What Do We Owe Our Children?

So now it’s okay to be a spoiled brat? Three recent trials have begged this very question: Ethan Couch, the Texas teen who appears to have gotten away with murder; Rachel Canning, the New Jersey teen who sued her parents for support and tuition; and prior to these, a lawsuit in the Northeast in which I was an expert witness, where two young adults were suing their father for the way he had handled their inheritance. In all three, my initial reaction was dismay at the ingratitude and sense of entitlement of these young family members. Yet, digging deeper, there is evidence of failure not only of these families, but of our society as a whole.

What is a parent’s responsibility? Since humans are born dependent and cannot live without care, we probably all can agree that we owe our children food, shelter, clothing and public school education or the equivalent. We need to meet their basic needs, or we are clearly irresponsible. After those first several years, what we owe our children becomes less clear. I believe that we owe our children good examples of all kinds in preparation for adulthood: clear teaching of values, and the encouragement of strength for character development. We owe them these inner tools and the opportunity to make their way in the world. All of this until at least age 18, and beyond for many of us.

Recently, a colleague sent me the following, written by Judge Phillip B. Gilliam, originally published on December 17, 1959, and reprinted in the Pierce County Tribune.

Words for teenagers

Northland College principal John Tapene has offered the following words from a judge who regularly deals with youth: "Always we hear the cry from teenagers, 'what can we do, where can we go?'

'My answer is this: Go home, mow the lawn, wash the windows, learn to cook, build a raft, get a job, visit the sick, study your lessons and after you've finished, read a book. Your town does not owe you recreational facilities and your parents do not owe you fun.

'The world does not owe you a living, you owe the world something. You owe it your time, energy and talent so that no one will be at war, in sickness and lonely again. In other words grow up, stop being a cry baby, get out of your dream world and develop a backbone not a wishbone. Start behaving like a responsible person. You are important and you are needed. It's too late to sit around and wait for somebody to do something someday. Someday is now and that somebody is you.'

Though this was written over half a century ago, it reflects the underlying truth that at some point we each need to take charge of our lives and work to become constructive and productive.
Consequently, the most important step in the upbringing of young family members is helping each one develop the ability to build a life: to launch. Don’t make life too easy for them or they will never know the sweet joy of challenges well met and the joy of their own success.

In the cases of the young people cited above, what went wrong? Perhaps growing up in a culture of entitlement, narcissism and ingratitude is taking its toll.

When I asked my 22-year-old daughter to respond to the above, she offered the following:

*What is wrong with Generation Y seems to be the question on everybody’s minds these days. Why are they moving back in with their parents? Why aren’t they working? How can they think life is harder for them now than it was for us? For many, the answers to these questions stem from one idea instilled in us when we were kids. Follow your dreams. The Baby Boomers were predominantly free-spirited, optimistic and experimental. Those same wild young adults who played in the mud at Woodstock became parents and taught their children that if you can dream it, you can do it.*

*I’m not saying that was the only life lesson we were taught while growing up. The obligatory axiom, “life isn’t fair” was a favorite of my parents. As was, “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” Even though those may seem slightly negative, pair them with hearing, “you can do it!” countless times and you come up with the idea that even though you may not get what you want the first time around, try again and you will succeed. When asked what my dream job was at the age of 7 and I said President of the United States, the response I got was along the lines of, “I can’t wait to see you on TV!” It was not, “Let’s be realistic.”

*We were taught to shoot for the stars and I am happy for that. While it may make Gen Y look lazy, and it’s true that some of us may be just that, the rest of us are looking for a career that will challenge us and excite us, and most of all will make us fall in love with our life. If we have to wait tables or bartend while finding that career, we figure that’s better than getting stuck at some job we hate, slowly giving up on our dreams. That may sound idealistic, but that’s just how I was raised.*

*Our kids have been told, “You are special and unique.” Many of them have not gotten the additional point that they have all been told this. Being inherently special is just not enough to make it in the world. Our young adults need to become productive contributors to society to be truly special. Open the door and discuss this with your kids.*

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