

The disintegration of the parent-child bond

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Fragility has become a characteristic of children and teenagers to an extent unknown 25 years ago. That's what I'm seeing in the office today – and what I did not see in the office years ago. But besides my observations and experience as a physician over the past quarter-century, several lines of evidence support my claim. The first and most obvious evidence is the extraordinary rise in the proportion of young people diagnosed and treated today for anxiety and depression.

But that line of evidence doesn't pertain in all cases. In some cases, something inside seems to be missing: some inner strength that we took for granted in young people a few decades back.

One cause of the fragility is a weak parent-child relationship. Many teens would be the first to tell you that they love their parents. But they are not seriously concerned with what their parents think. Or more precisely, some are more concerned about what their peers think than what their parents think. Others are more concerned about their inflated self-concept than about what their parents think. Kids need to value their parents' opinion as their first scale of value, at least throughout childhood and adolescence.

If parents don't come first, then kids become fragile. Here's why. A good parent-child relationship is robust and unconditional. My daughter might shout at me, "I hate you!" But she would know that her outburst is not going to change our relationship. My wife and I might choose to suspend some of her privileges for a week if she were to have such an outburst, but she would know that we both still love her. That won't change, and she knows it.

Peer relations, by contrast, are fragile by nature. Emily and Melissa may be best friends, but both of them know that one wrong word might fracture the relationship beyond repair. That's one reason why Emily is so frantic about checking her text messages every five minutes. If Melissa sends a text and Emily does not promptly respond, Emily is afraid that Melissa may misinterpret her silence as indicating a lack of enthusiasm. In peer relations, everything is conditional and contingent.

Young people don't want to look incompetent in the eyes of their peers, not for a week, not even for a single day. So many will not risk a humbling experience.

Children and teenagers need unconditional love and acceptance today no less than they did 30 or 50

years ago. But they cannot get unconditional love and acceptance from their peers or from a report card. That's one reason why there has been an explosion in the prevalence of anxiety and depression.

Many parents accept this situation as an inevitable consequence of 21st-century life. But they are mistaken. This phenomenon – of kids valuing their relationships with same-age peers, or their sports, or their academics, or their after-school activities, above their relationships with parents – is far more prevalent in North America than elsewhere. Most kids in Ecuador, Argentina and Scotland still look forward to spending free time with parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles. As one Scotsman told me, “We don't even think much about ‘generations.’ We just all enjoy doing things together.”

American novelist Reif Larsen recently moved with his family to Scotland. In contemporary Scottish society, Larsen observes, “family always comes first.” By comparison, he is struck by the failure of contemporary American culture “to acknowledge that children actually exist.” This difference is manifest not only in how kids and adults spend their free time, but also in:

an infrastructural commitment to children in public places. At the Edinburgh airport, you can find three large soft-play areas in the terminals, ample high chairs and dedicated lines for families. You can preorder baby milk, which will be delivered to you at your departure gate. There's even an entire cushy room devoted solely to nursing mothers.... Compare this with our experience in the United States. In the Newark airport, there is no such room. After much searching, we discovered there was approximately one high chair for all of Terminal C. We had to drag it across the airport like a family of transient Bedouins.

All of us, as parents, need to establish the primacy of the parent-child relationship over peer-to-peer relationships, over academics and over other activities.

Canadian psychologist Gordon Neufeld has observed the disintegration of the parent-child bond over the past 20 years. His main idea is that many of the problems we see with North American kids today – the defiance, the disrespect, the disconnection from the real world – can be traced to the lack of a strong attachment between parents and their kids. Or more precisely, to the fact that kids now form their primary attachment with same-age peers rather than with parents. As Neufeld writes, “The waning of adult authority is directly related to the weakening of attachments with adults and their displacement by peer attachments.”

Consider an acorn. Its strong shell prevents it from growing until the time is right. If you break open the shell too early, you don't stimulate the growth of a new tree. You just have a dead acorn. As with the acorn, the key to healthy child development is to do the right thing at the right time. Neufeld makes a strong case that the wrong attachment style in childhood and adolescence results in the wrong attachment style in early adulthood. Throughout childhood and adolescence, the primary attachment of a child should be to the parent. If a child has a strong primary attachment to a parent from infancy through adolescence, then when the child becomes an adult, that bond will break naturally, as an acorn breaks open naturally at the right time so that a new tree can grow. Such a child, once she becomes an adult, is ready to head out confidently into the world as an independent

young adult.

But increasingly, Neufeld and others have found, young people across North America just are not ready to step into the adult world. The same girl who refused to talk with her mom at 13 years of age is now texting her mom five times a day at age 22, asking for basic guidance about adolescent concerns. The acorn, having broken open too early, does not have the strength to become a tree.

Parents have to regain the central place in the lives of their children, displacing same-age peers. Same-age friends are great for your child. But your child's first allegiance must be to you, not to her best friend. The contemporary culture of texting, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and online video games has concealed this fundamental reality, promoting and accelerating the premature transfer of allegiance to same-age peers.

Excerpted from The Collapse of Parenting: How We Hurt Our Kids When We Treat Them Like Grown-ups by Leonard Sax. Available from Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group. Copyright © 2015.

How to strengthen the bond with your child

In all your arrangements for your child, try to make connecting with adults a higher priority than connecting with your child's same-age peers or academics or after-school activities. Prioritize your extended family and your close adult friends in the life of your child.

- One simple strategy is to schedule vacations just for the family. When your daughter asks whether she can bring her best friend along, the answer must be no. If the best friend comes along, then a significant portion of time on the vacation will go to your daughter bonding with her best friend. The main purpose of the family vacation should be to strengthen the bonds between parent and child, not to give the kids an expensive playdate.
- When you are planning a vacation, look for opportunities for your child to connect with her aunts, uncles and grandparents. You want to give your child a different perspective. You want to connect her to your culture.
- Even simpler is to create rituals, such as a weekly parent-child visit to a local coffee shop. Taking a walk together to the coffee shop, if it is within walking distance, provides a good opportunity to talk and listen to whatever your daughter or son might have to say.
- The family supper, the family trip to the movies and even a ride in the car all provide opportunities to strengthen these bonds.
- If you have the opportunity to move closer to your child's aunts, uncles and grandparents, do it. (We did.)

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