

Are We Really Serving Our Children?

I hadn't seen her for years. Last time I saw her she had two girls the same age as mine, now she has six children. "How do I get my 25 year old daughter to leave home, she lamented?" and going on "You wouldn't believe it, I was going to lunch last week and Grace (the 25 year old) asked if she could have a lift into the city." I said to her, "Well, I can take you to Wharf Street and you can then walk the last two blocks to your meeting, but you need to be ready on time."

"Grace was late getting ready, so now I was late for my lunch and I was getting resentful about driving her into the city in the first place. I was coming close to the corner where I was to drop her off and she said to me, bold as brass, 'We are so close now Mum, couldn't you just take me the last two blocks.'" And did you? I asked. "Yes, what else could I do?"

When do we start to put boundaries around our children and show dignity for ourselves, as a first priority? When do we start to teach them about dealing with the consequences of their behaviour?

A school Principal told me recently of the increased incidence of mothers of teenagers bemoaning the fact that there is too much stress and pressure put upon their children. This may be so in some instances, but instead of encouraging her child to put their efforts into their work, a particular parent complained that her child couldn't cope, that she just couldn't get the assignment in on time and that she needed an exemption from the work.

When the Principal said this was not possible, that the daughter would get the same treatment as the other students in her class, the mother threatened to take her out of the school.

"My concern with all of that," said the Principal "Is that children of these over-protective parents aren't allowing them to learn how to operate in the real world, wanting to protect them from hurt, discomfort and pain".

How else can our children learn about the consequences of their behaviour? What happens if the assignment doesn't get written on time? The child then has to talk to their teacher about that and perhaps negotiate more time or lose marks for not being on time; and then deal with that. They then find out that they don't die of it and they have a chance to find the courage to change their behaviour and draw on brave behaviour within themselves to overcome the problem, to find a compromise or solution. And then they have a chance to move on. If parents are going to protect

them from the consequences of their behaviour all the time, then they are not learning to access the life skills they desperately need.

Wouldn't it be better to teach our young people the skills of caring for themselves rather than telling them through our behaviour what a scary and unfriendly world it is out there? Over protection is not helping them to grow into strong caring adults; we are not better mothers or fathers because we drive them everywhere in the car. A caring adult teaches the skills of self sufficiency and independence. That's the parenting role. Otherwise you will be like Grace's mum with six grown children living at home...may be for life.

'You know the problem with young people today? The parents drive them everywhere.'

Gloria Steinman

If we let go of the need to control and teach our children how to catch public transport, how to cook, how to use the washing machine, how to sew a button and hem a cuff, and how to walk tall and safely into the night. These skills will nurture them through life and do more for their self-esteem than any amount of protection will ever do.

Written by Vicki Bennett for Women's Network Australia Magazine July 2003.