



Kids! Who'd Have Them?

how to cope when you do

At our age we ought to know best; at theirs they know absolutely everything! Neither of these are true, of course, each being based on a fair amount of arrogance which precludes seeing a situation from someone else's point of view. Is it possible to walk a mile in their shoes? We believe we could because we were young once and have the past to fall back on. As for our kids, they haven't been there and done that yet. The pain and disappointment of consequences are still to come, and until they do, our offspring only have our word for what they are about to receive; which, naturally, they will disregard out of principle. That pretty much sums up the reason for the war between young and old, a conflict we can never win, one our kids will eventually be fighting - and losing similarly - when they are our age.

Backing off isn't really an option. This simply means leaving them to their own devices in the knowledge that they will probably stuff up, making us feel guilty because we knew they would and we didn't do anything to stop them. But if you think about it, we learned by our mistakes - well, hopefully so - and trying to prevent them from making their own is, in effect, being poor teachers. We can't, however, be impartial observers. We brought them into this world and have a duty to guide and protect them as they grow. That's easily said when they are totally reliant and haven't reached the age where they start answering back. Unfortunately, they quickly progress to the point when anyone over the age of 21 is a dinosaur and not living in the real world. Then, what is left of our hair turns grey and we ask of ourselves, and anyone who will listen: "What have we done wrong?"

I can't tell you that, and I wouldn't presume to. This article isn't about *how* to bring up kids "properly" - that one is down to the individual and their chosen advisers. I am more concerned with coping when it all seems to have gone belly-up, the fateful day we awake to the terrible realisation that we have created our own nemesis. This is why we get so uptight. It seems to be the bane of our lives, a situation we can never resolve. That's our first mistake. The second is believing we have caused the first. Let's get it straight from the start - now is now and we have to live with it. Forget who is to blame. Just deal with it, or suffer! There are no other options. A harsh reality, maybe, but one we must face if we are to have any life with, or after kids.

So, where's the root of the problem, the one thing that's making our lives a misery? The answer, I'm afraid, is us - we are the cause of our own grief simply because we care for our children's well-being. We worry about how their lives seem to be shaping up, mainly because it isn't the way we imagined it would be. When our great expectations start fraying round the edges, we tend to blame the child for lacking the enthusiasm and drive to make them a reality. As is often the case, we are trying to re-live our own lives through them in the vain hope that they will achieve more than we ever managed. How unfair is that? My advice here is to observe their independent progress and just try to be helpful in ways that aren't over-bearing. If you stop wishing for a particular outcome, you can't get stressed if it doesn't eventuate. Give the kids some leeway and they might surprise you. Take a step back and let go, the same way you did when you were teaching them to ride a bike.

Okay, let's drop the eventual future prospects for the moment, get back to the present and take stock of what we will be inflicting on the world if we do nothing. Even the clothes they wear are a disgrace! "You're not going out looking like that!" we say. Why not? We don't have to accompany them - they wouldn't want us to. In fact, they would probably be mega-embarrassed to be seen out with any "olds", especially parents wearing daggy clothes. It's just not on. We have to remember that they are like we were at their age - maturing youngsters trying to establish their individuality in the few ways open to them. The fact that they all look alike only bothers *us* - it isn't a problem for them because it helps them feel a part of something fresh and new, members of the generation that will, one day, be ruling the world. If that dread-filled prospect is giving you a panic-attack, take a deep breath and chill out. When that time eventually comes, they'll do as well as any of their predecessors, hopefully better; and I guarantee that most will be wearing the appropriate dress of the day that even you in your dotage will find boring and conservative, always assuming you live that long.

Then there's the sudden lack of interest in the home. It's as if they no longer want to be there. When you were their age, didn't you reach a point when you wanted to strike out on your own, be with people of a similar age who did understand where you were coming from and weren't constantly criticising? Maybe you fancied having more than just a bedroom, a place that was less like a cell where you could invite a friend and not have to worry about having the music up too loud, or worse still, the chance of someone barging in muttering lame excuses when their real reason was to find out what the pair of you were up to. If your kids have reached the age when these things matter to them, it shouldn't be cause for concern - they are simply growing up. Accept that you've given them the best start that you could. You will still be their loving, caring parent until your dying day, but your role as minder and protector is almost done.

Another thing you may find hard to take is the family-participation issue. It used to be fun when they were smaller and you could just toss them all in the car and go out for the day. Vacations, too, were a real delight to look forward to. Now, the older ones aren't interested. Being honest, they hate the idea - it just isn't cool any more. If you insist on taking them, be prepared for a whingeing session of Olympic proportion. The possibility that you can salvage the occasion by inviting one of their friends to come along might work, but if it does it will be a miracle. More likely than not, you'll spend all of your holiday wondering where they are and what they're doing, and will be extremely lucky if they don't have a falling-out which ruins it for everyone. Make a safe provision for them to stay with someone you trust, then just go. Leave the past where it belongs and continue to recall those good memories of times when they were happy to be a part of family life. As your kids are trying to do - and you aren't making it easy for them - move on and make new memories without them. The apron-strings will have to be cut sometime, and it's better you do it than them.

Their friends, of course, are a major concern. The ones we get to see, and that's not many, seem like a bunch of losers. This impression is usually an assumption based on our blinkered view of life and what we consider to be acceptable. It's not just the clothes, hairstyles, tats and jewellery inserted through every conceivable part of their anatomy - it's their off-hand manner. How could our little girl or boy even think of keeping such rude, undesirable company? Well, they do, and they aren't "little" any more. They are approaching adulthood and can make up their own minds about whom they wish to be with. If we don't like it, that's our problem. How can we cope with it? Well, maybe we could try to communicate with these oddball strangers. They are people, after all, not an alien species as we are inclined to think. I recall a group of teenagers fronting up on our doorstep. They all wore black leather, chains and studded belts, fairly intimidating considering it was night-time. As it turned out, they weren't about to effect a home-invasion, just wanted to know if our daughter was in. She wasn't, but was due back shortly, so I invited them in to wait. By the time our "little" girl returned, we had got to know these kids, and they were nothing like we imagined from first impressions. After that, we were far less concerned for our daughter's safety, having met some of the crowd she was hanging out with.

Naivety is one of our worst failings. We have this misconception that our children, despite their obnoxious attitudes, are little angels. What we see on the evening news only happens to other kids, probably from broken, dysfunctional homes; but we are sure ours would never be into drugs, or commit crimes, or drive so recklessly. If we're wrong and exceptionally lucky, we'll receive a visit from a police officer informing us of some incident our child is "alleged" to have been

involved in - they prefer not to make positive accusations until after the judge has passed sentence. This leaves us shocked and stunned, but wiser, nevertheless. Unfortunately, most of us don't get this wake-up call. We continue in blissful ignorance of what our kids get up to after they go out. We can imagine, of course, and the possibilities are frightening. Perhaps we ought to interrogate them, get to the truth? If they are into something sinister, they are unlikely to admit it; if they insist they are not, there's every chance we won't believe them. Either way, we'll be dissatisfied, and we'll alienate them even further. There is no win-win solution here. You simply have to trust that your kids are doing the right thing. If they aren't, you have to be there when they stumble, and that means 24/7. In the meantime, you carry on with your life as if nothing is wrong - which, at the moment, it isn't.

Sex! The issue was always going to rear its embarrassing head sometime. These days, of course, sex education is part of the curriculum in most schools, so we shouldn't have to worry about steeling ourselves for an awkward tete-a-tete. Unlike many of the standard subjects, even application is included, along with the consequences of treating it too casually. Our kids may even be warned that their hormones are running riot and this will influence their behaviour and decision-making. Will it ever! Straight-A students become under-achievers overnight. Moods change. They are more secretive, downright sneaky on occasions. If you ask what's wrong, they'll bite your head off, or smile and tell you nothing is, which is probably worse because then you know it's a cover-up. This is the period when many parents become spies: listening at doors, regularly checking out facebook, hunting for diaries and letters, sometimes following their kids when they leave the house. What do they expect to discover - that their child is experimenting with a sexual relationship, same as they did when they were that age? And what then? The sensible course of action is not to take one. Just maintain the lines of communication, if they still exist, and be on hand to help, advise, or comfort and support when they need it. Carrying on with the CIA bit, plus ranting and raving while laying down the law won't stop nature taking its course. All it is likely to do is drive the kid further away and give the parent a nervous breakdown.

What happens after they graduate high school? Well, the ones who didn't trade learning for love may be at college; and we all know what a hotbed of vice and subversion those places are! Hang on a minute, though - isn't this what we wanted for them, an education as good as, or better than we had? Let's be glad they didn't drop out and are still keen to advance their learning. Maybe they aren't quite mature adults yet as they believe they are, but when their minds catch up with their physical development, most will look back on the fun and failures of those heady years as something they needed then, but don't any more. Many will have careers, or good jobs, and we won't have to worry about them, not with the same intensity. There are those, of course, who haven't yet crossed the line to embrace consideration and responsibility. Some aren't even aware it exists, or refuse to recognise it. Are you the not-so-proud owner of a slug boy or girl, that sloth-like breed which never surfaces until mid-afternoon, eats you out of house and home without contributing a penny, yet always seems to find the cash to go out clubbing all night? Stop beating yourself up because you can't get through to them - nobody can. Unless they are sending you bankrupt, be content that they still regard living with you as the preferred option, enabling you to spend some time with them, albeit in relative silence. At least when they are hogging the bathroom, or vegetating in their room playing video games, you know they are safe. Plenty of parents don't even have that small peace of mind.

No, bringing up kids isn't easy, neither is tolerating their idiosyncrasies and annoying habits; but you did make it possible for them to be a part of your life, so you have a commitment until they reach adulthood. You owe it to them, and yourself, to stay sane during that time; and afterwards to be physically, mentally and financially able to continue on with your hopes and dreams. Maybe, by then, they will have changed, and I suspect it will be for the better. You will be able to learn from all of the joy, pain, the tears and triumphs, quite a few regrets probably, but many more happy memories that you will treasure for years to come. Your children expect this of you, and as long as you deliver, they will know that having a family is one of the most rewarding experiences life has to offer and is not to be missed.

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