

The Parents League

OF NEW YORK

Review

2016

Essential Articles on Parenting and Education

Ready. Set. Let Go.

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Eleven years after Alvin Rosenfeld wrote his prescient piece “The Hyper Parenting Trap” for the 2005 *Parents League Review*, most of us have finally caught on to his message: Overparenting harms kids. Study after study in recent years has shown that Rosenfeld’s warnings were dead-on—that despite our loving intentions, when we overprotect, overdirect or hand-hold, our kids suffer from unlearned life skills, greater rates of anxiety and depression, and a deficiency in the skillsets that will be demanded of them in the work place one day. We’ve heard this. We’ve read this. We know this. We know it’s on us, their parents, to stop.

If only it were that easy. But it’s not. Because although there’s a child at the center of every parent’s efforts, parenting has come to be just as much about us as our kids. (It’s no accident that we call it “parenting” these days instead of “raising children.”) We’re so very afraid of getting it wrong that we overdo it to try to get it right. And how can we possibly stop—regardless of the warnings—when everyone around us is doing it and winning those short-term gains for their kids by being so involved?

Our Child: Our Worth, Our Value

We once measured our social status by “keeping up with the Joneses,” which meant having the same type of house and car as the most successful folks on our street (it sounds so quaint and simple). Nowadays, status is conferred by our kids’ accomplishments, the holy grail of which is admission to a highly selective college.

And we don't want to just *keep up with* the Joneses, we want to surpass them by cultivating our child to be a bit more outstanding—or appear to be a bit more outstanding—than everyone else's seems to be. For parents, it feels our actual worth and value as a human is measured by the achievements of our child.

And so, like little bonsai trees, our kids become our pet projects. We test the soil and the conditions, and monitor their

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growth, then enrich them with our choice of schools, the activities and opportunities we want them to pursue, and the coaching and tutoring we think they need. We prune by

overprotecting them, by judging the validity of their interests, and by criticizing their performance (trying to improve B's to A's, and A's to A-plusses). They try to grow and are pruned, grow some more and are pruned, and ultimately they take the shape of our good intentions. Then we carry them around with us in their ceramic pots and present them to our friends and colleagues: *Look at what I've done*, we say. *My child—my masterpiece!*

The Cracks in the Façade

Our children are not *our* masterpieces—they are humans of worth and value simply because they exist—and they're not *more* worthy of love because they've given us something to brag about over coffee or cocktails or outside Kumon. Children want to be seen, to be heard, to be valued simply for who they *are*, not for their grades and scores, and not based on some progress they've made toward who we really wish they'd be.

There's a child inside our braggy boasts: a child who feels a glimmer of gladness in the instant of our praise, and a nagging fear of what it will take to win that praise the next time and the time

after that. There's a child hiding beneath our tsks and tut-tuts: a child who feels a pang of self-doubt every time our eyes sparkle slightly less and convey far more effectively than our words that he's come up short *again*. There is a child who comes into this world eager to explore it, to figure things out, to make, to do, to be, whose budding sense of self withers as we do more and more and more for him, who becomes docile over having too much done for him, who becomes content just to receive.

We think we're doing right by them when we stand ever closer cluck-clucking them through experiences that should rightfully be theirs to contend with, but in so doing we send an insidious message that worms into their hearts and minds: *I don't think you can do this without me*. Our elementary schooler enters a speech contest which we prep and train her for and then we sit in the audience holding our breath hoping she performs well for her sake and for ours. And since our friends are also cultivating their kid to be more impressive than everyone else's, we're constantly secretly fearful we've just been one-upped and we wonder if there is any time left in the day to do anything about it. We're more than just proud of our children, more than just disappointed: their outcomes make or break our day.

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The Unlived Life of the Parent

Carl Jung said the greatest psychological harm to a child comes from the unlived life of the parent. I met a mom from Seattle named Catharine who got a Jungian reality check about the life she was failing to lead when as a young mother she called her own mother to complain about being cold, wet and muddy on the sideline at her kid's soccer game. Catharine's mother laid into her in no uncertain terms. "I have no idea why you're standing out

there,” she said. “You aren’t showing your kids anything. If you want to show them that athletics are important you should be

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going on a run yourself. Or if you want to show them what is valuable to you, go home and read a book, or get together with some of your own friends, or go to a play and then come home and talk about it.

Why don’t you go do some stuff of your own? That’s you getting a life. Your kids will observe that and think ‘Okay, that’s how you get a life.’ And they’ll want to go get one. But the way it is they’re going to get to be 25 and think, ‘I never saw grownups living a life. I only saw them doing stuff for me, driving around, standing somewhere on a Saturday morning.’”

Catharine’s reality rings true for so many of us, in the hollowness of our insides, as we devote our lives to scheduling our children’s lives and to shuttling them to and fro, as we stand on the sidelines with our coffee drinks waiting for whatever it is to be over. Wondering when we’ll go back to living *our* lives—what that even means anymore.

Is it any wonder, really, that so many young people seem to have so little interest in being adults? After all, we’ve made adulthood look terribly unappealing.

How We Can All Live Our Own Lives Again

We’ve been children. It’s our kids’ turn now, at every age and stage, to learn and grow by trying and failing, to have the chance to shape the person they’ll choose to be. In order for them to be happy, successful children, and to get back to leading the vibrant, thriving adult life you want to lead:

1. Check your ego. If you believe your children are an extension of you—that their academic and extracurricular

accomplishments and failures may as well be your own—stop. You can and should advise and guide them, particularly around matters of values, character and work ethic, and you can look for clues of what they're interested in and support those things. But the path they'll walk in life—the choices they'll make about what to be and do in the world—must be their own.

2. Watch your language: If you're saying "we" when you really mean your kid—"we're" on the soccer team, "we're" doing a science project, "we're" applying to college—stop. These actions and endeavors belong to our sons and daughters. Don't diminish their sense of accomplishment by behaving as if *you* had something to do with it. Don't diminish their developing competence by actually having *had* too much to do with it.
3. Sit on your hands: If you're doing your children's work for them—correcting the math, rewriting the essay, filling out the applications—stop. Teach them, yes, but if you do the work for them outright they'll never learn. Also, if you do your child's homework the teacher has no idea what your kid actually knows or understands. And, it's unethical.
4. Bite your tongue: If you're constantly intervening with adult authority figures—teachers, principals, coaches, referees—stop. For the most part these are competent and capable adults trying to do their jobs. We should teach our kids to respect authority, and in those occasional instances when there is a problem—a school project that seems to have been graded unfairly, for example—we need to teach them how to have that conversation themselves.

5. Let it go. If you think the world is scary and unsafe so that you must always be your children's bumpers and guardrails, stop. If you fear that their feelings are going to get hurt if you don't always intervene, stop. Although the media would have us believe otherwise, rates of violent crime against all persons (including kids) are down since we were children. And when it comes to their self-esteem, their sense of self actually grows stronger by bouncing back from the setbacks life will throw their way rather than by never experiencing them. Keep in mind that kids need an increasingly longer leash every year to prepare them for that not-too-distant day of full-fledged independence. Bottom line, they need you to stop worrying about them so much.

Wildflowers, Not Bonsai Trees

It seems a cruel twist of both nature and linguistics to suggest that *doing too much* for a child or being *too "there"* for them is even possible, let alone harmful. Yet the evidence is plain and

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bare. When we overstep, overhelp, step in, do for, we essentially supplant ourselves in the role our children must play in their own lives if they are ever to have meaningful lives.

They may emerge from our efforts as a beautiful specimen of a human being—like that carefully cultivated bonsai tree—but once raised like that they will forever need our care and we, having made them this way, will be obligated to provide it.

Back in 2005 Alvin Rosenfeld wrote, "We are what our children really need." But not in the ways we think. "The greatest gift we can give them," he said, "is the deep, inner conviction that

they don't have to perform well in order for us to love and cherish them." You see, our sons and daughters are not bonsai trees. They're gorgeous wildflowers of unknown genuses and species eager to become the glorious unique breathtaking beings they deserve the chance to be. Make sure they have sunshine and water and food, yes. Love them hard, yes. But—for their sake and for yours—do try your hardest to let them *be*.

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