

The Road Before Them

By Paul Singer, Head of School, Assets School

Parenting today has become more difficult than ever before. American parents have lived in fear for their child's safety since that first picture was printed on a milk carton. As a result, gone are the days when a parent would open the front door and say, "Go outside and play, just be home for dinner." Do you remember that? I do. There were no cell phones for keeping in touch or GPS devices for tracking. Off we went into our neighborhoods, vacant lots, parks, or malls.

We hung out with friends, we fought, we played made-up games and argued over the rules, always working together to come up with creative solutions to move the game forward. We never turned to our parents to solve our problems or to settle our arguments; we negotiated those matters on our own. No adult intervention necessary.

Research suggests that because of the freedom we had growing up, which included the freedom to do some foolish things that necessitated taking responsibility for our actions, we became capable problem solvers and resilient individuals. L. Todd Rose, a faculty member at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and author of the autobiographical book, *Square Peg*, states that resilience "...is not, in fact, an inborn trait, ... but rather the product of a complex system involving a positive feedback loop, in which a child becomes strong, at least in part due to other people's belief in him." When our parents encouraged us to go out and play, they unintentionally let us know that they believed in our ability to be responsible, that we were capable of solving our own problems, and that we were smart enough to know what to do should an unexpected challenge occur. They believed in us, but more importantly, we **knew** that they believed in us.

To quote Bob Dylan, “...the time’s they are a changin’”.

Julie Lythcott-Haims is the former dean of freshmen students for Stanford University. In her book *How to Raise an Adult*, she shares that in the late 1990’s, the first Millennial generation began going off to college and that she and her colleagues noticed a new phenomenon: parents, both virtually and literally, on the college campus. More and more parents were seeking opportunities, making decisions, and problem solving for their sons and daughters. Things that college-aged students once successfully did for themselves.

I remember sleeping overnight in line on my college campus to register for classes. In those days, the best way to get the classes we wanted or needed was to spend the night in line so that we could register first thing in the morning while seats were still available. Under the same circumstances, many of today’s parents would spend the night in line for their college-aged children.

Lythcott-Haims observed that there was a time in America when parents strove to prepare their children for the road before them. Today, more and more parents strive to prepare the road for their children, sometimes going to extremes to make certain that there are no speed bumps or pot holes because of their fear of what may happen should their child encounter any obstacles in their path. In doing so, they are preventing their children from life experiences in which they will have the opportunity to learn and grow. As the great educational philosopher John Dewey stated, “Education is not a preparation for life, education is life itself.” If we deny our children the opportunity to experience life, the good and the not so good, we are denying them a very significant part of their education, which is the wisdom that comes with life experience.

There is no perfect formula for child rearing, but we do know that when it comes to developing capable human beings, we must love our children enough to allow them to fall down, skin their knees, be

disappointed, and yes, experience failure. In doing so, we don't need to lecture or scold them. A simple "I hope you do better next time" is all that is necessary when a child comes home complaining about having to retake Algebra in summer school due to a failed grade.

As a lecturer once said during a presentation I attended, "the process of weaning is never easy, for the wean-e or the wean-or."

But it's necessary for the survival of our children. Developing creative individuals, critical thinkers, problem solvers, and resilient human beings requires allowing our children to experience a certain degree of challenge, frustration, hardship, disappointment, and ultimately failure.

Most children today are far more sophisticated than we were at their stage of life. But few are as mature as we were at the same developmental level. Maturation comes from experience, problem solving, and surviving challenges, disappointments and failures. That's why we often hear of extremely successful entrepreneurs speaking of the challenges they had growing up, or the school challenges they faced as a result of some type of learning difference. They grew and matured as a result of successfully overcoming, and learning from, adversities in their lives.

I've never met a parent who doesn't want the best for their child. As a parent myself, I clearly understand the pain we suffer when we see our child struggle, experience disappointment, or fail. I believe that we'd have happier and more resilient children if we returned to the days of striving to prepare our children for the road ahead instead of preparing the road for our child.