

The Martha's Vineyard Times

At Large : Good luck

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Someone asked the other day whether I thought Bill Jones and Mike Joyce had it right last week, about how parents ought to deal with their risk-oblivious middle schoolers and teenagers. (OpEd, October 29.)

I suppose this young woman asked because she is a new mother and because I have four children and look well broken in. Plus, all four of my kids have survived their teenage years and so have I. I supposed it might qualify one to offer an opinion on how to be a parent. For me, though, having done the work for good or ill, for more than 30 years, I have no opinion.

For sure, it's not rocket science, is it? It's not calculus or algorithms? It's not resolving the Israeli-Palestinian dispute? It's not even like getting Edgartown and Oak Bluffs to see eye to eye on how to divide the bill for the regional high school?

If it were, then conceiving, delivering and raising children would be beyond most of us. It would not be the most widely indulged pastime of humankind. From the bozos among us to the most insightful, everyone gets a chance to procreate and then pay for the fun of it. Even as we were learning to give our knuckles a rest and moving out of the cave, we were having kids and trying to get them to do a lick of work around the campfire - just one useful thing each day.

After procreation and its ensuing delights, the next most popular occupation among humans is driving a car. A week at the wheel with your mother next to you screeching instructions and a couple of months snuggling with your girlfriend in the back of the driver's education class or in the back seat of the driver's ed car, and you're entitled to a driver's license. It was one of my standard encouragements, as the four kids prepared for their license tests. Look, I'd say, people with IQs in the single digits, people who keep company with water buffalo and even worship them, learn to drive. You can do it too.

Messrs Jones and Joyce, co-chairmen of the county health council's Youth Task Force are experienced educators who know teenagers - Vineyard teenagers - better than most of us. They've seen the good, the bad, and the heartbreaking. Writing

sternly and prescriptively last week to Island parents of youngsters on the verge of the fearsome teenage years, they demanded a great deal. It wasn't easy to hear.

"For parents," they wrote, "it is far easier to over talk an issue or to avoid it than it is to confront and impose consequences to behaviors that can lead to death. As difficult as it may be, we ask that if someone suggests that your child may be using alcohol or other drugs, listen to that person and do not dismiss them with, 'No, not my kid. Other kids are doing it, but not my kid.' Seek the truth. We challenge parents and community members to step up and speak out. In recent years the role of parents has become blurred and overshadowed by the need to be a friend to your child. In the case of underage drinking, the parent hat is the only one that can be worn. Do not participate in any illegal activity that puts you or your child at risk. Losing your child, your home, or serving jail time is not worth a few minutes of an alcoholic high you might provide to an underage drinker."

This is daunting stuff, especially in a community where drug and alcohol use by young people, their older brothers and sisters, and their parents is, if not alarmingly acute, then certainly chronic. And many of us regard these behaviors with an unwarranted complacency.

Plus, it's a small place. The house party swarming with beer swilling teenagers, broken up by police late at night, may be reported in the newspaper, with names. It's likely we know, or know of, the child who died in a car wreck, the parent whose driving under the influence arraignment appeared in the Court Report, or the post-grad who pled guilty to possession with intent to distribute. It's all in your face, and pointing fingers is tough.

Will the parents who diminish the importance of stepping up and speaking out, as the Youth Task Force asked, respond constructively to the challenge? Or will they consider it a message intended for others?

I wouldn't put money on a positive response. Especially because good teenage outcomes don't necessarily correlate with what we might regard as best practice parental behavior. And parents know that, and depend on it. I know parents whose children as teenagers smoked pot, drank as they liked, convened parties of friends weekend after weekend, and hooked up with their boyfriends or girlfriends at home on school nights. The kids turned out fine. Other parents, similar M.O., and the outcome is sadly in doubt. Others made sure there was none of that nonsense at their house, and the kids remain a question mark. There are no guarantees, and sometimes luck will rule the results.

It was easier to be a parent or a child 30 or 40 years ago. There were social and civil rules, widely accepted. Parents, for some unfathomable reason, were more certain about each choice they made bringing up the kids. They didn't second guess themselves or misunderstand their roles. For that matter, they didn't think too much

about their roles. Parents just didn't worry about what was the perfect way to be a parent. They did what seemed sensible, and went on with their lives. The neighborhood, the school, the church, the coach saw things much as the parents did, and pitched in. Together, they guided youthful behavior toward acceptance of the settled, governing path, and toward the self-restraint this path demanded and developed. The kids all strayed, of course, but never without knowing it was wrong and worrying about the shame and guilt that would almost certainly attend discovery.

Anyhow, none of this orderliness, this daily indoctrination in the virtues of self-restraint, has survived the 1960s, the one-world-wide web, or the instant everything culture. Parents see themselves as unimpeded entrepreneurs, and their kids do too. Today seems dedicated to breaking the old rules, making up new ones that fit better, parenting outside the box. It's about choices, good and bad, but choices always, made quickly. It's self-absorbed rather than selfless, unrestrained rather than reserved. It's about being counter-intuitive.

And parents, who are supposed to be there to help, often find themselves as bewildered as their children. Despite the earnest efforts of the Youth Task Force, mom and dad find it hard these days to lay their hands on the "parent hat."

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