

Some Things I Have Learned from “Kid’s These Days”

I recently went with my wife to her 10 year high school reunion. As with most social gatherings of this sort, it was not something I had been eagerly anticipating. It’s not that I have a problem with social settings per se, it’s just that when I am asked what I do for a living and I tell people I’m a counselor, then I often find myself “on the clock.” Seems everyone has at least one family member or friend who “has had a hard time” or is “having some problems,” and since I’m a counselor they assume that I would like to talk about it. Now don’t get me wrong; I do not mind listening to people talk about their problems, even when I’m off the clock. But sometimes it just gets to be a bit much. I need a break like anyone else. So being at my wife’s reunion had me just a little on guard, wondering if it would be yet another one of those occasions.

Turns out, it was not like that at all. The night largely consisted of good food and good conversation. But the funny thing was that I had been so focused on my usual concern of not getting into one of those “oh, you’re a counselor, let me tell you about my sister” conversations, that I did not see one of the other things I look out for in social settings until after it happened. I am talking about the good old “kids these days” talk. That adult classic, the lamenting discussion of how these days, kids have gone too far and have crossed some sort of line from being kids to being something else entirely. I’m getting old enough where these are becoming more common than my previous nemesis, being caught in a conversation about a person’s personal problems. I have to admit, I’m beginning to prefer the old days, of people simply wanting to talk about themselves!

The thing is, when I’m in a social setting and I find myself talking with someone about their problems, all they usually want is the chance to “think out loud” and get some things off their minds. It’s pretty harmless, even if it is sometimes a little annoying. But when the conversation is about others, people do not just want sympathy - usually, they want agreement. And frankly, when it comes to this issue, I’m rarely able to provide it.

“Kids These Days”

The “kids these days” theme is so familiar it’s downright cliché, yet it never seems to fall out of favor. Apparently the older people get, the worse kids get - at least that is what they tell me as they get older. Of course it’s an optical illusion, but it

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seems to trick so many people I come across. If you ask me, it's time for we adults to get a clue.

Today's kids are not different. The "different" we see around us is to be found in the adults. Or more specifically, in the families and communities we adults are raising our kids in, the technology we have let take over our lives, and the way so many of us have thrown so many traditional values so completely out the window. If you take a closer look at some of these things, you will find what is supposedly missing in our kids. And the ironic thing is, I really began to see these things as clearly as I have mostly by listening to kids themselves, in both word and deed. But before I share their wisdom, let me share what they are up against.

Our Changing World

These days we hear all the time that we are living in a rapidly changing world, especially in modern America. It's not hard to see that this is indeed the case. Technology, family structure, and values are indeed changing right before our eyes. But not all this change is bad; in fact, I'm very excited about many of the changes going on around us. I am old enough to remember what it was like before the internet, mobile phones, computers in virtually every home, widespread cable television, fuel efficient cars, and so on. I also remember growing up in the middle of a lot of racial and cultural tensions, when a mixed-race couple were not only rare, but often found themselves largely rejected by their neighbors - if not overtly, then definitely covertly. Personally, I welcome much of what is changing in our world with open arms. I love my internet-capable, GPS-enabled phone, and I love my multi-racial neighborhood.

But let's not kid ourselves. Some changes are not exactly welcome, or at least they should not be. And some of these changes are indeed impacting our kids. We owe it to ourselves to take a close look.

Take technology, for example. Most of today's kids have never known a world without near-instant access to communication and information. They are in a world saturated with it. And technology makes it so that they are rarely disconnected. While I am as "guilty" as the next person for occasionally texting in the middle of dinner or glancing at my email while stopped at the stoplight, I do know how to unplug. So when I've met people who do not know when to turn the dang computer off, it is scary. And when I've met their kids...goodness, I've nearly cried. The idea that a person does not remember how old they were when they got their first cell phone because they were too young to remember getting it is

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just too much for me to handle. I cannot even begin to list all the reasons why that is just plain not a good way to raise a child.

Or, consider family structure. The divorce rate and the out of wedlock birth rate have both been high enough for long enough that we are now watching an American generation rising up, in their teens and 20's, who for the most part have never seen a world where most people were born and raised in a home where kids came after marriage, and parents who get married largely stayed that way. Marriage has become, simply put, optional. While I realize there are always exceptions to the general rules, and that single parents are not a "problem" on an individual basis, even divorced and single parents realize that if it becomes the norm for kids to be raised in split families or without one half of the parenting dyad, it's not really good for any of us. When the exception turns into the rule, we need to watch out.

And finally, consider our values. There is no doubt they have changed. Some are not terribly concerning and simply represent a change of attitudes and preferences over time that are largely incidental. But some values are, well, valuable and deserve a bit more respect than they have been getting as of late. For example, consider monogamy. It may sound old-fashioned to many people to have but one sex partner at a time. But studies of human behavior in anthropology, sociology, archeology, and so on have shown time and time again that monogamy is a stabilizing force and a state to which humans find themselves naturally drawn. I'm not the morality police and I'm no prude, but denying our very nature and acting as though the human animal is not monogamous by nature is as foolish as saying that eating or breathing are "old fashioned."

Of course, there will always be those who say that change is inevitable, so why try and stop it? Similarly, there will always be those who say that not only is change inevitable, but that it is not truly important. They claim that the only thing holding us back is fear and ignorance; once we get over those, the theory goes, we'll find that it's not a big deal after all.

I agree that we cannot stop certain changes, and that we have to pick our battles. I also agree that some changes seem big and scary at first, but that those proverbial monsters in our closet do indeed usually turn out to be just shadows and our imagination at work. But, that being said, I disagree that we should just "go with the flow" and let change push us helplessly downstream. Some things are worth fighting for. And when it comes to our kids, we need to make sure they are inheriting a world that is at least as nurturing and stable as the one we were raised in.

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A Dose of Reality

Considering that the kids of “today” were not around “yesterday,” I’ve been impressed by how astute they can be at pointing out the problems of today with more honesty than the average parent of today. I think in many ways this is why parents get so annoyed with kids; besides all the natural trouble, drama, and immaturity of youth, the fact is that most kids I know are brutally honest, which can be hard to accept. As such, many adults choose to tear down the messenger instead of trying to deal with the message. And thus we find ourselves, lamenting the way things are, and for some reason we decide it is the fault of “today’s kids.”

Sorry folks, but that’s just bologna. Today’s parents are the ones in need of some serious work, and it is the kids who suffer from our collective refusal to wake up. Consider the following things that have been pointed out to me and then confirmed by research:

- Kids are often thought of as moody, angry, unpredictable, out of control, unnecessary risk-takers, and even violent. But most kids realize this is unfair, and have said to me, “How come when I get upset and yell, it’s time to go to the counselor or buckle down at school, but when they do, it’s “just stress” and nobody tells them they’re broken or doing anything wrong, that in fact they need a break and should take it easy?” And they’re right; from the beginning, it has been the adults of our nation who have been taking far more mood altering drugs (legal and otherwise), have been breaking up families, and have been far and away more violent.
- I have met many hundreds of children who have been abused by their parents, but frankly only a handful of parents whose children were abusive towards them - even when the kids were old and large enough to be physically dominant. But when you walk into a store, do you cringe at the adults, or the teenagers?
- Kids are often thought of as detached and emotionally distant, especially teens. But I have found that far more often than not, it is the parents who bring their children in to me, complaining about how they are so distant...and then when we get down to it, we find that it is the parents who have been ignoring the child and focusing on work or other issues, and when faced with it they come up with excuses to explain why it’s not their fault. I find it absolutely ironic for parents to complain about a kid’s lack of willingness to take personal responsibility for their obligations and trying to avoid accountability, and then they turn around and use every excuse they can conjure up to avoid making their kids the priority they should have been all along.

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- I don't know how many times I have witnessed a parent complaining about their boss, then in the next breathe tell their child they need to "grow up" and "learn to deal with it" when the kid complains about their teachers. They tell the kids "that's the way the real world is, and the sooner you learn it the better." The irony usually eludes them.

Conclusion

The bottom line is that kids are not and never have been "the problem." We are. They have inherited this world from us, and it seems to me we could all use some straightening out before it is too late. Now, I'm sure may of you run your homes very well and have great kids; if so I applaud you. But this is not just about people stepping up as parents to their kids; it is also about all of us seeing all kids for who they really are, and to stop looking at them in such negative terms. They deserve more credit than they have been given, and we could use a dose of humility.

So next time you hear someone lament about "kids these days," I beg you to bring up the issue of what is going on with parents these days. It may be hard to look in the mirror, but if we're going to solve the problem, that's what we all need to do.

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