda & the bully;
- The 'moral-interventionist' teacher: a) dating b) joking c) *populares*
- Relational responses to loss in the family a) divorced parents b) widowed father

The '*pandilla*' (protective 'gang' of peers) is key – here are some reflective notes I made while listening to an interview with a very shy/nervous (she had three pets, incl a horse) 12 yr. old girl at the fee-paying school:

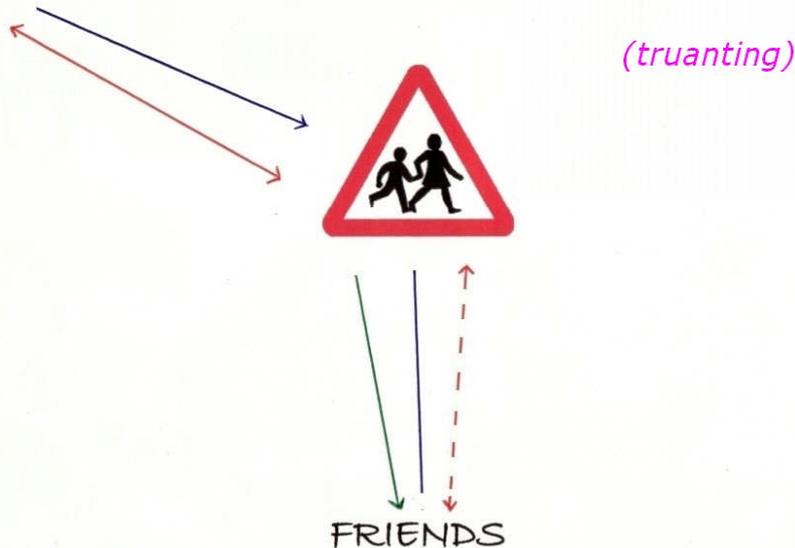
"The agglomerative, evolutionary way in which the friends '*pandilla*' is actually formed is just becoming visible: the 2 by 2s of best friends as the basic components, usually same sex (but not e.g. P--, whose rare friendship from early years with a girl brings her friends into interaction with his friends), based on school classes, fostered by in-/out-group behaviours like gossip, mutual aid/support/understanding, sport for the boys, shopping for the girls (cf. N--'s comments on Spanish girls - she thinks shopping is about what is bought, not realising it is about the relationships that are built while buying), these activities gradually take the space left by diminished relations with siblings, parents, grandparents, etc. as adolescence opens up and liberates the social field. Compare with J--/C-- at the council school, how here they have friends in self-contained 'sets for settings': the school, the *urbanizacion(es)*, camping, the *pueblo* for those with family in the country, etc. Where do they find the time? Probably because they watch much less TV and (especially the girls) much less Playstation than Scottish children – to be confirmed [when I do the Scottish research]!

For the culture of interdependence/mutual support being just as strong in girls' *pandillas* as in boys, remember J-- on the remorse expressed loudly by the friends at the funeral of the murdered student at Xavia.

'Unavailing Love' -  
where child's benefit from love is low

**FAMILY**

*SCHOOL*



Poor integration of developmental energies in the metamorphosing adolescenting system

**THIS IS the relational space of the un-self-confident child (an imagined case). As you can see, this is not a Well-connected Child.**

**In my understanding of the child as to some degree a hologram of their relational space, a reduced environment is an impoverished/unrealized child.** Where there is a lack of affordances to relational development in the metamorphosing holon of the adolescenting system, they get stuck, 'miss their milestones' as the health visitors would say, or deviate off down unproductive by-ways.

Graphically I have tried to represent a relational space in trouble, characterized by 'Unavailing love'. There is love in this space, but it is not as effective in fostering development as in the earlier model. By using the 'decomposition' of the system 'self-confident child' into its relational components we can identify what's going well and what is struggling.

Perhaps most seriously, we see that the child is truanting from school, at a stroke cutting out a large amount of potentially 'availing' relationships, ones which could help them grow strong and self-confident. In doing this the child-system 'self-deprives', even 'self-harms'.

In the Dundee research, was this in fact happening? **NEXT SLIDE**

**Six out of the seven Dundee women who a) were interviewed as a mother, and b) mentioned their schooling, used the word 'hate' when talking of their school experience.**

- **31** I had good exams. I was at [- Academy] till I sat my standard grades and they said I could stay on [when I got pregnant], but I went to --. **I absolutely hated it.** I sat my highers, but I didn't pass any of them. Well, I got Ds, which I think is just a kind way of telling you that you've failed. (Single parent, 17)
- **35** About school? Apart from that **I hated it**, not much. I just thought it was totally irrelevant. I wasn't interested in the subjects, I thought they could have treated animals better and they could have taught you about the kinds of things that would help you. Money, how to sort out your money, how to do your bills, how to fill out forms, that sort of stuff. Instead, it was all about the Romans or the Wars or dancing at PE. Useless! I liked it at Primary, they were always nice, but that doesn't last.
- I didn't like school, you'll have gathered that. It was as much about the way that they treated you as what they taught. It was just bad. (Married parent, 20)
- **30** I should have had more sex education at school. I had some stuff at primary, but once you are at the big school, it's pretty poor. **Everyone hates it.** The teachers treat you like dirt, so nobody would listen to them anyway. (Single parent, 23)
- **32** I don't think I ever had ambitions, to leave school I suppose. **I hated school**, and the last year I never really went. We were moved around so much, I was at Menzieshill, Lawside and the Linlathen, they were all awful. I truanted most of the time, but eventually my mum and dad found out and they let me be off because they knew how unhappy I was. I got out as soon as I could. (Single parent, 20)
- **33** What does 'being healthy' mean? That's quite difficult, I suppose it would be about eating healthy stuff and taking care of yourself. I might have known more about that from school, but **I hated it** and I skived off most of the last two years. I was on a day sheet and everything, my mum was going mad about it. I wasn't really interested in any of that stuff.
- JW Did you get any sex education at school?
- Well, the others did, but I wasn't there.
- JW What ambitions do you have?
- I want the kids to grow up with a good education and a bit more money than I have. (Married parent, 19)
- **27** I've never really had an ambition, I don't think. At school, well, **I hated it.** (Single parent, 40)

Seen from the pupil's side, very much the opposite. They were defending themselves against the harm perpetrated by the school. From the individual's perspective the relationship has broken down, and they are very resentful. From the social-system perspective, many qualities of energy which could make their adolescent process more developmentally productive are missing or very low.

Absent all those relationships filling all those hours, it is not surprising to find that the relationships that they develop in their place are a) often with the opposite sex, b) in adult-free spaces, c) often facilitated by the key Scottish sociability-enhancer, alcohol. This suggests that, indirectly, 'school failure' may be the leading 'cause' of teenage pregnancy. It is certainly massively associated.

Don Coid has suggested that total failure to master the relationships in school is seriously disabling for when they later encounter work, gainful employment (i.e. school-writ-large). These are **life-skills**, not just school-skills.

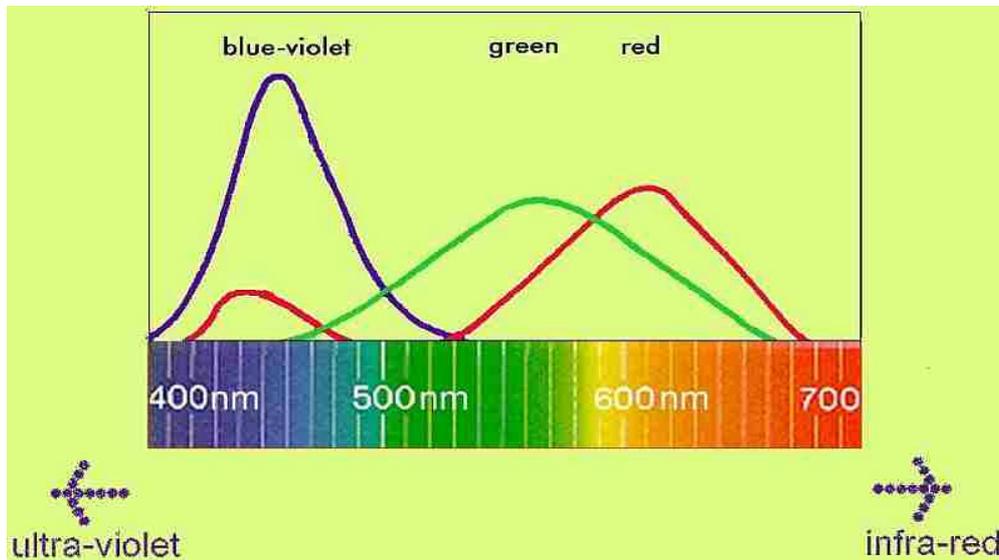
**SOBER CONCLUSION:** we are not comparing like with like – Dundee schools in 1999 were not 'relational spaces' in the way Valencian schools were in 2006. The schools are doing different things – in sociological terms, **performing different functions for society.**

Another way of putting it is to say they were on different wavelengths.



The colour spectrum we see here is what happens to white light when put through a prism: it is separated into its different wavelengths. So the full-spectrum is our natural light, what makes us see the external world 'as it is' for us.

**Visible light = the part of the electromagnetic spectrum to which our eyes are sensitive**



The basics of colour-vision. The blue curve is tall because blue light needs to be at twice the intensity for us to see it equally – Newton originally thought there were only five colours in the rainbow/spectrum, orange and indigo being later additions.

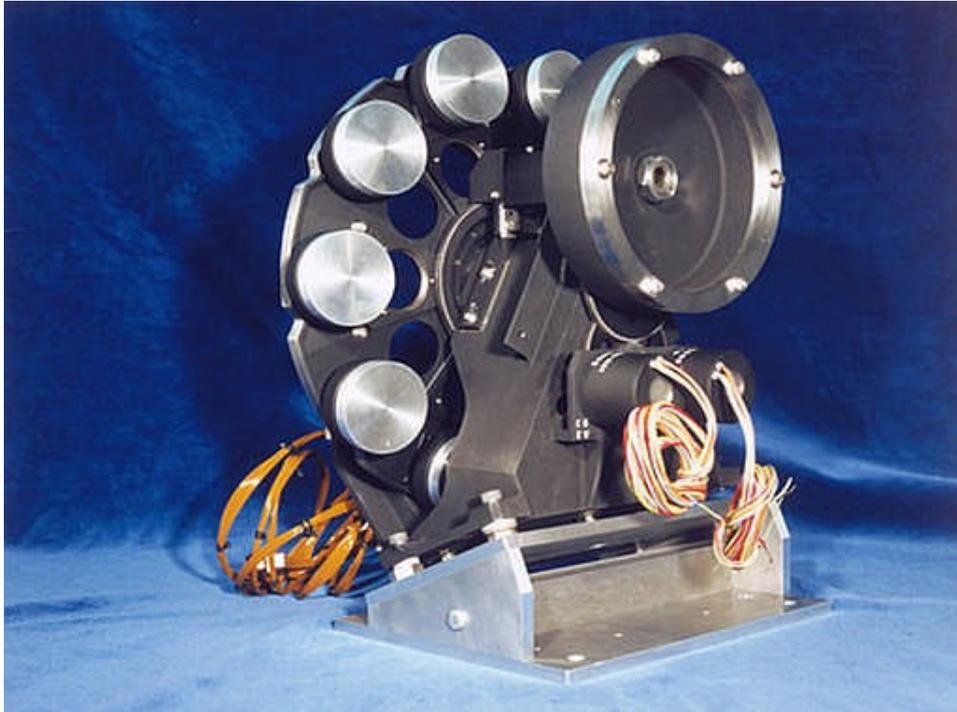
## Carina nebula in visible & infra-red wavelengths



What you see depends on where/how you are looking, electromagnetically speaking. **But adding new lenses and filters can extend our vision –**

**Santayana: "Nature has many dimensions at once and whenever we see anything happen, much else is happening there which we cannot see."**

**Hubble's filters –  
they process the spectrum for scientific research**



## *Full-Spectrum Life Analysis (FuSLA®) – the 7 Levels*

Overview	Level	Description
<p>The basic theory is that the life-world of human beings today has seven distinct but mutually related domains.</p> <p>In other words, people thrive (or don't) in a <b>unity</b> of seven domains or <u>dimensions</u>.</p> <p>They are here presented as a spectrum from the material-environmental at the lowest '<u>wavelength</u>' (red) through the social to the spiritual at the highest (violet).</p> <p>To thrive is to live an <b>integrated life in its fullness</b> –</p>	<b>Spiritual</b>	
	<b>Culture</b>	
	<b>Socio-ecological</b>	
	<b>Functional service delivery</b>	
	<b>Constitution</b>	
	<b>Pathogens</b>	
	<b>Physical-environmental</b>	

But 'natural light'/the spectrum remains the model of 'true seeing'. Full-spectrum Life Analysis® is an analytical scheme developed to enable one to enquire about the quality of every dimension of a human life, from the trivial to the transcendent. Modernity discovered the power of the functional organization (Level 4), and its huge dominance of our lives since the 1950s marginalises other aspects of our humanness, esp. relationships, culture and the spiritual (Levels 5-7).

**DEFINITION:** "***function** – the necessary goal-oriented property of a process or a system. Its carrier is a system or process.*

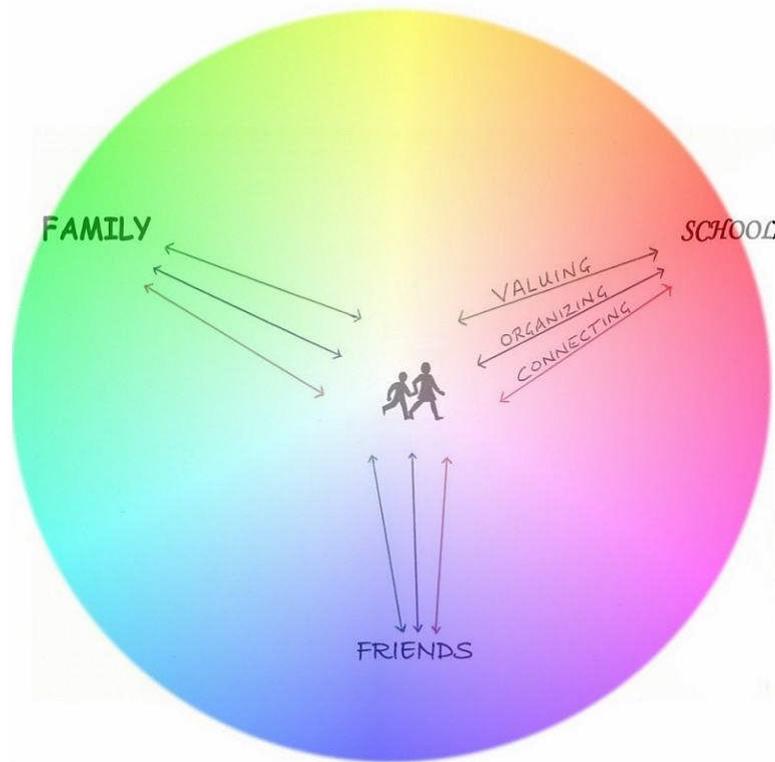
*Functions are internal and external.*

***External functions** of technological systems are called **services**.*

NB that functional system's external contribution is SERVICES to wider society, e.g. education, health, justice, defence, religion, etc.

**The ideal of Full Human Life** is representable as the spectrum: FuSLA as levels.

**Full-spectrum childhood = full-spectrum family  
+ full-spectrum school  
+ full-spectrum friends**



So, by analogy with the process of visual perception, we need something like a concept of **Full-spectrum Childhood**. I offer you this to frame the claim that, as an ideal type, **Valential Love** is a system achievement - where spiritual, cultural, social and technical values and resources integrate with a benign material base to form an effective developmental space-with-child.

NB: Apologies for deficient IT skills! The slide misrepresents – each sector should have a full spectrum



**What kind of animal can you see?**

Contrariwise, where there is **Unavailing Love, since it is a system property, it is also a collective failure.** For example, over the centuries, institution founders, policy-makers and culture-leaders (media and the arts, religions, academic teachers/researchers, etc.) may have selective blind spots to the value of fully-human relationships. They may have these blind spots because they are as persons 'colour-blind'....

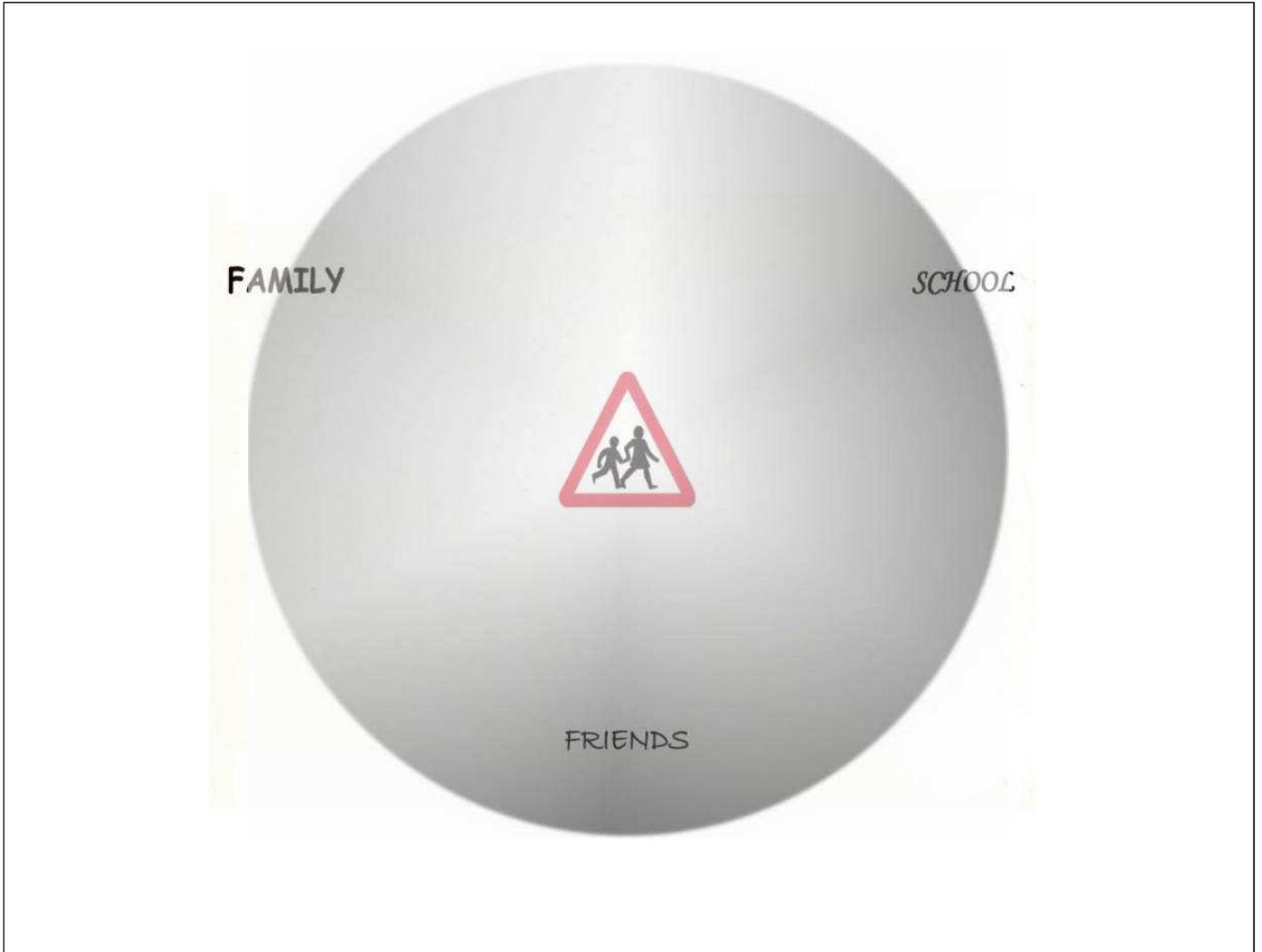
## **institutional filters – defences against anxiety in functional organizations?**



....or because they are culturally subject to **filters and amplifiers** affecting what and how they see. Cultures and institutions also put 'filters' on the visions & values of relational spaces ('lifeworlds'): there is no 'natural light' on society, no 'world as it really is' for us as social beings.

These defects of full-spectrum vision may result from a) confusion and overlap between filters, b) colour-blindness, and c) perhaps an acquired impairment of the skills of social interaction, verbal and non-verbal communication (e.g. listening), leading to the characteristic syndromes of politicians, restricted, repetitive and/or stereotyped behaviour. See as an example policy-makers who protect/promote schools which are unavailing for less academic children because they are dominated by a 'literalist' understanding of the school as preparing for the job market. Their poverty of culture makes them underestimate the importance of culture – and relationships, and spirituality. What price **the life-enhancing school?**

**Why does this happen? Institutional filters function as defences against anxiety, by legitimating e.g. restrictions of a) framing, b) objectives and c) policy means.**



If, *per impossibile*, a child had NO positive relationships, their world could be represented like this. But this would be the world of Spitz's 'hospitalism' and Harlow's monkeys...

## In conclusion....

- **1. This was not my planned research.** While I intended my question to determine the social factors with most impact, the children talked about themselves as lived lives: re-enter 'the child as a whole'. The children's answers 'changed the subject'.
- **2. These communities are in different socio-historical epochs, even though simultaneous in chronological time.** In terms of Dundee's history, Valencia 2006 is in about 1966: high inward investment, industrial diversification, labour-force upskilling, huge housing growth, positive view of youth, new significance of university experience, softening of religious demands, emphasis on the future... They have different 'system ages' – this is like Picasso and Renoir exhibiting at the same show.
- **3. Of fundamental importance:** there is a difference in the characteristic of success between my Valencia schools-for-those-children and those-encountered-by-respondents in Dundee. Valential Love is *not* another way of delivering functional service-commodities, *but rather* the reclaiming for the cultural value of self-realization of **the co-production of wellbeing and development for self and family and community**. That can only be achieved in relationship: well-connected children.
- **4.** Values are the drivers - different values, different spaces, different children.
- **5.** So my now-question is about our human ecology: **Can you have well-connected children without a well-connected society?** Without 'any such thing as society'? What kind of children do you have when you live in an economy? A marginal economy?

Re #5: "...shared visions - whether they appear as belief, conviction, or opinion, fantasy or illusion - are part of an individual's functioning, in that they either encourage a certain actualization of trained energies in interplay with communal and environmental resources or, indeed, impart a sense of being inactivated and devitalized in an incomprehensible world. **What happens, then, to an individual's inner life at any given stage in the life history is always significantly related to the crises of the social institutions predominant in the developing world view at that historical moment.**"

p.174 Erik H. Erikson Toys and Reasons: stages in the ritualization of experience L.: Boyars (1978)

