

AT ISSUE

And Who Will Shape the Village?

On the surface, it would seem that our children have never had it so good. We, their doting parents, will do anything for them, and they know it. The sacrifices we make for them we wear like badges of honor—the early mornings spent watching them play soccer in the rain, the endless batches of cookies baked for school sales, the countless miles logged chauffeuring them to their various activities. Determined to correct what we judge to have been the mistakes of our own parents, we have chosen to make our commitment to our kids absolute, our involvement in their lives total.

Sometimes, though, something happens that makes me wonder if our approach is flawed, and that it is only the strength of our numbers—swollen by our own births during the baby boom—that has convinced us that our way of raising kids may be better. Recently, I was at the pediatrician's office with my children, enduring a long wait to be seen, when suddenly the sound of a child's voice—"No!"—echoed from the exam area. A boy of perhaps seven rocketed into the waiting room, with his mother and a nurse in hot pursuit. "We're only trying to weigh you," the nurse said, attempting to reassure the child just as his mother caught up to him. Without warning, he whirled and punched his mother, hard, right in the stomach. For an instant she and I locked eyes, and I knew what she was feeling. Mortification, of course, but something even worse: panic. *What do I do now?*

My mother would have known what to do—she'd have walloped me halfway into next week. Perhaps at the time I might not have appreciated it, but I certainly would have known I had it coming. Yet the issue is moot, because the incident would never have occurred. I was no angel as a child, but I understood that there were certain unspoken behavioral taboos, and hitting your mother ranked high on that list. Our parents

commanded unconditional respect, which they mostly got both from us and from the other children with whom they came in contact. Now that we've become parents ourselves, their assured authority remains a remote mystery, a totem we grasp at but can never quite acquire. This is nowhere more obvious than in the ambiguous messages we constantly send to our own offspring.

Take our efforts to transform our kids into bright, articulate youngsters. From an early age we encourage them to speak up, no matter how inane or off topic their comments. Is it any wonder that eventually they turn into chronic interrupters? Mealtimes used to be the occasion for children to be exposed to the pleasures—even the occasional mysteries—of grown-up ideas and words. Youngsters were welcome to absorb what they could, even allowed to interject an opinion if they were able to make a reasonable case for it. Now the level of discourse has dipped to the level of the lowest common denominator, with children injecting the crude vernacular of their friends into what was once the most civilized of settings.

Equally misguided is our current tendency to justify everything we ask our kids to do. When I was a child, only one reason seemed sufficient to explain all parental requests—"Because I *told* you so!"—but now every command seems to require elaborate justification. Every request now turns into a debating match, hardly the behavior we want our children to carry into the adult working world (unless we're positive we want them to grow up to be lawyers).

Such efforts fit into what seems like a grand societal program of "esteem building." Child development advice books and gurus such as Penelope Leach and T. Berry Brazelton all preach the virtues of constant praise and positive reinforcement. And what could be the harm in making our children feel good about themselves, in telling them,

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in the words of Barney, the TV dinosaur, that “you are special”? The problem, to put it bluntly, is that not all kids are. We want to encourage kids to succeed (measured by good grades or tallies in the win column), but there is unease among adults about too much praising, for fear that kids less bright or not as skilled athletically will feel slighted. The solution: awards given for effort and participation, rather than achievement. Even overpraising gifted kids can backfire, giving them the sense that they’ve already accomplished enough and so deadening their desire to push themselves further.

But we save perhaps our greatest parental miscues for the realm of discipline. Nowadays, the only thing consistent about how we discipline our kids is our inconsistency. Few would endorse a return to the corporal punishment of bygone days—*spare the rod, spoil the child!*—but our children would benefit from clearer limits on their behavior. Yet we feel conflicted about being too tough on our kids, in part for fear of damaging their self-esteem. Our reluctance to chastise our children might have even more to do with feelings of guilt that come from spending so much time away from them. In those precious moments together, we dread being anything less than their best pals. But it’s hard to have it both ways, to be both playmate and disciplinarian. Once we’ve let them peek through the curtains at the real us, we sacrifice the aura of authority that we associate with our own parents. It takes our kids longer to understand that the game is over and that it’s time to toe the line.

In years past—it must have been when our parents were kids, because such things had mostly disappeared by the 1960s, when I was growing up—parents had powerful allies in their quest to raise

morally upright kids. Moral instruction was a part of the public school curriculum, not restricted, as it mostly is today, to church-backed private schools and Sunday school classes. The lessons brought strong reminders that a higher power was on the lookout for wayward boys and girls. Today kids receive their moral lessons partly from parents, teachers, and other adults, partly from the media—where they have such sterling role models as Bart Simpson and the gang on *South Park*—but mostly—as Judith Rich Harris points out in her book, *The Nurture Assumption*, and in her essay in this issue (see page 30)—from other children, most of whom are likely to be as clueless as themselves.

Our communities used to be more closely knit places, where adults kept a careful eye on all the kids in their neighborhood—not only to ensure their safety but also to curb any mischief-making. Now we are less willing to get involved, and children in general pay for our aloofness.

Rather than obsessing endlessly about our own children, trying to transform them into new and improved models of ourselves, we ought to demonstrate that our commitment extends beyond the backyard. This would take a different kind of courage, probably more than we’ve got. It requires that we reach out to kids whom we now tend to ignore or shun, the ones who mask their troubles with false bravado and announce their tough-guy “maturity” with nonstop streams of obscenity. If we want to bring about real change, we might consider expending a little less energy on shaping our own children into bright, shining examples for the world and a little more on finding ways to improve the worlds they inhabit.

—James Carman