

**Working Notes Issue 39:
The Crisis in Parenting**

Turning Around the Negative Cycle in Families

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What is the real problem?

When you work with families, you get used to double-takes. The reason a family gives for seeking the help of a stranger is seldom the real reason. It is always more complicated than it appears. In a crisis, there is a tendency to find a scapegoat, draw a circle round her/him and say There's the problem. It is always more complex than it looks, and the initial problem is seldom the real one.

Jim is a quiet, agreeable 11-year-old, doing badly at school. On testing he turns out to be bright, but mildly dyslexic. His general ability is in the top half of his age-group, but his reading and spelling is in the bottom 5%. There is something more: he is diffident, almost cowed. It is only when you see husband and wife together that you sense the volcano of anger between them. Their son registers it as little animals sense the forthcoming earthquake long before the seismographs register the first shake. Helping Jim with his reading will be only a first step towards bringing him back to confident learning. The family has to tackle its problems too.

That is my first reflection: that the cry for help often comes from the family rather than the child. I am having problems with my 14-year-old son. He has become very difficult. I am at the end of my tether. Further complications emerge on enquiry: I separated from my husband last year...Matt is making suicidal noises. It is not a case of drawing a ring round Matt and pointing: There is the problem. Much more a case of enabling the responsible parent to survive and live with Matt and he with her. As Dilys Daws remarked: Children (and adolescents) are sent for therapy because somebody wants them changed. Obviously one does not take at face value the notion that it is the young person who needs to be changed. On occasion the best advice may be to seek family therapy. There are times, however, when individual therapy with a young person is the best, though by no means the only way forward.

Abuse is not normal

The first requirement is to recognise that there is something wrong. Some families live in a climate of mutual abuse which is as natural to them as water for a fish. They cannot imagine another sort of family, although the children may sometimes get a glimpse of one when they visit friends. Adults may see alternative styles when they watch soap operas on TV - though these tend to model conflict and break-up rather than stability of families. There will be no turning around until the family realise that things are not as they should be, and there are alternative ways of getting on together; until they recognise that while tension and arguments are normal, screaming and abuse are not.

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Once a family recognises that things are not as they should be, there is often a widespread sense of guilt and failure, and a search for someone to blame, that most futile and destructive of quests. Mother is ashamed of her short fuse, or the fact that she is starting to dislike one or other of the children. Father feels he has grown away from his children, but shifts the intolerable guilt for that onto his wife. The children internalise the accusations and criticisms which come their way all the time. As they face the task of improving things, they all, at some level, fear that it will mean putting themselves in the dock. At the start all feel guilty, and find it hard to consider a change until they experience respect from the rest. The strong tendency to look for something to blame is itself a large part of the problem.

Can I praise the others?

The start of any repair process is respect for the others. Can you praise the others? Success is what we do with our failures. Recognise that each member of the family has invested in it. The family carries his/her hopes and expectations. It is not like a new couch or a new car that is expendable. Family is for life. It is never something you can leave behind, or pick and choose. The parents have restricted their choice by opting for one another, and for their children; and the children, though they do not choose their parents, have a stake in them as they will never have in any other human being.

Many years ago I was invited into a family where the daughter (call her Lara) was mentioned as a problem. She was the eldest, and as she turned into her beautiful teens, her father, who had loved her as his princess, was baffled by the change. She would spurn his advice but quote with awe what she had heard from some young friend down the road. She obviously preferred to be out of the house than in. From being a dutiful daughter she seemed to her father to have become something of a monster, looking to a wild bunch of friends for her style in clothes and make-up (tending towards the outrageous), her language (often rough or obscene), her morals (at least as expressed in her conversation) and her centre of gravity.

That at least was how it looked to her father. I sat down on one occasion with him, his wife, and daughter and asked them to say what they liked about each of the others, without ifs or buts. Lara had no difficulty: despite the difference in age and style, she liked her mother for her warmth, her father for being a strong and responsible provider, and for all the fun she used to have with him. But when her father tried to say what he liked in Lara, he could not finish a sentence positively. She can be good company - but she is never in the house. She is bright and intelligent - but she does no study and is wasting her brains. She is pretty - but look what she is doing with her face and hair and clothes.

In the comfortable suburb where they lived, the teenagers formed a large, noisy, visible group, and Lara found a welcome among them. The old wisdom is that teenagers look to their peers for matters of style and appearance, and to their parents for more lasting values. It seems to be generally true, but is not always obvious to the parents, because lasting values do not show on the surface, whereas lifestyle does. \Style\ of conversation often means holding forth on matters of politics, morals, religion, in a way that deeply offends parents.

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Three weeks of abstinence

What her father eventually did was heroic. He gave himself three weeks - his wife went along with him - in which he would hold back any criticism or comment on Lara, except to compliment her. It meant letting all sorts of annoyances pass unremarked. It gave him a space in which to sort out the trivial from matters of deeper concern. He found that most of what annoyed him was trivial, details of dress, appearance and conversation that changed even in the trial period which he allowed himself. He saw how much of Lara's posturing was just experimenting with style, trying to find what was really her. He found that she could still be a delight to him, she could still be funny and great company, though her quickness and sophistication often made him nervous.

Lara had in fact given up any hope of pleasing her father. She had unwittingly accepted the role of being a disappointment to him, a thorn in his side, and was beginning to find pleasure in her ability to annoy him. Now she discovered to her surprise that she could still please her father, and in a different way from when she was a little girl.

If there is a general rule, it must be something simple like that: stop blaming, start praising. But it is never that simple. The turn-about could come equally from the parents discovering that they have the right and the ability to say No, and to set limits to children's desires which bear no relationship to their real needs. One could argue endlessly about the details of this: how much money they should be given, what freedom they should have to go out or stay out or drink or absent themselves from a family meal. Basic to all these is the principle that a family is not a democracy, but a group with diverse experience and responsibilities, in which the adults have ultimately to answer for their children as well as care for them and listen to them.

A family may mean anything from two people to ten or twelve. I once taught a girl who was the seventeenth of twenty-five children of the same father and mother. These people know one another in a way that no stranger will ever know them; they can start a war by a mocking glance, a gesture of the hand, a mimicking phrase. If they are to seek help outside the family, a first question must be: is it help for an individual, or for the whole family? Will it be individual or family therapy? Even to answer that question one must have some understanding of the history of the family. Each of us brings a script to our dealings with others. Mother and father have their own histories which tend to be reproduced in the present. These operate below the level of consciousness, so it is almost impossible for a couple or family to tackle their own dynamics without help from outside. Only an outsider, and one with some training, can pick up the underlying patterns.

Family Styles

Family styles vary hugely. Some prefer arguments to atmosphere, others vice versa. In some, members blame one another constantly and use scapegoating. In others they cling precariously to one another and feel unduly threatened by any hint of separation, disagreement or even individuality. In others they maintain independence only by constant manipulation, fighting and abusive behaviour. In others they are endlessly competitive, striving for sexual dominance and fearful of being the loser. Other families can allow individuality without competition or conflict,

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and for at least part of the time they can show cooperation and creativity. It was about such as these that Lacan famously remarked: If you want an institution that will produce a creative and revolutionary people, you cannot find a better one than the Western nuclear family.

In turning around a negative cycle, the prayer for serenity has its place. You have to recognise what can be changed and what cannot, be wise enough to know the difference. Just as an alcoholic starts his recovery with the recognition that alcohol is something he can no longer handle, so a family starts its turnaround by accepting what is happening. Even to talk through the mess with somebody who will respect them all, can work well. Nearly always there will be attempts to suck that somebody into the mess, pressure them to take sides; their only value is in staying outside the war. Every therapist knows the anxiety of feeling that the family wants you to be effective, firm and in control, and at the same time makes you feel quite powerless. You can become the family scapegoat, feeling you have to do something, but worried about taking sides.

The price of break-up

All through this paper I have felt the tension between broad generalisations and getting embroiled in endless detail - endless because one could not start to do justice to the varieties of negative cycles in families and how they are tackled. Some messes seem so bad that you feel their only way forward is to break up the family and start again. The price for such a decision is huge. Spouses feel they have failed in the most important decision of their lives, and find every aspect of life, including the management of children, harder to cope with. There is often poorer communication with the children, less affection, inconsistent discipline and control, especially with sons. Children in turn tend to nag, whine, disobey, attack, demand more, and ignore mother, leading to a two-way escalation of coercive exchanges.

There are resources available in Ireland now that may prevent breakdown, ranging from the non-directive Parentline (phone 8733500) which I have known to be enormously helpful in defusing a crisis, to more structured interventions by professionals in the health boards or other bodies. The journey back is helped above all by parents who (both father and mother) stay close to their children and try to minimise on-going conflict between themselves. Children can also be helped - in sharply varying degrees - by therapy and counselling, both individual and group.

Those seeking an employment niche in the Irish scene should develop a skill and organise a place for group work with the young victims of family discord. It is more cost-effective than individual therapy, and can be more fruitful. It is exhausting work, because the therapists (usually a man and a woman, to take the roles of the parents in the exchanges) are at the receiving end of intense emotions. Boys in particular express their anger by noisily or cunningly disrupting anything the adults are trying to do. Yet it is effective, and much appreciated by the young people who want to keep coming despite the chaos they cause.

We used to smile at a prayer which was attributed to a synod of the Church of England: Lord, give us the grace to disagree without being disagreeable. Disagreement of some sort is built into the very make-up of a family; there are always clashes of interests. It is only when arguments move from

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being the small change of family life to being occasions of abuse and anger, that danger beckons. Even then, there are ways back, ways of turning around the negative cycle.

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Bill Toner, SJ - February 2001

Introduction

In a recent survey in a Dublin suburb afflicted by drugs, 100 adolescents were asked in a questionnaire how the family could help young people to avoid getting involved with drugs? Of these, 28 stated that parents could help by knowing where their children were and who they were with, looking after children properly, keeping of the street and limiting their freedom. Another 23 suggested that parents could talk to children about drugs. The authors of the survey conclude: “Of those responding, over half (of adolescents) require a greater involvement of parents in their lives. The perception that young teenagers want more freedom is not borne out by the results of this survey” [1]

The survey highlights the importance of parenting in the context of delinquency of any kind, whether it be drug abuse, joy-riding or vandalism. There is nothing very surprising about this. Every Garda, social worker or community activist will confirm this perception, sometimes going so far as to say, “It is the parents who should be locked up”. Nevertheless, when the decision-makers discuss, say, an anti-drug strategy, help for parents is rarely mentioned.

It is not only in communities affected by drugs or delinquency that parenting is an issue. Today parenting is probably more difficult than it has ever been. It faces difficulties from a number of different trends and influences, some economic, some cultural, and some even technological. To some of these difficulties we now turn.

Parenting and Western Values

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In its scale of values, modern Western society assigns a great deal of value to money and 'making' money. Many things are esteemed insofar as they have monetary value and can be bought and sold on the market for profit.

Sometimes money is prized for its own sake, and perhaps for the security it brings. Yet in general money is valued for the material goods and services it can buy. And these in turn are valued partly for their own sakes, but also because they bring status. Status in Ireland is not determined by birth or 'caste', but mainly by 'conspicuous consumption', revealed through status symbols such as houses and property ownership, children's schools, cars, clothes and foreign travel.

As a result of this value system, occupations are generally valued in terms of the income they generate. Voluntary work, as a full-time occupation, is not regarded as highly as paid work. Parenting is a case in point. There was a time that staying at home to mind children was considered a more 'valuable' activity than it is now. However it is unlikely that this change in attitude is due to a change in our value system itself. In the past there was less opportunity for the stay-at-home parent to find a job, so comparisons did not tend to get made between the 'value' of parenting and the 'value' of a paid job. But nowadays, with more employment opportunities, many parents will weigh up the benefits to them and their children of one of them staying at home all day, against a possible addition to the family income of, say, £10,000 a year, even after childcare costs and tax.

Most of the extra money is likely to go on a mortgage, and thus any possible compromising of the children's best interests by going out to work might seem worthwhile, if not essential. It is mainly the increase in family incomes over the last thirty years that has driven up house prices (in real terms), and increased their size. Until the 1960s there were prohibitions on married women working in the Civil Service and in many private companies, such as Guinness's. This gradually came to be seen as discriminatory, and seems unimaginable today, especially to young people. At any rate, once sufficient numbers of couples started to work and pool their incomes, this began to put upward pressure on house prices, and other couples were forced to follow suit if they wanted to 'keep up with the Jones's'.

Thus many parents are 'forced' out to work, whether they like it or not, because the availability of jobs and money fuels the competition for status, particularly in the area of housing, and because it is very difficult for parents (as for anyone else) to opt out of the prevailing value system. It is most ironic that both parents are under such pressure to work when the wealth generated in our society has never been greater. The current level of house prices will also inevitably persuade many couples to postpone having children, or perhaps not to have them at all.

Of course there are many other cogs working this particular wheel. The jobs that are now so freely available are fueled by demand, and demand is fueled by advertising and investment and the drive for economic growth. Growth is seen as necessary by governments, because improving technology can otherwise wipe out jobs (and our value system doesn't promote sharing work). And growth is seen as necessary by investors because otherwise they cannot gain interest on their investments.

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Our economic system demands that as many people as possible go out to work, and the problems that creates for parenting are given scant attention.

Not all parenting problems are caused by both parents being out at work all day. Some of the worst failures of parenting occurs in families where no adult goes out to work. But for an increasing number of parents the lack of time they have to be with their children is causing them and the children a lot of pain and sometimes more serious problems. Some parents cope better than others, but there are few people working today who do not regret their inability to spend more time with their children. In the United Kingdom, one in five children between 5 and 10 is left alone at home during school holidays, and one in six comes home at the end of each school day to an empty house. [2]

Parenting Past and Present

This is not to suggest that it is necessary or even desirable for any parent to do nothing else all day but look after children. Only in the modern Western world has the ideal of a parent, usually the woman, staying home all day minding children for most of her lifetime, been proposed as a serious option. Many adults today would 'go spare' if they had nothing else to do but mind young children. It was normal in earlier times in Ireland, as it is in other cultures at the present time, for women to do a lot of work as well as looking after children (sometimes with the help of others). Women planted and reaped vegetables and crops (often bringing their children with them), milked cows, knitted and spun, ground meal, fed animals, kept the books, managed staff, served customers, and cooked and baked for home use or sale. But, significantly, the work was done in and around the home.

What has changed is the separation of work from home. From the eighteenth century onwards, more and more work moved away from the home, particularly work that society saw as suitable for women. In many cases the new industries competed with the work that women formerly did at home, with spinning and knitting being increasingly done in large factories, and women having no choice but to work away from the home. Children were often minded at home by older children or other relatives, and then went to work in the factories themselves at an early age. The slogan of the 'woman's place is in the home' usually arose only when women came into competition with men in the workplace, as happened after the World Wars when men returned from battle and looked for their jobs back. Women still go to work in factories, but the problem of looking after the children is seen as more acute than it was in the 18th or 19th centuries:

Families are smaller now and more scattered, so there are fewer older siblings or relatives to mind younger children.

Parents' and children's free time does not coincide. Increased concern for children's welfare has led to young children being excluded from paid employment, and school hours are shorter than typical hours worked in industry.

Even after the factories came, many small businesses, such as shops, continued to be operated from home, with the children close by or included in the work. Most of these small businesses have now gone. There has been a growth in tele-homeworking of course, but homeworkers are often

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prevented by their contracts from looking after children at the same time.

Compared with former times, only a very small percentage of people now live on small farms, where child-rearing could most easily be combined with work.

More families are breaking down, and parenting/work dilemmas are more acute for lone parents.

It would of course be a big mistake to think that parenting was better and children more orderly in past centuries than they are today. In Ireland Nano Nagle and Edmund Rice set up their schools in the late 18th century in response to the sight of hordes of undisciplined children running wild in the slums of Waterford and Cork. Parenting may be no worse today than it ever was, but in the overall design of our society it is still assigned a much lower priority than it should be.

In the Western world, the ‘economy’, and the interests of industry (or at least of industrialists), have generally taken precedence over parenting and the interests of the family. If economic growth requires that parents be separated from their children, then so be it. In the design of working hours, it is the needs of business, not the needs of families, that are taken into account. The total amount of time parents and children spend together has dropped by 40 per cent in a single generation. [3]

According to a recent survey by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, employees in the EU are working harder and in more stressful conditions than before. Increasing ‘flexibility’ is designed for customer and client needs, rather than employee needs, and lack of predictability in rosters is causing serious problems, especially for women. [4]

But the pursuit of wealth is not the only factor threatening parenting today. In the next section we turn to examine other forces in our culture which make the task of parents more difficult than it used to be.

Cultural Pressures on Parenting

Apart from the fact that more and more parents have to combine parenting with work, and thus “live like trapeze artists” [5], our modern culture, in a number of other ways, makes parenting more difficult than it used to be:

Parents are less sure about the rationale for having children.

In former times (and in non-Western cultures today) children were (are) seen as playing an important role in the continuance of a family. For instance they might be needed for kinship ties, to work in the family business, to look after parents in their own age, or to safeguard an inheritance.

In these situations the interests of extended family, or clan, or tribe assumed importance. Now the term often used in the West in regard to having a first child is starting a family. There is still some social pressure regarding the continuance of the family name, and the passing on of property, but the modern family is much more seen as a stand-alone entity. Children are still wanted by their parents, but they are less needed by them, and the objective of parenting less clear.

- Families are more isolated and there is less support from the extended family.

In former times [6] it was common for a number of adults and their families to live in close proximity, and families were larger. Most of the adults and older children took some responsibility for all the children. Today the close rural communities are fewer, and inner city families have been

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dispersed to different suburbs. Child-minders are now in short supply, and so are playmates within the family circle.

- There is a suspicion of authority, including parental authority.

Since the sixties a strong bias against authority has developed. Bob Dylan wrote, “Come mothers and fathers throughout the land; your sons and your daughters are beyond your command”. With the atrocities and wasted lives of two world wars still in people’s consciousness, people have become less comfortable with the concept of doing something just because someone ‘told’ them to do it. But those in authority have also become less comfortable about telling others what to do. Parents are teaching children “not to mind what anybody tells them”, while trying to tell them lots of things themselves. Overall, children have become more resistant to authority, and parents have become less confident about enforcing it.

- Children are more conscious of their rights and are more likely to challenge not only adults in general, but their parents.

In the past, children were hardly considered to have any ‘rights’ independent of their parents. But, the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, in particular, has now articulated a number of rights, for instance the right to freedom of expression (Art.13), and the right to freedom of association (Art.15). The Convention is at pains to stress the primary importance of parents’ role and makes various provisos, particularly relating to the “evolving capacities of the child”. Nevertheless many parents who see their role as ‘benign dictators’ find it hard to accept the flavour of ‘democracy’ in the Convention. A number of parents have similar difficulties with the concept of ‘Childline’, now found in many countries, through which children may phone a third party to complain about their parents (or other adults).

There is no doubt that the emphasis on children’s rights is essential, especially in the wake of recent disclosures of widespread child abuse. But some parents will say that it makes parenting more difficult, and that parents are not being given the help they need to bring up their children in a responsible way. In response to misgivings voiced, the UN Convention Committee has stated that “the Convention focuses primarily on what governments... must do....The Committee does not monitor the behaviour of individual parents. Nor does the Committee receive complaints from citizens, including children, against individual parents.” [7]

In practice, in Ireland we could do more to show proper respect to children. For instance, in the medical area, adults’ rights over children’s bodies are taken for granted, and in schools their opinions are rarely sought. The excuse is made that children don’t know what is best for them, but in fact it is often simply because children are smaller and less sure of themselves that adults get away with discriminating against them. There is a well-known pub in Co. Down that displays the sign, “Unsupervised children will be sold into slavery”. No doubt many people, even children, will find this amusing, but imagine the outcry if it was applied to some other category of persons?

- In a liberal society, parents are less comfortable about laying down ‘right’ and ‘wrong’.

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Apart from being less comfortable about the exercise of authority, parents are less sure about everything in our post-modern culture, and many do not know what to tell their children. Penelope Leach comments:

Concepts like right and wrong are out of fashion, the words sometimes trotted out on political platforms, but mostly reserved for sums or multiple-choice questions. Good judgment is something everyone wants, but nobody wants to be judgmental. Even values are tricky to handle and usually kept as impersonal as “value for money” or as distanced from individuals as “conservative values”, “Christian values” or perhaps a deprecating “good, old-fashioned values” [8]

The general uncertainty of parents about values may be one of the reasons why places in a school that has a reputation for discipline and firm values are likely to be in demand, even among parents who don't subscribe to the (usually) religious ethos of the school. Many parents are delegating the imparting of values to the schools, though all the indications are that this has limited success in inculcating values without back-up from the home.

The uncertainty about, or disregard of, values has not only affected the family, but has invaded the media as well. The restraints on what can be shown on TV or broadcast on radio become looser by the day, which inevitably puts additional pressures on parents, who have to cope with the impact of explicit material on their children.

- The materialism of the culture makes children more demanding, while the greater wealth of families makes it harder for parents to say ‘No’.

Nowadays when people start to talk about children, the conversation gets around to the ‘Nike syndrome’ within minutes. For whatever reason, children feel their identity far more bound up with possessions and status symbols than used to be the case, and peer pressure on the non-conformist can be devastating. Parents are at a loss to explain the phenomenon or cope with it, but simply debunking peer values does not work. [9] Moreover, in former times the issue was self-limiting for most parents, because they simply could not afford the most desirable items. Now there are a very large number of Irish parents for whom ‘money is no object’ with regard to Christmas presents. The children know this, and the ‘why?’s become more persistent.

- For a variety of reasons, parents are more anxious about parenting well; parenting has become more professionalized and competitive.

Like many other things in life that were once taken more casually (such as personal nutrition), parenting has taken on the status of a ‘skill’. Many areas of life and work have been invaded by ‘experts’ and sometimes (often for sound reasons) professionalized. Benjamin Spock's, *Baby and Childcare*, (1968) was an important milestone. It rightly called into question many entrenched attitudes regarding child-raising. But it also highlighted parenting as a skill that parents could be ‘good’ or ‘bad’ at. Parents became as concerned about their own success as that of their children. Parents have always asked, “Where did I go wrong?”, but they are more likely to ask it in the post-Spock era. As in any other area of life, anxiety is a poor guide, particularly in childcare, where it is easily transmitted to the child as lack of confidence.

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- Because parents today generally spend less time with their children, peer influence has become correspondingly greater.

It is reckoned that children get forty per cent less of their parents' time than they did a generation ago. More parents are working, and the school day is starting earlier and finishing later. Children take more and more of their values from their peer group. While mixing with peers is a valuable part of socialization, there is also the potential for a 'Lord of the Flies' situation. [10] Without constant input from adults children are liable to engage in bullying, violence, sexism, and ridicule. Peer influence can become so great that it is impossible for parents to communicate their own norms and values. Television characters, especially in 'soaps', become a new category of 'peer' when parents leave children alone at home or even switch on the TV to keep them quiet.

As peers become the child's most important reference group, the approval of the parent becomes less significant to them. In some books on parenting, maintaining discipline in the home is represented as a kind of game between parents and children. Parents are advised to devise a programme of sanctions, sometimes described as 'punitive consequences', which are applied systematically and consistently for breaches of rules. Robert MacKenzie's popular book, *Setting Limits*, is an example. [11] The disturbing thing about this approach is that it pays little attention to what should be the most powerful punishment for a child, - the parent's disapproval. [12] Parenting then becomes a power struggle, or even an exercise in 'Pavlovian' [13] programming. MacKenzie makes remarkably little reference to love or affection in the relationship between child and parent. The most important thing in building parent-child relationships is listening to the child, and unfortunately parents today have little time for this. If the relationship becomes weak and mutually disrespectful, the parent's disapproval may not be very important to the child.

- Family breakdown is more common, and parenting is usually more difficult for a single parent.

Although it is difficult to generalize about the effect on a child of having only one parent, there is a lot of evidence that, in general, parenting is more difficult if carried out alone. Although family breakdown is on the increase, surveys in Europe have found, ironically, increasing popular support for the view that a child needs a home with both a father and a mother [14]. Writers on parenting give different reasons for this. Maureen Gaffney comments:

"Women's strength is that they are so good, almost too good, at responding to other's needs. Fathers are critical, then, not just for rescuing mothers from the ropes after the sixth round with the kids, but also as confidants and advisors." [15]

Penelope Leach emphasizes the psychological importance to the child of the father, especially in infancy:

"Infants cannot have too much continuous closeness with their mothers...As long as mothering (by somebody) is constant, fathers' comings and goings, into relatedness and out to adult affairs, offer an important balancing discontinuity and the recurring treat of somebody who is not always available, who is not that mothering person, and who is not like her... As the first year draws on,

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fathers lure their offspring from the enclosing, rightly dependent relationship with the female parent or parent figure and out towards autonomy..." [16]

- Corporal punishment is increasingly, and rightly, seen as unfair and ultimately ineffective, but this does mean that parents have to spend more time and effort to achieve desirable behaviour.

Some parents respond to children's arguments, or 'talking back', or simple disobedience by slapping them. Parents do this for a number of reasons:

they are usually bigger and stronger than the child;

it is sometimes more difficult to reason with a child than with an adult;

children can be very persistent, and parents lose patience;

parents can see themselves as 'owning their child' and having control over it; in contrast, they would be very slow to hit another person's child even for the same degree of aggravation.

However an increasing number of people are of the view that hitting a child is the same as hitting anyone else and constitutes an assault. In a few countries it is illegal to slap a child, and in almost any country excessive slapping could lead to prosecution. In Ireland there does not currently seem to be a strong movement to outlaw slapping by parents, but it is definitely frowned on more than it used to be, and resorting to it is increasingly viewed as a failure.

The main problems with slapping are that (a) it does not respect the dignity of the child; (b) it teaches children that 'might is right', and can even encourage them to be violent; (c) children often do not understand why they are being slapped; (d) children can carry resentment of being slapped 'unfairly' right through their lives in a way that is not true of other sanctions; (e) slapping does not teach children why their behaviour is unacceptable, but only what the consequences of the behaviour are; (f) in their teenage years children can start to slap back; (g) when parents start to slap they can easily lose control and do serious damage, especially through slapping children around the head.

Slapping is often done out of frustration, when parents feel completely helpless in coping with a situation any other way. Parents can often walk away from confrontations with adults, but they cannot do this with their children. The realization that slapping children is wrong and counter-productive is a considerable advance for society, but it means that parents require greater patience and better 'motivational' skills. Slapping is part of an 'authoritarian' style of parenting which can produce timid and dependent children. But if it is not replaced by some other response the outlook can be nearly as bad. Children of 'permissive' or 'laissez-faire' parents who maintain no discipline tend to be immature, low in self-reliance and self-control, and not particularly socially responsible.

- The 'sexual revolution', which began in the 1960s, means that parents face major concerns at the start of adolescence (which begins earlier each decade).

Most parents will admit that raising children, especially girls, through adolescence has become a nightmare. The fear of many parents is pre-marital pregnancy, and to some extent disease, rather

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than sexual activity in itself. Although premarital teenage births have soared, they show little sign of becoming totally acceptable to adult society in general, hence the nervousness of parents. However there are still many parents who are just as uneasy about the impact of premarital and casual sex on the psychological and spiritual development of the young person. This is one reason why many parents are bitterly opposed to making contraceptives available to young people.

Through the ages different societies have responded to the sexual awakening of their children in different ways. In some societies young girls are almost literally locked up in their teenage years. In former times in Ireland, while teenage girls were given a lot of freedom, there were incredibly strong social and religious pressures on both girls and boys to refrain from premarital sexual activity. Most Irish teenagers of the 1950s literally feared hellfire even for having sexual fantasies, let alone putting them into practice.

The problem for Irish parents today is that they do not know what to tell their children in regard to sex. It is difficult in today's highly sexualized culture to convince young people that sex outside marriage is 'wrong', so the emphasis from parents is on being 'careful' rather than chaste. One writer captures the dilemma of the parent in a liberal society:

"We must be able to express our fears about their sexual behaviour not as fears about sex itself but about the unhappiness that sex at the wrong time or with the wrong person can bring." [17]

Thus in the absence of clear and confident norms of their own, it is difficult for parents to answer the "questions that torment teenagers, caught between intense peer-pressure and gossip on the one hand, and an unformed or nervous conscience on the other" [18]

Of course many Irish parents do enforce strict controls on their children in relation to attending discos and so on, but where internalized moral restraints are weak or absent there are bound to be 'casualties'

- The possibility of alcohol and other drug abuse by their children is a major worry for parents.

Surveys indicate that the average age for Dublin pupils to start experimenting with cannabis is now as young as 12 years. About 40% of Irish 15-16 year olds smoke cannabis occasionally (compared with, say, about 5% in Portugal and Finland). Cannabis abuse is serious for school-children because it interferes with concentration and it also introduces them to the world of illegal drugs. In an Eastern Health Board Survey 18% of students admitted they had experimented with 'hard' drugs. Ireland has the highest rate of drug-related deaths in the European Union.

The concern about 'drugs' unfortunately draws attention away from the widespread abuse of alcohol, the drug that wreaks most destruction in our society. Research clearly shows that the younger the age at which people start to drink, and the more they drink, the more likely they are to become alcoholics. Drinking by schoolchildren is now so common, and is driven by such strong peer pressure, that many Irish parents find it impossible to control.

- New technology continues to introduce new areas of conflict between parents and children.

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Parents have struggled to control excessive and unsuitable television watching by children since the 1960s. This conflict has been much exacerbated by the availability of videos, which allow children to view violent and pornographic material which would not find its way onto the ordinary channels. Internet porn has now become a new source of concern. Not only the availability of new technology, but its cost and the time devoted to it, can become a major battle ground, as children demand mobile phones, computers and software, internet facilities, and pay channels.

- There is very little help available to parents to gain parenting skills.

For all the reasons mentioned above, parenting today has become a complex skill, and modern family structures makes it more difficult to learn it 'on the job'. In general the importance and complexity of this skill has not been adequately recognized by governments, including our own. Parenting courses are available in some centres and schools, but, in general, funding is inadequate to make properly certified training available. One of the best packages on the market, popular with parent-school liaison staff, costs over £1000 to run as an accredited programme, and the cost is prohibitive for schools in disadvantaged areas. There is also a need to devise programmes more suited to disadvantaged areas and working-class cultures, but again, current funding levels are inadequate to resource this.

An example of government neglect is the lack of financial support given to the 'Lifestart' programmes, which are aimed at involving parents more actively in the education of their very young children. 'Lifestart' is a development of an American programme called Operation Head Start, in use since the 1960s. Apart from the help it gives in building the relationship between parent and child, preliminary research shows that children who have been through the programme perform better when they start school. Much better funding has been made available for the government's own 'Early Start' school-based scheme, which is aimed at an older age group and does not involve parents as much.

More support could also be given by the government to the efforts that have been made to introduce parenting programmes in schools. School is often the only structured learning opportunity in a person's life, and parenting is arguably more important than many other things taught in school. Pre-marriage courses could also devote more time to parenting, though the proportion of parents who take part in them is declining.

Needless to say, parenting skills are not the only things needed to make parenting easier and improve the socialization of children. Parenting is much more difficult in situations of poverty, inadequate and crowded housing, under-funded schools, inadequate medical care, and work-related stress, and where these problems exist they have to be attended to before better parenting can have a significant impact.

The Ultimate Threat to Parenting - Voluntary Childlessness

More and more women throughout the world are choosing not to have babies at all. There are many possible reasons for this, but one Australian woman journalist, Carolyn Webb, probably put her finger on it when she said that the big reason is that society values motherhood so poorly:

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“Someone who clinches a sales deal, gains a new client, manages a team and engineers a merger is valued more highly than someone wiping bottoms, breastfeeding and nurturing a new life... Society has a double standard for mothers. A woman is damned if stays at home with the children, and damned if she goes back to work and ruins poor Junior’s psychological make-up by putting him in creche for a few days a week. Now she’s damned for not having children at all.” [19]

Webb was responding to a newspaper article highlighting research into reasons why women in Australia (as in other developed countries) are having fewer children. The researcher, Fran Baum, had identified four main categories of reasons given by women for their state of voluntary childlessness:

- Hedonists - women who choose to remain childless through a desire to preserve their standard of living and who are unwilling to invest either their time or money in raising children.
- Emotional - women who do not have emotional feelings for babies or children.
- Idealistic - women who do not want to bring a child into a world they feel is unsuitable, or who do not want to contribute to overpopulation.
- Practical - women who have a practical reason for being childless, such as a desire to pursue their career, or a fear of passing on a genetic defect to their child. [20]

Webb, in her response, also suggested other reasons, such as an increasing difficulty in ‘meeting the right person’ due to the break up of community and church structures, and even the demise of dances where couples traditionally met in a ‘safe’ environment.

The availability of contraceptives is not considered a major factor in fertility decline. They were not widely available when fertility began to decline in Northern Europe at the end of the 19th century. Fertility decline is more likely to be caused by a change in values. Today there exists a close correspondence between fertility and contraceptives, but this most likely means that many families that have chosen to limit family size, find contraceptives the easiest way to do so. [21]

The extent of childlessness in the developed world is now quite scary. In developed countries, the ‘fertility rate’ (the number of births per woman required to maintain a population - excluding immigration) is currently 2.1 births. In Ireland the current rate is now below 2.0, and it is estimated that it will be about 1.6 by 2005. [22] (As recently as 1971 it was 4.0). In other European countries the situation is much worse. In former Eastern Germany the situation is catastrophic, with the current fertility rate only 0.77, the lowest in the world. [23] In Italy and Spain the rate is below 1.2. Demographers forecast that if this continues the population of Italy, now 57 million, could decline to fewer than 10 million within a century. [24]

A lot of attention has been focused on medical reasons for childlessness, such as declining sperm counts, but it is estimated that only 5-8% of couples are unable to have children for medical reasons. [25] The main reasons for childlessness seem to be socio-cultural, with economic considerations playing a big part.

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The only country in Europe with fertility above replacement rate is Sweden. In Sweden fertility fell to low levels in the the 1970s but recovered to a stage where it tops the EU league. It is probably no coincidence that more parent-friendly policies were introduced in the 1980s, to the extent that they are now the best in the world. [26] For instance parental leave provisions in Sweden are as follows:

- Up to 450 days per child (126 in Ireland, plus 56 days unpaid leave).
- Out of the 450 days of leave, 30 are reserved for the mother and 30 for the father, but the rest of the days can be split as they wish (no statutory paid paternal leave yet in Ireland).
- Parents receive 85% of their income for the first 60 days, while for the next 290 days the compensation is the same as for sickness benefits (80%) and a flat rate thereafter (70% for 126 days in Ireland).
- Employers often provide a supplement so that the parent's full salary is replaced for up to 4 months (sometimes happens in Ireland too).
- 120 days leave to care for children between 8 and 12 at 75% of wage [27] (nothing similar in Ireland).

The United States may appear to buck the trend at first sight, since the fertility rate there is 2.1 [28] and the U.S. has no paid parental leave. However the fertility rate among non-Hispanic whites is only 1.8, whereas the Hispanic rate is 3.0. [29] Research suggests that in the U.S. “the relatively high fertility of immigrants compared to natives can be completely explained by compositional differences with respect to age, education, income and ethnicity” and that fertility has dropped at a faster rate for natives than for immigrants. [30]

In general, research suggests “a moderate but not insignificant impact of family policy (i.e. family benefits) on demographic behaviour”. [31]

Many advantages have been identified, to children, parents and employers, of extended maternity and paternal leave, backed up by considerable research [32] :

- There are significant benefits conferred by breastfeeding to mothers and infants. Breastfeeding is related to improved infant health through decreased incidence or severity of many diseases, and possibly enhanced cognitive development. Employment of mothers reduces both the frequency and duration of breastfeeding.
- Parental leave reduces household stress and allows parents to give more time to children, nurture and stimulate them, and develop healthy interactions with them.
- Parental leave rights improve the labour market status of women. Generous leave legislation increases the employment-to-population ratio of women of childbearing age by about 9%.
- Long parental leaves are associated with better maternal health, including mental health and vitality.

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- Research reveals that more generous parental leave reduces the deaths of infants and young children.
- More women return to work after childbirth where parental leave systems are in place.
- Paternity leave encourages shared parenthood.

Better parental leave on its own is probably not enough to persuade couples that parenting can be combined with work. Working hours are so inflexible, and in many cases so long, that having children while holding down a job can be very stressful.

The reduction in the length of the maximum working week to 48 hours through gradual implementation of the Organization of Working Time Act of 1997 should be welcome news for families with young children. In particular it should allow many fathers more time with their children, instead of them having to try to squeeze in an hour of 'quality time' at 9 p.m. when the child is exhausted. Hopefully the government will actually enforce this EU-inspired Act, for which the stated penalties for non-compliance are quite severe.

While individual employers may balk at the idea of giving employees more parental leave, it is good to see that the employers' representative body, IBEC, are urging employees to adopt more parent-friendly policies. They refer particularly to flexible arrangements such as part-time working and there is no doubt that this would be necessary in addition to better parental leave if women, in particular, are to be attracted into the workforce or remain in it. This initiative of IBEC is being carried out jointly with the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. Both groups, as well as the Government, are concerned about the 80,000 vacancies (6.5% of all jobs) currently unfilled in the State. But in the general scale of things, our fertility rate should be of much greater concern than our current difficulty in filling jobs.

Choices About Daycare

There is big push on in Ireland at present to make childcare more widely available to all social classes. The National Development Plan included £250m. for childcare and the Government subsequently allocated a further £40m. This is not before its time, as childcare provision in Ireland lags far behind that in

much of the EU. Where childcare is not readily available, or is too expensive, women inevitably suffer discrimination in their aspirations to take a full part in the workforce. Children may suffer too, if they are left at home without supervision because there is nowhere for them to be minded.

Much of the new funding for childcare is earmarked for grants for building or renovating childcare centres and crèches. These certainly have their place. However they tend to be established with the work-schedule of the parent in mind rather than (except indirectly) the interests of the child. Daycare can only be the first choice for the children themselves towards the end of the toddler period, well into the third year, when it begins to fulfill needs for companionship and education from others. In this way daycare replaces some of the support and social education once given by siblings, relatives and neighbours. But infants are best cared for by the mother, supported by the

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father, at home, and this is only made possible through generous parental leave provision. Toddlers are best cared for, if not at home, then in a home environment with another family, where they are consistently cared for by people they know and who know them. [33] This model of childcare, (which in Ireland is used by 45% of parents of children aged 0-4 in full-time jobs) [34], is not sufficiently supported by the present government strategy, which is overly focused on child-minding outside the home or home environment. The matter is complicated by the fact that most of those minding in their own home operate in the informal economy. However the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare devoted a lot of attention to this issue, and their recommendations in relation to special tax allowances and income disregards should be followed up as a matter of urgency.

Where parents are looking after young children, international research suggests that daycare is not in fact their first choice. Given the choice, the money, and guarantees regarding their employment status, most mothers of children under two would choose to stay at home. Countries with the best daycare provision do not necessarily have the most working mothers of young children. [35]

In spite of new legislation, there are still many unregistered, and therefore uninspected, facilities where infants are cared for. Many staff are unqualified. Even in many registered facilities, the qualified staff are often caught up in administration, and young untrained staff do most of the hands-on work. There are no figures for staff turnover in Ireland, but it is probably not far from the U.S. figure of 42% per annum. This kind of discontinuity is far from ideal for an infant.

Conclusions

Parenting in the developed world is in crisis today. A dramatic symptom of this is that women (in many cases with male collusion) are choosing not to have babies, or at any rate not sufficient to guarantee the survival of their own national grouping. Where parents do choose to have children, they are less likely today to be able to give the time it takes to raise well-balanced, responsible, and properly-socialized children.

The main reason (but not the only reason) why parenting is in crisis is that the modern economy does not value parenting sufficiently. Although the long-term interests of all developed economies depend on a steady or growing supply of workers, customers, and entrepreneurs, the short-term demands of economies for productivity, highly-structured work organization, and profits, militate against their longer-term needs. There is urgent need to make employment more family-friendly, through the provision of much more generous parental leave, and flexible work schedules which benefit the working parent rather than the customer.

Childcare provision needs to be improved. Parents, particularly women, need affordable childcare to be able to combine paid work with good parenting, and avoid destructive stress to themselves. Childcare costs in Ireland are the highest in Europe as a percentage of earned income. [36] Tax relief for childcare is an obvious measure, as long as some way is devised of giving equivalent assistance to parents who are outside the tax net. Government strategy should not lose sight of the

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fact that childminding in the minder's home is the most commonly used childcare arrangement among women with paid jobs, and is the most desirable type of childcare for very young children.

Finally, most governments, including the Irish government, need to give more help to parents to improve their parenting skills. Money spent in this area would be better spent than much of that devoted to curbing delinquency, after parenting has broken down. The possibility of setting up a 'Parenting Promotion Unit' on the lines of the former 'Health Promotion Unit' should be considered.

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Notes:

[1] Vincentian Partnership for Justice, *The Drugs Crisis in the Cherry Orchard/Ballyfermot Area as Seen by Members of the Local Communities*. Dublin, 2000.

[2] Penelope Leach, *Children First*, New York, Vintage Books, 1994, p.247.

[3] *Op.cit.*, p.258.

[4] As reported in the *Irish Times*, 3rd February, 2001, p.3.

[5] Penelope Leach, *op.cit.*, p.22.

[6] 'In former times' or in other cultures today. In many countries older families patterns have survived better than in the West, though even here they are changing under the impact of globalization, urbanization, and industrialialization.

[7] See the UN website: www.unicef.org/crc/parentsfaq.htm

[8] Penelope Leach, *Op.cit.*, p.148.

[9] See Penelope Leach, *Op.cit.* p.25.

[10] In William Golding's novel, *The Lord of the Flies* a groups of middle-class school-children marooned on a desert island ended up, literally, killing one another. 'Lord of the Flies' is a religious symbol for the devil.

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[11] See for instance Robert J. MacKenzie, *Setting Limits - How to Raise Responsible, Independent Children by providing CLEAR Boundaries*. Rocklin California, Prima Publishing. 1998 (2nd ed.). A more positive approach can be found in John Sharry, *Bringing Up Responsible Children*, Dublin: Veritas. 1999.

[12] Maureen Gaffney, et al., *Parenting - a Handbook for Parents*. Dublin, Town House/RTE, 1991, p.77.

[13] Ivan Pavlov (1849-1936) was a Russian physiologist who carried out experiments on 'conditioned' reflexes in dogs. Dogs that were fed when a bell was rung were gradually induced to salivate simply by ringing a bell. Children who are automatically punished for a particular type of behaviour, without discussion, are likely to conform, but may cease to learn anything new about the reason for the punishment.

[14] Ester, Peter et al (eds), *The Individualizing Society: Value Changes in Europe and North America*. Tilburg University Press, 1994.

[15] Maureen Gaffney et al., *Op.cit.*, p.16.

[16] Penelope Leach, *Op.cit.*, pp.46-47.

[17] In 'The Teenage Years (2)' in Maureen Gaffney et al. (*op.cit.*), p.143.

[18] In 'The Teenage Years (1)' in Maureen Gaffney et al. (*op.cit.*), p.129.

[19] Carolyn Webb, 'I've no kids, and it is none of your business' in *The Age* (Australian Newspaper), 1st April 2000. See www.theage.com.au/news/

[20] Baum, F. 1994, 'Choosing Not to Have Children'. *Australian Demographic Statistics*, September 1999. Available on www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/

[21] Keith Montgomery (University of Wisconsin) 'The Demographic Transition'. <http://mthw.uwc.edu/wwwmahes/courses/geog/Demotrans/demtran.htm>

[22] Economic and Social Research Institute, *Medium-Term Review: 1997-2003*, April 1997, p.15.

[23] Kohler, Hans-Peter, 'Research Group on Social Dynamics and Fertility'. Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research. [Www.demogr.mpg.de/labs/sdf/Fertility.htm](http://www.demogr.mpg.de/labs/sdf/Fertility.htm).

[24] Tim Colebatch, 'Childless future for many women', in *The Age*. 22 March 2000. www.theage.com.au/news/.

[25] See Webb, S. and Holman D.1992. 'A survey of infertility, surgical sterility and associated reproductive disability in Perth, Western Australia'. *Australian Journal of Public Health*, Vol.16, No.4, 376-382.

[26] Economic and Social Research Institute, *Medium-Term Review: 1997-2003*, April 1997, p.15.

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[27] This data, and other information about trends in parental leave, is available in an article, 'Response to Extension of Parental Leaves' on the excellent website of the Canadian Centre of Families, Work and Well-Being, www.uoguelph.ca/cfww/

[28] United Nations figure for 1994 available on www.undp.org/popin/wdtrends/

[29] Statistical Assessment Service, 'Do Svidaniya Baby'. www.stats.org/mewsletters/9709/BOOM.

[30] Kahn, Joan R. 'Immigrant and native fertility during the 1980s: adaptations and expectations for the future'. *International Migration Review*, Fall 1994. Abstract available on <http://popindex.princeton.edu/>.

[31] Blanchet, Didier and O.Ekert-Jaffe, 'The demographic impact of family benefits: evidence from a micro-model and from macro-data', in *The Family, the Market and the State in Aging Societies*'. (ed. John Ermisch and N. Ogawa. Oxford, Clarendon Press. 1994.

[32] As for Note 21.

[33] See Chapter 4, 'Dreams and Nightmares' in Penelope Leach, *op.cit.*

[34] National Children Strategy (Report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare), Stationery Office, 1999., p.16.

[35] See Penelope Leach, *op.cit.*, p.71.

[36] National Children's Nurseries Association, as quoted in the Irish Times Budget 2001 supplement, 7th December 2000.

Parenting Adolescents

Marie Murray

February, 2001

Introduction

Adolescence is a wonderful time. One is on the brink of life. Childhood is a glimpse behind, adulthood a stretch ahead and in between is the agony and the ecstasy of negotiating the transition from one stage to the other.

Adolescence is a time of hope. The possibilities and potentialities are at their greatest. Intellectual capacity peaks. Energy, enthusiasm and sheer joy of living surge up in the wit, the humour, the idealism, energy and purpose of the young. Never again will the brain and the body, the spirit and the self be so utterly able. This should be the moment of which marvellous memories are made. Not so, today, for far too many young people.

Not so, for far too many of their parents. Indeed, many parents either dread the onset of their children's adolescence, try to survive the teenage stage when it arrives, or look back with relief when those same children emerge into young adulthood.

One might wonder whether or not this is because teenagers today are different, whether or not their parents are different or whether both young people and their parents are of an entirely different order than before. Whatever changes are occurring in the one, the other, or indeed in both, the question that persistently seems to arise is whether this difficulty in parent-teenager relationship represents a real crisis in parenting, or a realistic and appropriate response to the current difficulties facing adolescents because of the many changes in the socio-cultural world around them.

Of course there has always been a tendency for each generation to view the subsequent ones with horror and despair. The 'hint of stocking as something shocking' is a far cry from the 'expose all' climate of current culture and each generation has grieved at the apparent demise of decorum and decency in its offspring. Indeed, while parents in the 1960's thought that they had the worst time because there was radical social and cultural change then, the parents of the rock and rollers and 'teddy boys' in the 50's would have been equally alarmed. In this sense worrying about teenagers is not new because each generation also rightly challenges the generation before it.

Disturbing Trends

But it would appear, that in the Ireland of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, enormous shifts have indeed taken place that are reflected in a series of alarming new trends and behaviours in young people, for instance:

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A blatant challenge to authority in all its guises. Whether the issue is adherence to age limits for drinking, the intake of illegal drugs or the flaunting of speed limits while driving, there is a deconstruction of the civil code in favour of personal choice.

An alarming increase in the age at which activities are begun that were previously the province of adulthood. Having the first drink at the age of eighteen years or twenty-one with some ritual, celebration and excitement would be as foreign to most teenagers as going to the well for water. The age of onset of alcohol consumption allied to the actual consumption itself is a cause for alarm. Young people are starting to drink at younger and younger ages.

The purpose and intent in drinking. The purpose of drinking is to become as drunk as possible – this is very different to the secretive sip of ‘Dutch Courage’ of a time past.

The desensitisation through repetitive lyrics. The lyrics of the music favoured by many adolescents are insidiously inciting them negatively. Of course music was always the medium through which a generation challenged its elders. The strumming of the consciousness of a generation in the 1960’s was an imperative to embrace love and reject war, to discover personal identity and to deconstruct oppressive ideologies and practices from the past. Sadly, the current challenge, if challenge is the correct term, is now often embodied in incitement to hate, to violence and to a disturbing incestuous misogyny, as, for example, typified by the ‘sounds’ of Eminem. Many adult ears have never heard or imagined or known that these assaults on the sensibilities and sacredness of the young are taking place in their own homes. Some have stumbled upon the lyrics unaware and have been stunned and shocked, either by the ‘musical’ choice of their children or by the extreme exploitation of the young, depending on their interpretation of the situation.

The desensitisation of the hearts and minds of a generation who have ingested violent screen images from the earliest ages, so that they can view the most nauseating of cruelties with a numbing nonchalance. This mediaziation of reality has threatened the capacity of young people to distinguish between visual, virtual and vital realities. As the capacity to be sensitive and to be shocked is eroded there is a requirement for increasingly more shocking, sensational and salacious viewing. As one child of twelve once enthused, recounting an experience at the age of eight of watching the film Predator “it was massive, so it was, all gore and guts and he was gutted, just gutted, you should watch it so you should”.

The soaring in rates of suicide amongst those for whom there should have been pride and a place for them in the Ireland of prosperity.

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Protection Through Boundaries

Confronted by this litany of gloom, how are we to make sense of what is happening to many young people today? More importantly, what are the protective factors for those who are engaging in and enjoying their adolescent years and who are not participating in the negative cultural invitations? Parents who parent provide the most protective factor.

It is the easy option to blame the young for the problems they produce. Ever since they were classified and categorised, named as a specific group in a precise period of life by G. Stanley Hall, the term adolescence has also come to conjure up a range of negative ascriptions that would weigh down even the most enthusiastic. Terms such as rebellious, irresponsible, hostile, egocentric are foisted upon the young person. Specific descriptions such as lazy, untidy, argumentative, oppositional, defiant, out of control have shadowed many adolescents' self-esteem. Pressures to perform, to achieve academically, to be competitive and competent, have invaded the value system of many young people. This is not of their making.

It is tragic that youth, a time that should be filled with hope and learning, a time of anticipation, expectation and eventual fulfilment, should become one of anxiety, depression and despair for many young people today. We are confronted by the stark statistics on suicide. We are concerned at the anger and rage that expresses itself in crime and vandalism. We dread to think that drugs provide the escape from the raw reality of life. We reel before the sexual exploits, the exploitation of the young by the young, of the demise of decency and the descent into decadence. But more sinister is the degree to which we have begun to believe that we can do nothing for them.

The drawing by parents of BOUNDARIES has never been more crucial than it is today in a society in which globalisation has already blurred the boundaries of countries and continents, of information and opinion, of news and views and of therapy and theology. As we all struggle to relocate ourselves in a new world and in what could even be a better world, many young people are left without any maps to guide them through this particular passage in their lives.

This adult 'helplessness' seems to be a new and disturbing development. Embedded in it is the belief that the adult world has not, and should not, have control over these young people. Shades of an oppressive and punitive past prevent any glimmer of common sense entering the parenting picture today. Current culture is consumed with the stories of how we sat in rows at school, were beaten for inability or insubordination, were psychologically damaged by our parents and secretly damaged by society. Many of the other narratives of that time have faded or they are no longer permitted, such as the narratives of nurturance, of idealism and of commitment.

Of course one would not wish to return to any part of the past that was harsh and punitive. Perhaps much of the reluctance that appears to be present in parents to draw clear boundaries, to make real rules and to shape the behaviour of young people, has stemmed from memories of that time when the regime was often too harsh, the boundaries too rigid and the tolerance too low. But to 'overcorrect' from the past is to turn the steering wheel so far in the opposite direction that there is a

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careering and skidding and nobody guiding or driving. This, is to deny a whole generation the help that it needs

Indeed, if many young people are depressed, this may be matched by the gloom that has descended upon their parents, a fog of uncertainty, a reign of resignation, of abdication and adjustment to the impossibility of parenting the current adolescent.

This reign of resignation appears to be particularly potent. It stems from a series of fallacious views;

- The belief that there is nothing that parents can do.
- The suggestion that there is no point in creating rules in a world that does not subscribe to discipline.
- The conviction that there is no purpose in demanding conformity in a world of diversity.
- The idea that there is no pressure on study in an economy of plenty.
- Finally, the belief that there is no need for values, which might oppress and distress the young.

This is a brave new world indeed. A world without boundaries, providing no guidelines to a whole generation. Without boundaries young people do not know how to play the game of life.

If one can imagine playing a game without rules, then the confusion of young people must be apparent. Indeed, without rules there can be no game, no safety in engagement, nothing to strive for if the goalposts always change, nothing to mark success if there are no milestones to mark the way.

How do you participate in the game if you do not know what team you are on, who is your friend or opponent, what is good or bad behaviour, fair or foul play and how to judge the behaviour of your team mates. The chaos of a game without rules is the legacy of many young people growing up today. It does not serve the adolescent purpose well.

What does serve the adolescent purpose? What does an adolescent need to move successfully into adulthood? The needs are simple and surprisingly the same from one generation to the next. They need to be loved and affirmed. They need respect and regard. They need us to define, interpret and guide. They need someone to know how the game is played and to teach them the rules. Sometimes this includes the word 'no'.

The team coach knows what the team needs, what food and drink are healthy and energising, what rest is required, what fitness, what training. The coach knows that clear, fair rules are essential and the consequences of breaking them need to be discussed in advance. Consequences may constitute

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a time on the sidelines, missing a game or not yet being trusted with the challenge of an away game. The coach knows that unless you spend time with your team you will not know their strengths and weakness or how to help them to maximise the former and tackle the latter. A coach knows where his team are and ensures that they are transported safely to and from events. The team knows that the coach cares because of the degree to which they are minded and guided.

Young people still need minding throughout their adolescence while also needing to grow into safe and graduated independence. The tasks of adolescence are many and how adolescents cope with these tasks depend on factors such as the young person's own disposition, the position of the young person in the family and the dynamics within the family itself. They include the level of contact and support from the extended family, specific life events, medical events and the adolescent's intellectual and social capacities. The school context is crucial and how the young person relates to friends, teachers and the academic process itself is part of making and shaping the adolescent experience.

Sending the Right Message

Additionally, there are the many messages which a society conveys to its young about what is normal, what is acceptable, what is healthy and unhealthy and what is appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. If the societal messages are not age-appropriate and morally supportive they are nonetheless transmitted and absorbed unless that impact is cushioned by parental intervention and interpretation.

Finally, and most importantly, is the parental message itself. This remains the most powerful message. Indeed, many parents do not realise just how pivotal their opinions are in their children's and adolescents' lives. The parental view is the counterbalance to other inappropriate messages when there is a warm relationship between parents and children. The parental view is, or should be, the message that provides the prototype for responsible adult behaviour.

In truth, then, adolescents will behave as well, or as badly, as we do. We cannot suggest that they do not take drugs while ourselves holding a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other. We cannot demand sibling acceptance while we model marital conflict. We cannot speak about truth and morality if they do not observe it in all of our own dealings. We cannot speak about tolerance, if we ourselves hold prejudices. By the age of three a child will have begun to acquire the prejudices of its parents and racial prejudice can appear in the behaviour of kindergarten children. This is how powerful parental messages are to the young.

If we are not in control of our own lives we cannot ask adolescents to control their own transitional ones. Most importantly, unless the message we give is a clear one, it is a further confusion at an already uncertain time. If we tell teenagers not to have sex but that if they do so they should be 'careful', then we tell them what? If we tell them 'be safe' and don't know where they are so as to ensure their safety, then what do we convey? If we say 'grow up' and then treat them like children what does that mean? If we do not ourselves know that life can be richer, fuller and more meaningful than material success, how can they find true purpose in their own lives?

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Practical Pointers

If there is one singular complaint that adolescents will voice it is, in paraphrase, that they do not know who they are, what they are meant to do, what they are meant to be and how to achieve it. This awful ambivalence is easily addressed by the following:

Know where the adolescent is, whom they are with and how they are getting home. Collect young adolescents from activities.

Draw clear guidelines for behaviour – write them down if necessary. As an example ‘must not be out after a certain time, must phone if there is any difficulty or change in agreed plans, must not drink alcohol etc’. The interesting thing about boundaries is that once they are drawn, the adolescent then has safe parameters within which to argue with you. This can even be healthy – their task is to achieve independence, loosening parent-child ties is a painful part of the process for everyone. Therefore, if the rule is 10.00p.m. the young person can now argue for 10.15 p.m. They can argue knowing that they are safe, having some reference point.

If the comment is ‘come home when you like’ then the message is that the parent doesn’t care. Regard the mistakes young people make as opportunities for learning for them and for you and if too much freedom has been given with negative consequences, recalibrate the rules in relation to their capacity to be mature.

Let them know what values are important to you and model the benefits of holding those civil or spiritual beliefs.

Screen negative media messages and discuss those they have encountered in an open and friendly way.

Remind the young person that you trust them and believe in them, it is the wider world that makes the restrictions and their protection so necessary.

Ask them to reassure you about their safety in the plans they make. Again, put the emphasis in discussion on your concern for them, not on your distrust of them. Young people have a way of living up or down to our expectations of them.

Catch them out being positive and ignore much of the irrational, slightly hysterical, sometimes offensive, frequently insensitive egocentric behaviour. It is not easy to live in a body that is changing in a world that is changing at a time that is uncertain.

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Convey your love by setting limits.

Remember that the adolescent process is time-limited and give the time the young person needs.

Just as the memories etched in childhood last a lifetime, the guidance provided in adolescence is central to later adult life.

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