

The Kids Will Be Alright

A morning bell rings surges through the spirited games and conversations scattered around a schoolyard. Children saddled with bulging backpacks head into class, small Sherpas preparing to scale another day. By mid-afternoon a convoy of minivans is on hand to deliver them to a slew of after-school programs. Snacks are inhaled; rush hour looms.

I live in a comfortable neighbourhood where children are raised in "the soil of easy growth", as Tillie Olsen wrote in her widely anthologized story, *I Stand Here Ironing*. As she moves her iron back and forth an overworked mother takes an inventory of the life experiences that shaped her first-born. As she sifts through all the challenges she faced - lean years, other children - she stands in the shadow of self-doubt. Her anguish is triggered by a phone call from the eldest daughter's teacher, who suggests a meeting is in order because the daughter needs help.

It's the type of phone call many parents would dread, none more so than those who clothe their children in their own insecurities. These parents - well off and well educated - don't wait for a teacher to call. They arrive at the principal's office at the first sign of trouble. A call from a teacher means it's too late, that the storm clouds weren't noticed.

No, we will not miss the signs. We make sure we're on top of things. We will ensure every book report is seamless. We will make enough papier maché to plaster a house. We will chart our kids' progress with spreadsheets if we have to. We will be damned if they fall through any cracks.

How the landscape has changed. When I was growing up in the sixties, our mothers knew little more than our teachers' name; the more involved fathers, if pressed, might have known what grade we were in. By and large, parental involvement was limited to an annual "Meet the Teacher" night. They met, they listened, they sat at our desks and waddled home with sore knees.

Once upon a time, parents knew too little about how their children spent the better part of the day. Who knew of curriculum and standardized tests? If once parents were too detached from the daily rhythms of a child's life many have swung too far the other way, involving themselves in ways that are unhealthy and unhelpful.

It is no longer enough to meet the teacher. Long before we send our children into the classroom we mingle with other parents to dissect teaching methods. This teacher is too strict, too insensitive, too unimaginative. That one's a gem. Over cups of coffee we knit concerns into anxiety.

And our children? Few carry the preconceptions and expectations their parents shoulder. A teacher is presumed innocent until proven otherwise. Inevitably, there's the occasional personality clash between teacher and student, but more often than not our children emerge from a year at the hands of a demonized teacher with no scars. Sometimes, they wear smiles that speak to a relationship within a classroom that a parent can never know.

If we insist on nothing but the best for our children, we subject them to unrealistic expectations. We diminish the complete experiences to which they are entitled. There is value

in learning to negotiate a world where not everyone or everything is to our liking. Yes, there are some mediocre teachers out there. Not to mention some mediocre parents.

Mediocrity has never been a synonym for average. There's much to be gained in teaching our children to strive for excellence but accept their limitations. 'Above-average' can't always be the yardstick by which we gauge our children's development. Too many of us mistake limitations for liabilities. Send in the tutors. Hire a coach. Cancel that sleepover.

In our quest for well-rounded children we risk deforming childhood itself. Armed with chequebooks and day timers, devoted parents trumpet "Stimulation!" as a daily mantra. A glance at some of the schedules children have would leave some CEOs in a cold sweat. There is not an afternoon to spare: piano, ballet, hockey, skating, gymnastics. Moderation is trampled beneath the rush of small feet. Weekends are a whirlwind. Birthday parties are no longer planned but orchestrated. The lazy days of summer have been wedged into a tight succession of specialty camps.

Between all the training and moulding, little time is spared to let children be. It's as if the notion of playing is on the verge of extinction. Not playing with a higher goal - improved motor skills, increased vocabulary - but playing for play's sake, playing in ways where imaginations are not calibrated but celebrated.

On Friday nights my wife and two school-age daughters gather around our dinner table and light candles. We take stock of the week, and invite our children to share a moment that resonated with them, for better or worse. And as surely as we bless the bread we bless our children. The simplicity of the blessing doesn't deflect from the sheen of its truth: "Be who you are, and may you be blessed in all that you are."

Be who you are. No small task from a parent's perspective. We read report cards as if we were the ones being assessed, every "C" a curved dagger in our hearts. We are so close to our children we step on their heels; when they fall they take us with them. The best of intentions can warp a blessing into a curse: Be who we want you to be.

Parents who feel an overriding need to have their say should lend an ear to the beleaguered mother who narrates *I Stand Here Ironing*. "She is so lovely," she says of a daughter who never blossomed at school, in an unspoken conversation with her teacher. "Why did you want me to come in at all? Why were you concerned? She will find her way."

It's a tall order: to suggest but not always prescribe, to reconsider what we believe to be true, to learn as much as we teach. We have much to give our growing daughters and sons - morals, values, insights - but there is a difference between showing a child a path and steering her down it. If only more of us had the confidence, the peace of mind that allows us to point our children in the right direction but not follow them every step of the way. They are bound to stumble. They may scrape their knees. They will find their way.

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