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Editor's Notebook: What's a Parent To Do?

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Parenting teenage children is fast becoming the most difficult, stress-filled job of the 90's. As our kids are attacked from all sides by drugs, alcohol, crime, violence, sexual perversity and countless other lesser maladies, parents are increasingly seen with that blank look on their face, a mix of disbelief, second-guessing, fear and despair. What used to be a pleasurable pastime of raising children in a climate akin to the days of Leave It To Beaver has become a difficult and saddening chore with mom and dad uttering the battle cry of the times, “what’s a parent to do?”

My wife and I have so far ( emphasis on so far ) been quite fortunate in raising our teenage daughters. There have been a few shouting matches, a few crying episodes, a few slammed doors and a few stern late night discussions, but nothing approaching the crisis management that so many parents have had to face as their son or daughter slips into illegality, ill health or ill will.

So why the apparent success in the Kryzanek household? Is it luck? Is it in the genes? Is it discipline? Is it religion? Is it love? Why have we been blessed, while other parents have those blank looks? It certainly isn’t because we took a course in parenting, read Dr. Spock twenty years ago or listened to talk radio psychologists late at night. In fact my wife and I really jumped into this parenting business with little preparation and little thought, which upon reflection probably was not a very wise thing to do considering the problems and threats that are out there.

But after twenty years of doing whatever we are doing, there are a few observations about parenting that are beginning to rise to the surface. These little nuggets of wisdom are in no way meant to suggest all-encompassing answers to the ills of today’s youth, or are they presented as the first installment of a new parenting self-help book by the Kryzaneks. The observations, however, do point to what more and more “successful” parents are finding as the keys to getting families through those adolescent years.

1. Parenting by good example remains the rock solid foundation of raising good kids. Mom and dad can preach till they are blue in the face, but if their kids see them engaged in behavior that is contrary to the message being preached, then teens will automatically shut off those listening skills and follow in their parent’s footsteps. Good example may be an ancient and simplistic tool for behavior modification, but it still works.

2. The most injurious parenting phrase of the 80’s and the 90’s is “it’s not the quantity of the time I spend with my children, it’s the quality of the time.” Whoever first uttered those words ought to offer an apology. Parents who bought into that philosophy fooled themselves by thinking they could have it all and still assume the heavy burdens of being a full-time mom and dad. Thankfully, more and more parents are beginning to recognize that spending time with their kids and most of all being there when the kids need them is absolutely essential for their personal and moral development.

3. Effective parenting begins with effective teaching. Too often television, movies, advertising and now online computer services have become the sources for directing the lives of teenagers. Moreover, in this hustle and bustle world we live in, parents are too willing to have the teaching role taken up by the D.A.R.E. officer or the school principal or the parish priest. Teaching is a hard task; it requires time, communication skills, discipline and most of all love, but it remains the best tool in the arsenal of parenting.

Even with these simple suggestions, there is no guarantee of success. Many times young people make foolish decisions or are in the wrong place at the wrong time or take bad advice from friends. In these situations good example, quantity of time and teaching skills have little impact on saving a young boy or girl from crossing the line. But that should not stop parents from recognizing that they do have the ability to guide their teens through the “terrible teens.” It’s a tough and often thankless job, but our future as a civilized society depends upon good parents doing good work.

Michael Kryzanek is Editor of the Bridgewater Review