

Parents, be adults and let children be children by Sarah Mabel Hough

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My father has become increasingly sentimental about my childhood since the birth of my son 10 months ago. "It'll happen to you," he says one day. "When he's older, you'll have kids knocking at your door all the time asking if he can hang out."

I'm not so sure. I try to explain "play dates" to him, part of the culture in which parents decide what happens and when, and where women religiously attend "mommy support groups" to talk, of course, about their children. I attended a breast-feeding support group once. I left after the first hour. The women had put off a family until midlife in order to get three degrees and a six-figure salary, and now were obsessing over every detail. I wanted to scream, "I am still a person! Not just a mommy!"

What this culture creates is children who are scrupulously fine-combed to death. Nothing is by chance anymore. In fact, I haven't seen a kid knock on another kid's door in years. They probably eat their breakfast and text one another. This is a generation that expects things.

The rift between my generation - mid-20s - and one only a few years younger is larger than it's ever been. My 65-year-old father shares with me more ideas of what it means to be a kid than my 15-year-old sister-in-law does. I think about this every day. When an iPhone application enters the market for ages 2 and up, I shiver. Is this what it's come to? This technological detachment from the world? From ourselves?

My sister-in-law is in constant communication with her friends. She'll randomly pick up her cell phone while visiting us and begin talking to someone. (Did it even ring?!) Can her generation be out of touch once in a while? If not, what are the consequences of always being "wired"?

Children aren't totally to blame. Overconsumption begins at an alarmingly early age. Parents pile on early-learning DVDs to breed a generation of superhuman intellects with higher-than-average SAT scores. However, the basics - social skills, problem-solving, and, gee, manners - are overlooked. Kids are overloaded with information but not taught how to deal with it.

I was not a "wired" child but still felt the pressures of school, the awkwardness of growing up. Now there are sexting, cyber bullying, and having your teen years plastered all over the Internet, while parents who are too afraid of being deemed "uncool" refuse to pull the plug once in a while.

They fear not giving enough to their children, yet they've already given too much. Every fall is met with a feather-stuffed pillow, cushioning any potential injury. These children are not prepared for a world that does not involve their parents. They don't

know how to deal with peers or teachers in high school. By college, they are floating around the hallways in their own virtual bubbles. These are our future CEOs, politicians, and educators.

"I have watched this phenomenon with a broken heart for the children who will never get to know what truly being a child is like," comments a grandmother online in response to a 2007 Philadelphia magazine article, "Bad Parenting." In the article, author Tom McGrath shows multiple disturbing scenarios of parents taking the proverbial steering wheel from their child's hands into their own. This "professional parent," the hoverer who tries to guide the child to an extraordinary life, is becoming the norm. So in addition to their every move's being captured on Facebook and Twitter, texting, and who knows what else, children are under the hawklike eye of parents who only want things to be "perfect," as one Main Line dad told McGrath.

Oh, is that all?

Do we really want a generation of overprotected and underprepared children with little to no life experience and way too much senseless information to absorb? Can't responsible adults rein in what reaches their children while leading a grown-up life separate from the kids?

I don't know where this wave of "professional parenting" and techno-kids will lead, but I'm happy I got through childhood before it hit.

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