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OP-ED COLUMNIST

A Critique of Pure Reason

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All the presidential candidates this year will talk about education. The conventional ones will talk about improving the schools. The creative ones will talk about improving the lives of students.

The conventional ones, though they don't know it, are prisoners of the dead husk of behaviorism. They will speak of education as if children were blank slates waiting to have ideas inputted into their brains with some efficient delivery mechanism.

The creative ones will finally absorb the truth found in decades of research: the relationships children have outside school shape their performance inside the school.

The conventional candidates will give the same old education reform speeches, trumpeting this or that bureaucratic reshuffle. The creative ones will give speeches like the one David Cameron, who is reviving the British Tory party, gave last month. They will talk, as Cameron did, about the mushy things, like love and attachment, and will say, as Cameron did, "Family relationships matter more than anything else."

They will understand that schools filled with students who can't control their impulses, who can't focus their attention and who can't regulate their emotions will not succeed, no matter how many reforms are made by governors, superintendents or presidents.

These candidates will emphasize that education is a cumulative process that begins at the dawn of life and builds early in life as children learn how to learn. These candidates will point out that powerful social trends — the doubling of single-parent families over the past generation, the rise of divorce rates — mean that government has to rethink its role. They'll note that if we want to have successful human capital policies, we have to get over the definition of education as something that takes place in schools between the hours of 8 and 3, between the months of September and June, and between the ages of 5 and 18.

As Bob Marvin of the University of Virginia points out, there is a mountain of evidence

demonstrating that early childhood attachments shape lifelong learning competence.

Children do have inborn temperaments and intelligence. Nevertheless, students make the most of their natural dispositions when they have a secure emotional base from which to explore, and even the brightest children stumble when there is chaos inside.

Research over the past few decades impressively shows that children who emerge from attentive, attuned parental relationships do better in school and beyond. They tend to choose friends wisely. They handle frustration better. They're more resilient in the face of setbacks. They grow up to become more productive workers.

On the other hand, as Martha Farah of the University of Pennsylvania has found, students who do not feel emotionally safe tend not to develop good memories (which is consistent with cortisol experiments in animals). Students from less stimulating environments have worse language skills.

The question, of course, is, What can government do about any of this? The answer is that there are programs that do work to help young and stressed mothers establish healthier attachments. These programs usually involve having nurses or mature women make a series of home visits to give young mothers the sort of cajoling and practical wisdom that in other times would have been delivered by grandmothers or elders.

The Circle of Security program has measurably improved attachments and enhanced social skills. The Nurse-Family Partnerships program, founded by David Olds, has produced rigorously examined, impressive results. Children who have been in this program had 59 percent fewer arrests at age 15. (Presidential candidates are commanded to read Katherine Boo's Feb. 6, 2006, New Yorker article to get a feel for how these programs work.)

It's important not to get carried away. "Enhancing Early Attachments," a review of the literature edited by Lisa Berlin and others, is filled with phrases like "marginal success" and "modest but significant benefits." But these programs can be expanded.

And one thing is clear: It's crazy to have educational policies that, in effect, chop up children's brains into the rational cortex, which the government ministers to in schools, and the emotional limbic system, which the government ignores. In nature there is no neat division. Emotional engagement is the essence of information processing and learning.

In Britain, where both David Cameron and Gordon Brown have grappled with this reality, policy is catching up with the research. In the United States, we are forever behind. But that

won't last. This year, some smart presidential candidate will help us catch up.

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