

The Return to Sane Parenting



By Eileen Spatz

I am guilty, my friends are guilty, my generation is guilty. Collectively, we are guilty of over-parenting our children. At some point in the eighties parenting became about enabling. Although our motivations were pure and just, this altruistic version of hyper-parenting was simply wrongheaded. Showering our children with every known toy and gadget may have felt like good parenting, but ultimately it has, generally speaking, produced a generation of young adults who have been handed everything on a silver platter.

Helicopter Mom Prototype

Not only did we lavish them with things but we also made life too easy for them. We scheduled and micro-managed their childhoods, leaving them no opportunity to learn from mistakes because we were too busy preventing them. Thus, the prototype for today's helicopter mom was born.

So, has the parenting-on-steroids model yielded a generation of talented, intelligent, secure adults who will become the backbone of society, or possibly a group of weak, entitled, soul-less consumers who will be the ruin of our society? Millennials consumed with their Twitter feed or in posting the perfect Instagram selfies does not bode well for the future of the nation.

The relentless self-esteem building in the schools during this same era has surely exacerbated the problem. How many years did we watch them—help them, mind you—cut and paste yet another Star-of-the-Week poster to present to bored peers from kindergarten to high school? The incessant focus on themselves as a curriculum staple has, in some ways, set them up to be insecure adults when they realize that, in the real world, chest-pounding self-aggrandisement is just not cool.

As real estate values ratcheted up in the first decade of the new millennium, we parents became punch drunk with the false notion that this meant we could spend just that much more on our kids' clothes, parties, lessons, and tuitions. Why not, the mentality went, provide our children with the best there was if we could afford to? Parents who attempted to push back against the trends of chronic consumerism and overt materialism felt marginalized. After all, if their kids' classmates were vacationing in Spain and spending weeklong ski trips in Mammoth, or cruising into the school parking lot in a \$40,000 vehicle, wasn't this the new normal?

Reality Check

Funny, isn't it, how life seems to level us when we are in need of a good smack down. What now seems like overnight, those child-indulging piggy banks, now fondly recollected as the good ole days of home equity, all but burst, draining most of us dry and forcing parents to embrace a revised form of parenting on the fly.

At that time, in my own family, I laid out our new economic reality in honest terms, making a feeble attempt to keep the shrill sound of panic out of my voice. I bluntly informed my youngest, when she turned eighteen and graduated from the pricey high school that my home

equity had financed, of the realities of our financial challenges. I laid out not only the cutbacks we were making, but also her newfound obligations, compliments of the sub-prime disaster.

I admit to feeling guilty that this child, my third and youngest, would not reap the same benefits of her older siblings at this stage of their lives. No, this one would be responsible for pretty much everything except the roof over her head.

Hard Work Develops Life Skills

Watching my daughter step up and look for a second job and pay her own bills while in college reminded me that people are hardwired to work for things. Authentic self-esteem is only acquired from the efforts we make to achieve our goals. While we were showering our children with stuff we were operating something equivalent to a mini-nanny state. Our children became dependent on handouts that were well intentioned, but could ultimately hobble all but the strongest kid. Keeping them safely ensconced in bubble wrap, we may have failed in preparing them for the rigors of life.

If there is anything positive that came out of the Great Recession my hope is that it was for young people to have learned valuable life skills as they reckoned with financial constraints and hard choices. Helicopter parenting, however, is still flying high, if not at an even higher altitude as we predecessors. Hopefully, however, some will embrace a return to sane parenting, having learned from the prior generation of parents that the ultimate goal of parenting should be for one's children to mature into contributors, not devolve into liabilities.

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