



March Newsletter: February Columns

Remove the Smart Phone, Regain the Child

As regular readers of this column already know, I am completely, one hundred percent opposed to children, including teenagers still living at home, being in possession of smart phones. No parent has ever been able to give me a logical reason why a minor should enjoy such a privilege, if enjoy is even the proper word.

The most common rationale given is "I want my child to be able to get in touch with me and vice versa." If that is your best defense, purchase a basic cell phone from a box store and give it to your child on selective occasions. I'm referring to the sort of cell phone you possessed, as an adult, ten years ago; to wit, one that will not connect to the Internet, does not have a built-in camera, and is not text-friendly.

The evidence is mounting that for whatever reasons most likely having to do with brain development during said years, smart phones are literally addictive to children and teenagers. Adults are able to keep their smart phones in their pockets unless some necessity arises. Human beings who are not yet adults seem unable, by and large, to do so. The exception to the child/teen whose attention is disproportionately captured by a smart phone's screen is rare.

"But John, that is how teenagers communicate with one another" is a common parental defense to which I respond, "Yes, and that is why their face-to-face communication skills are generally poor to awful." Their eye contact is notoriously bad and when, in a face-to-face encounter, they begin feeling uncomfortable (which is often), what do they do? Right! They pull out their smart phone and begin looking at it while you are talking to them! I conclude that these devices interfere with the development of proper social skills. There is a reason why employers are increasingly identifying the social and conversational skills of job applicants as more important than college grades.

I recently spent some time with two parents and their teenage child who had a habit of taking out his cell phone and looking at it while conversation was taking place. His parents told him to put the cell phone away at least five times in fifteen minutes. They were obviously exasperated. They are intelligent people but living proof that common sense and intelligence do not go hand-in-hand.

On the positive side, I've recently spoken with a handful of parents who have taken their kids' smart phones away for good. They have all testified to the sort of reaction typical of withdrawal from an addiction: tantrums, even rages, mood swings, and near-manic obsession. It takes two weeks, at least, for the addiction to run its course at which time, according to said parents, their children's moods greatly improve ("He's actually begun to seem like a happy kid again!"), they begin engaging in family conversation and family activities, demonstrate renewed sensitivity to other people's feelings, and seem generally more relaxed. As yet, no parent has reported a downside.

One teenage boy eventually thanked his parents, telling them he felt a whole lot better without a smart phone. Yes, a normal childhood is a wonderful thing. Every child's right, in fact.

Where's our common sense these days?

Success Is a Matter of Character, Not Grades

There must be some relationship between aging and the "You've got to be kidding me!" response, if I am any indication, that is. What was once occasional has become almost daily.

My latest "YGTBKM!" was in response to a Wall Street Journal article ("New Instructions at High Schools: Take a Nap," February 9, 2017) on high school nap clubs. Yep, high schools are now providing safe spaces where sleep-deprived teens whose milquetoast parents will not insist that they turn off their connections, turn out their lights, and turn in to bed at a decent hour can take a 20- to 30- minute nap during school hours.

The high school nap club, proponents say, helps teens deal with the pressures of getting into college. Allow me to put this into proper perspective. First, the "right" college, whatever that is, does not guarantee success, however that is measured. Not for the student, that is. Parents and high school administrators want students to get into the "right" colleges so that they can brag. A kid who gets into a "right" college is a trophy for both groups.

I was admitted to both Yale and Western Illinois University. I decided to attend the latter because a good number of my friends were going to Western and none were going to Yale. My parents, both PhDs, had not helped me fill out college admission forms and only shook their heads in dismay when I informed them of my decision. Western was not the "right" college then, nor is it now (U.S. News and World Report Rank of 49 among Regional Universities in the Midwest). Nonetheless, it was good enough and I managed to parlay my WIU education into a reasonably good standard of living.

My daughter attended a "right" college. She later reported that to make good grades in her major subject all she had to do was participate in professor-led class exercises in bashing politically-incorrect things that her parents stand for. The quality of her work counted less than the correctness of her positions on a diversity of social issues. So much for the "right" college. I received a far better education.

Second, success is a matter of character, not grades, scholarships, IQ, or the "right" college. It is a matter of perseverance, a proper work ethic, personal responsibility, and respect for others—all of which are in short supply among today's youth. It's not their fault, by the way. It's the fault of parents who abdicate their authority because they are afraid that if they draw lines their kids don't like, said kids won't like them (can't have that). And it's the fault of school administrators who think the solution to teen sleep deprivation is a nap club featuring \$13,000 napping pods purchased with monies contributed by hard-working taxpayers.

Not all teens are sleep-deprived, by the way. I occasionally run into parents who report that their teens do not have smart phones, tablets, video games, or computers in their rooms. The parents in question tell of respectful, responsible teens who voluntarily turn their lights out and go to sleep by ten o'clock. Or, if need be, said parents tell their kids to turn out their lights and go to sleep no later than ten o'clock and their kids obey. These parents love their children but do not give a hoot whether their children like them on any given day or not. Such is the stuff of parental leadership, also in short supply these days.

Some of these kids will get into "right" college, others won't. Some may not even go to college (Have you heard? It's not an essential prerequisite to success either!). In any case, they will have learned, as children, the value of a good night's sleep.

Adopted Son Wants to Live With Biological Mother

Q: Our 14-year-old son, who was adopted by open adoption, now wants to go live with his birth-mother. She was completely out of the picture until a couple of years ago when she suddenly showed up, telling us that she'd completely changed her life and wanted to re-establish contact with "her" son. At first, it was just phone calls. Then she asked for daytime visits, then overnights. Then he wanted to go on vacation with her last summer. In the meantime, he's become more and more difficult to live with - moody and disrespectful, mostly, and his grades have taken a nose dive. He's told us he doesn't want to live with us anymore. I think he believes there will be no rules with her and he'll be able to eat ice cream all day long, figuratively speaking. What should we do?

A: Unfortunately, I've heard variations on this same story many, many times. It's why I've been opposed to open adoptions from the beginning. This is an example of how this seemingly "fair" arrangement can turn into a nightmare for adoptive parents when the child enters adolescence and begins agitating for contact with the birth mom. It's also a major reason why so many American parents, instead of adopting American children and risk having to deal with courts and social services agencies that have seemingly low regard for their emotional investment, go outside the country to adopt.

Today's young teens, male and female, seem highly attracted to any opportunity to produce and take part in social drama. This is fueled, in large part, by the fact that what I call "psychological parenting" - the expert-driven parenting paradigm America embraced in the late 1960s - fails miserably at teaching children to put their emotions under the control of rational thinking. Emotional control is incompatible with children having a supposed right to express their feelings freely, one of the most powerful of the post-1960s parenting memes. Public schools that no longer teach critical thinking skills don't help the situation.

In danger of being forgotten is that American teenagers were once generally respectful, trustworthy, rational, hard-working, and the like. What was not so long ago the norm has become the exception to the teen whose feelings rule. The upshot of this is a dramatic rise in teen mental health problems since the 1960s. Some researchers estimate that today's children, compared with 1960s kids, are ten times more likely to experience a major emotional setback by age 16.

Put this all together with open adoption and you have a potential "I want to go live with my birth mother because she really understands me" soap opera when the adopted child hits adolescence. The fact is,

your son doesn't know what is best for him. His birth mother doesn't know what's best for him, either. If she did, she wouldn't be engineering this from behind the curtain. Of the players, only the two of you truly know him and have his best interests in mind.

The further tragedy is that judges sometimes treat these situations as they would treat a custody dispute following divorce. Furthermore, the agreements you signed at the time of adoption put you in a legal bind here. Therefore, the best thing for you to do is get yourselves a family attorney who has had a good amount of experience in such matters.

In the meantime, continue to love your son, understanding that he's captive to his feelings. That's not a good thing at any age for the person in question or anyone around him.

Obedience: It's All in How You Ask for It

I've said it many times, but it bears repeating: A child's natural response to the proper presentation of authority is obedience; as in, the first time the child is told to do something, he does it.

Furthermore, research finds what common sense intuits: Obedient kids are happy kids. Therefore, whereas an obedient child is certainly a blessing to a parent, the greatest benefit of obedience accrues to the child.

Getting a child to obey is a matter of six features of parent communication that I call The Formula:

1. Speak from an upright position. I know what some other "experts" say. They are wrong.
2. Use as few words as possible to convey the instruction.
3. Precede the instruction with an authoritative phrase such as "I want you to...", "It's time for you to..." or "I expect you to..."
4. Do not explain why you are giving the instruction. That results in the question, "Why?"
5. Answer "Why?" with "Because I said so." Yes, and again, I know what some other "experts" say. They are wrong.
6. If possible, walk away. Do not stand there, giving the child someone to push back against.

In September of 2016, a couple in Richmond, VA, heard me describe The Formula. Their 3-year-old has been obedient ever since. Mind you, prior to the fateful speaking engagement in question, said child ignored, complained, cried, and otherwise refused to obey

instructions from her parents. The child's oppositional defiant disorder was cured in one day.

A couple who attended a small-group retreat in Atlanta in February of 2017 began using The Formula with their 4-year-old. The first day, the little fellow cleaned up his toys by himself, dressed himself, and when straightforwardly told to stop interrupting conversation between his parents, stopped and stayed quiet. In all three cases, firsts. When his mutually-dreaded naptime came, his parents used the formula and he took his nap without a fight (prior to this, there had always been a naptime scene). He also had a habit of following his mother around the house. She told him to stop and leave the room. He left the room.

The parents, amazed with how much progress they had made in such a short time, applied a similar recommendation of mine to their son's refusal to eat vegetables. At dinner, they gave him one green bean cut into pieces, one-half teaspoon of fried chicken, and one-half teaspoon of mashed potatoes and gravy. They informed him that when he ate everything, he could have seconds of anything. He ate everything. Over subsequent nights they increased the veggie but not the meat or starch. A week later, he is eating a regular helping of broccoli without complaint. In addition, his teacher reports that he is now eating veggies at school.

The proper discipline of a child is a matter of presentation, folks. It is not a matter of using correct consequences, although there will still be times when they are necessary. The formula described above keeps the use of consequences to a minimum, meaning everyone is happier.

Your great-grandmother could have told you this. Despite what people in my profession have been saying for fifty years, there is nothing new under the sun concerning children.

John Rosemond
The Leadership Parenting Institute
New Bern, NC
www.rosemond.com

Do you agree that there is nothing new under the sun when it comes to parenting?

John Rosemond, 420 Craven Street, New Bern, NC 28560