

The Kid's Are Alright.

I recently received great news from my son Eric and his wife Jessica. They are expecting their firstborn, a daughter, scheduled to arrive in October. I was thrilled when they told me the news. Then, because a parent never stops parenting, I proceeded to explain that their life is going to change. Not a piece of their life, but everything in their life. Of course they can't fully grasp this change until their daughter is born. No first-time parent can.

Eric and Jessica will soon have the job of parenting, the most difficult task in the world to do well. How could I, a parent who never stops parenting, try to explain and prepare them for the challenges ahead?

Perhaps part of the answer is to examine and then mirror the work of the best parents in the world, my parents. They raised five of us in the 1960s and 1970s when the world was, in the words of my grandmother, “going to hell in a handcart.” Let’s step back in time and see what great parenting looked like back then.

As I remember, when I was a kid...

- My mom shooed us out the door on summer mornings with the admonition “don’t come home until the street lights are on.” Until dinnertime in the summer, our parents had no idea where we were, who we were with or what we were doing.
- When we misbehaved we were grounded and assigned hard physical labor. Assigned jobs like trimming the grass on the driveway with a pair of hand scissors, picking rotten peaches out of a neighbor’s yard, or laying sod in the backyard. Particularly heinous behavior could lead to a spanking or a slap across the face.
 - My parents did not question authority figures. Kids were wrong, no matter the evidence. The Catholic nuns who were our teachers, were infallible. My brother Mike, in third grade, was sometimes locked up in a closet with a clothespin clamped on his tongue, by a nun who felt this would help him fix his stutter. I had a nun hit my knuckles with a metal edged ruler because she felt I had a ‘smart mouth’. By the way, I still have the scar on my hand. And the smart mouth. However, Mike’s stutter was cured.
- There was a lot of bullying at school. But, most of the time, it was settled on the playground, between the kids, by fistfights. Parents never asked and were rarely told about the fisticuffs.



- We played in vacant lots and construction sites. Our playgrounds were filled with 'jungle gyms' that seem to be designed to cause injury or death. Amusement parks had no restraints on Ferris wheels or roller coasters. We rode our bikes everywhere, even along interstate highways. My brother Kevin use to hop freight trains to travel across town to see a friend. In the rare case our parents took us somewhere by car, there were no seat belts. Infant car seats had not been invented.



- On summer nights, pesticide trucks roamed neighborhoods spraying billowing clouds of mosquito repellent out the back. We followed behind on our bikes, as close as we could, inhaling the insecticide. Was that wrong?



• I learned to swim when my Dad threw me into the deep end of a swimming pool. He waited in the shallow end until I made it across.

- If we were thirsty during an athletic event we were denied water but given salt pills.
- For refreshment, kids drank water out of a garden hose.
- We played in the sewers. Hell, so did my kids. My boys pretended to be the 'ninja turtles'.



• One of our favorite treats were candy cigarettes. Candy designed to look like cigarettes, that we pretended to smoke to imitate adults, since over 50% of American adults smoked in the 1960s. The cool third grader had a pack of these in his shirt pocket. The really cool eighth grade boy offered them to girls for a kiss.



- My brothers and I played on baseball fields (Berkeley Khoury League Fields) that, as it turned out, had been used as a dump site for toxic waste.



• Starting when we were about 12 years old, my brothers and I sold newspapers at the corner of Airport Road and Faye Avenue in Berkeley, Missouri. This job included standing in the middle of a busy street holding up a paper, then stopping traffic when someone chose to make a purchase. During the winter months, this job also involved building a fire in a trash can on the sidewalk so big that you could see the light from outer space.

• In those days, standard nutrition for my siblings and I were outdated Hostess Twinkies purchased at a thrift store for breakfast, a boiled hot dog for lunch, and Mrs. Paul's fish sticks for dinner. Twelve fish sticks in a box, family of seven. We all had two except for my baby sister, MaryAnn. She didn't get a fish stick, she was little, and the Kraft Mac & Cheese in the blue box was enough.

- We lined up to buy ice cream from unregulated neighborhood trucks, operated by drivers that were not drug tested or background checked. Food safety inspections were not yet a thing. A 'bomb pop' or a small vanilla cone was a nickel. Shakes or Malts were so far out of our price range (probably a quarter) that we could only dream. But still the best ice cream I have ever had.



- My dad regularly cut our hair in the garage with a pair of clippers he had bought that came with haircut instructions. However, on special occasions, I was tasked with taking my three younger brothers on a city bus from where we lived in north St. Louis County, to downtown St. Louis to get a "real" haircut. To accomplish this, I would meet the bus at the corner where we sold papers, then hop the bus with my three younger brothers and pay the fare. 1/2 way to downtown, I would negotiate a transfer to a second bus, just outside a housing project, to finish the trip to Roy's barber shop. When we arrived, Roy the barber (a friend of my Dad's who offered discounted haircuts for kids) would give us Playboy magazines to browse while we waited. I was 14 years old.

That's just some of what parenting looked like when I was a kid. Parenting done well.

However, the point of examining my folk's parenting style is not to denigrate the job my parents did in raising their children. Or to complain that my siblings and I had a dangerous and stressful childhood. Quite the opposite. I think my parents did an amazing job of raising their children. And I wouldn't trade my childhood with anyone. My brothers and sister feel the same way.

It was hard to be a parent in the 60's and 70's. My mom and dad had to raise their children under the imminent threat of nuclear war, the onset of the drug culture, free love, race riots, heavy metal rock, Vietnam, a \$1.25 minimum wage, gas shortages and a host of other things I cannot imagine or remember. They did the best they could with the information and resources they had at the time. Raising good kids was their number one priority and they gave us all of their energy, time and support. Most of all, they trusted their instincts and loved their children.

Guess what? It worked. We all turned out alright.

It is harder to be a parent today. Today, parents are raising their children while dealing with school shootings, cell phones, gangsta rap, tic-tac, internet porn, designer drugs, lack of day care, vaping, cyber bullying, 18 year olds with assault rifles, a staggeringly high teen suicide rate... the list is endless and growing. But the parents I watch today, the parents of my grandkids, are doing an equally amazing job raising children under incredibly difficult conditions. And, as with my parents, they are doing the best they can with the information and resources available. Raising good kids is their number one priority and they give their children all the energy, time and support they have. Most of all, they trust their instincts and love their children.

I'm very confident, their kids will be alright.

So, what challenges will Eric and Jessica encounter as they raise their daughter? I cannot imagine parenting will get any easier. Parenting done well, as mentioned at the outset, was, is, and will continue to be, the toughest job in the world.

My advice?

Perhaps today's new parents shouldn't mirror specific parenting actions from the past, but they should certainly mirror my parent's generation's intent, vision, focus and love.

So use all the information and resources available. Make your children your number one priority. Give them all the energy, time and support you can muster. Then trust your instincts. Instincts that come with the love that a parent has for their child. The type of love that changes lives forever.

I'm betting the kids will be alright.

That's all I'm sayin'

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