

## The Eight Commandments of Parenting

*The following article was originally printed in the Miami Herald. It is reprinted here as a guide for all parents, struggling or otherwise. Regardless of how sweet or sassy your kids are, you will get something out of this article. - Dr. Bassett*

### THE EIGHT COMMANDMENTS OF PARENTING

Miami Herald, The (FL)

January 25, 1998

Author: JOHN DORSCHNER, Tropic Staff Writer

It's a classic supermarket scene: The kid is tugging on the parent's leg, begging for that sugar-laden treat, and the adult is scanning the shelves for cereal. The begging escalates to whimpering, then crying, then erupts in a wide-mouthed, from-the-bottom-of-the-gut scream. " BUT I WANT IT!"

Here is the quintessential test of parenthood in the consumer society.

Some parents ask themselves: Why deprive the kid? It's just a cheap treat to keep him happy -- and quiet. Boomer gratification.

Still, many parents know they should answer no. It's junk food. A child shouldn't be rewarded for whining. But . . . but the kid keeps it up. Maybe even rolling on the floor in Aisle 7, between the crackers and cookies, pounding her fists on the floor and thrashing her legs.

What to do? To resist isn't now a matter of money. Now, the cost is fortitude . . . and time. At this moment, a lot of American parents surrender.

"I don't have the time," an exasperated working mother in North Dade puts it. "I'm in the Winn-Dixie, and she wants this \$1.09 thing. Either you can get it for her, or you can have a big scene, and maybe you'll have to take her home and then finish the shopping later. And I can't do that. So what do you do? You buy the thing."

A trivial indulgence? Maybe. But there is a darker view: Expedient parenting decisions like these, which get made millions of times every day, could be the beginning of the end of civilization as we have known it.

### APOCALYPSE NOW

The experts say it. The statistics say it. Even most parents admit it: We're doing a lousy job raising kids these days.

"We're doing something that's extraordinary in the history of modern times," says Urie Bronfenbrenner, a Cornell professor who was a founder of the Great Society's Head Start project. He thinks the situation is so severe that he entitled an article about it *The Apocalypse Is Now*.

In his recent book, *The State of Americans*, Bronfenbrenner produced pages of charts showing evidence of a drastic, continuing decline among America's young.

"The process of making human beings human is breaking down in American society," he wrote. "The signs of this breakdown are seen in the growing rates of alienation, apathy, rebellion, delinquency and violence we have observed in youth in this nation in recent decades."

And the problem is not confined to an impoverished, dysfunctional underclass. The negative statistics show up across the socioeconomic spectrum. "The youth crisis that we face in our society is a general one," writes Brown University Professor William Damon in *Greater Expectations*. "It is not confined to a particular class, ethnic group, gender or any other social grouping. The mistaken beliefs that guide our child-rearing practices are as prevalent in affluent communities as they are in poor neighborhoods."

Bronfenbrenner cites a survey that shows that two-in-three high-school and college students confessed to cheating on tests (compared to one-in-three in 1969). Another poll showed that more than 40 percent of all

high-school seniors saw no moral problem with having a child out of wedlock because the act involved only "doing their own thing" and "not affecting anyone else."

The rest of us are clearly disgusted with such attitudes. A Public Agenda survey of 2,000 adults showed that two-thirds thought teenagers were "rude," "irresponsible," "wild," "lacking discipline" and "spoiled." Half thought these failings applied even to children age 5 to 12, the range when kids used to be considered "adorable."

These attitudes weren't coming only from the grumpy elderly or the childless who view kids from afar. Those closest to kids, the survey shows, are among the most negative. Half say they're convinced they know what the problem is: parents fail to do a good job instilling discipline. Meanwhile, many kids don't feel good about themselves. Dr. Jon Shaw, head of children and adolescent psychiatry at the University of Miami, says many therapists report increased depression among youths. The rate of adolescent suicide has quadrupled since 1950, and a 1993 survey found that 20 percent of high-school students had contemplated suicide -- a rate that had doubled in just three years.

Youth know who to blame, too. A survey of students by the Horatio Alger Association showed that they think the top problem facing America today is the decline of family and moral values. (In the '80s, it was fear of nuclear war, in the '70s overpopulation and environmental concerns.)

What's gone wrong? "The most fundamental problem," says Laurence Steinberg, a Temple psychologist and author of several books on child-raising, "is parents' lack of involvement in their kids' lives."

Part of it, says Steinberg, is the cult of what he calls "ideological permissiveness," a concept going back to the '60s that says it's better to be your child's friend than his dictator. Part of it is "neglectful permissiveness" -- "I just don't have time to deal with this now."

Steinberg blames "self-absorbed" Baby Boomers and the "liberalization of values," but he adds that many parents have less time for parenting because, in 60 percent of two-parent households, both parents are working, and in an ever-growing number of homes, there is only one parent to take care of a kid's needs. (See *The Plight of Ms. X*, Page 10.)

Gary Stroope, a pastor at University Baptist in Coral Gables who frequently counsels youths and parents: "I've never seen a generation so parentless." Parents may love their kids, but they're busy with work, with their own activities.

"They're never there for the kids, with their hearts . . . The kids are angry. They're angry because they don't have their parents' attention."

Stroope adds: "Miami people tend to blame it on Miami," because our crime and big-city ambience offers a lot of opportunities for kids to go astray, "but it's exactly the same everywhere." Last summer, Stroope attended a youth camp in Texas attended by 300 teenagers. He heard the same gripes he hears in Miami.

## **VITAMIN N**

It's one thing to agree there is a problem. Another to know what to do about it.

In fact, many of the experts sounding the alarm say that one of the reasons we are in this mess is that we listened too enthusiastically to experts of an earlier generation who advocated a "child-centered" approach. This well-meaning movement was a response to a world in which child neglect and abuse were often ignored. But now, warns Damon at Brown University, the movement has gone to extremes. "We are living in a time when the 'child-centered' ethic has become a justification for every sort of overindulgent child-rearing practice."

Some leading authorities still advocate fairly permissive styles of child-raising, and one of the leading international experts writes in her latest edition that she hopes parents never even have to think of the word discipline (see *The Debate*, Page 16). But a growing number of experts, both academics and hands-on therapists, are advocating a new approach to child-raising that emphasizes both sensitivity and stricture.

Wade Horn, a psychologist who is writing a *Better Homes and Gardens Guide for New Fathers*: "Parents have an obligation to understand their child's needs and feelings, treat the child's interests and problems as

meaningful, and show genuine concern. At the same time, they set well-defined limits. They hold their child to high standards, establish clear rules for behavior, and enforce these strictly and consistently."

One of the loudest voices for firm parenthood has been John Rosemond, a family psychologist whose child-raising column regularly appears in *The Herald* and many other newspapers. As he once put it: "Children require regular doses of what I call Vitamin N. (Hint: it's the most character-building, two-letter word in the English language.) They need to be denied on a regular basis, sometimes just for the heck of it."

Even among this new wave of experts, of course, differences of opinion and emphasis abound. Still, there is a broad consensus emerging about what parents should do -- and not do -- to raise a confident, responsible and empathetic child.

## **1: BE A PARENT, NOT A FRIEND**

A child needs a leader, not a buddy. Too often these days, a lonely parent -- frequently a harried single parent -- looks to a child as a friend, a companion with whom to share life experiences, almost as a substitute spouse or sibling.

The parent might share intimate accounts of romantic problems with a school-age child, just as one might unburden oneself to a friend. When the parent and child go out to dinner, admonishments such as "eat your vegetables" or "say please and thank you" are unlikely: One doesn't lecture one's companions.

One protective South Dade father was shocked to learn that his 9-year-old daughter, off to a friend's house for an overnight, had ended up in a Coconut Grove bar-restaurant at midnight. The mother, a single parent, had wanted some weekend fun and had taken the girls along to share the experience. "Do you know what a bar can be like at midnight?" the horrified father asked.

Psychologist Wade Horn says the No. 1 lesson he gives parents is: "Stop thinking you're supposed to be your child's friend. You're supposed to be your children's parent. That means sometimes doing what your children don't like. Setting limits, making rules. . . . to make sure this boy or girl grows up into a well-functioning adult." *[Dr. Bassett says, "If your children are always happy, you're doing something wrong."]*

## **2: DISCIPLINE: BE FIRM, CONSISTENT AND EARLY**

Aida Sanchez, a Miami family counselor and mother of two, feels the same frustration most parents know when she's doing things around the house and her 4-year-old throws a screaming, thrashing tantrum to get her attention.

"I feel like hugging him, but I don't. I don't want him to think having a tantrum will mean he has my attention. I say, 'I don't like your behavior right now.' I leave him on the floor crying, for I will not tolerate that. I ignore him completely." But when he calms down, then she'll sit on the floor with him and play.

Of course, a hug will get him to shut up and will smooth the mother's nerves, and for many of us, particularly when the kids are quite young, our temptation is to be forgiving. We figure we can postpone lessons of discipline until the kids are older.

Maricel Cigales, a South Florida psychologist whose Behavior Services Inc. provides parent training for those who are having trouble with their children: "It's just so much easier to do the quick fix."

Instead of teaching the kid to make her bed and going through the foot-dragging and the "I-don't-want-to," it's easier for the parent to do it. The same for making snacks, getting dressed, picking up toys. Put off the chore routines, a lot of us figure, until they're older and it isn't so hard to persuade them to do it or teach them how. And maybe we won't be so tired and pressed then.

"But if you wait till they're older to teach them, then you're going to meet resistance," says Cigales. "You should start when they're born. Parents tend to make exceptions for toddlers, or even older. Then they get to be 10 or 11, and they're brats, and parents try to train them and don't understand why they're being so stubborn. The problem is that for many years, no didn't mean no. No meant maybe, or if you bug me enough, then maybe I'll change my mind."

One of the worst scenarios is when parents are indifferent or permissive for long stretches, then suddenly decide to clamp down hard. Many parents see graphic examples of this in the supermarket: The kid out of control with whining and screaming, the parent ignoring the behavior for a long time, then exploding and smacking the kid with such ferocity that it shocks onlookers.

This lenient-severe scenario has less to do with the child's behavior than it does the parent's. "When parents are under stress, tired or preoccupied," says Steinberg, "they often slip into domination ('Just do it because I say so') or permissiveness ('Do whatever you want'). The result of such flip-flops, of course, is an outraged and confused child.

What is required, the experts say, is consistent authority. That doesn't mean an iron-fisted "do it because I say so." Damon, the promoter of sterner standards in *Greater Expectations*, says discipline "must be rational, and it must make sense to the child."

As soon as a child is old enough to communicate, parents can start giving reasons for behavior: You're going to Sunday school because we want to give you a sense of knowing right-from-wrong. It's not fair to your mom and dad if they have to pick up all your toys. Playing by the street is dangerous.

Explaining is good. Negotiating is a problem. Most experts warn not to give in to the kid who says, "I'll pick up my toys if you take me to get an ice cream cone." To accept that demand puts the child in control, and when it comes down to it, the parent must be in control. Regardless of what it costs the parent.

This is the hard part -- the sacrifices made in the short term to avoid the bad outcomes in the long term. For instance, in the case of a grocery store tantrum, experts suggest that if a child refuses to quiet down after calm, firm demands by the parent, he should be led out of the store by the hand. Leave the cart. End the shopping trip. Bring the kid home for a time-out. It's the kind of experience that can define limits in a way a child will understand and remember.

### **3: SPEND TIME WITH YOUR KIDS**

The busier we get, the more we talk about having "quality time" with our kids.

"I work hard," a South Dade lawyer with small children says. "I need to rack up the billable hours. I like to work out to stay in shape. I like to golf. I could easily fill up 30 hours a day. I'm lucky, because I have an excellent wife and mother who's home full time. And the hours I am home, it's quality. The kids and I will roll around together on the floor."

Is that enough? Laurence Steinberg, a Temple psychologist and co-author of *You and Your Adolescent* : "There's a lot of research on this. In general, kids who spend more time with their parents do better than kids that spend less time. It seems to be very difficult to make up for that lack of time. The idea of quality time has been oversold."

For many folks, adds Steinberg, "quality time" becomes a euphemism for whatever time is left over: "Watching TV side by side doesn't count."

Joseph Allen, a University of Virginia psychologist who did a study of 150 teenagers: "Particularly with adolescents, quality time doesn't work. If a teenager has a problem, they want to talk about it when they're thinking of it. It won't save up until 7:30 when mom or dad gets home. It's not just the dire emergencies. It's the smaller, day-to-day interactions."

And for a lot of us, it's those smaller transactions that are the problem. The North Dade mother mentioned at the beginning of this story, the one who will give her child the \$1.09 Winn-Dixie item rather than deal with a tantrum, adds guiltily : "On the weekends, when I have time, I'm a dynamite parent."

### **4: CONTROL THE ELECTRONICS**

The more time you spend with your kid, the less time the child is spending alone in the culture jungle that our society has become. It used to be that only grumpy curmudgeons complained about the popular entertainment media, but these days, the professionals are looking at it askance as well, particularly because today's children are being bombarded by information -- television, movies, music, radios,

computers -- to a greater extent than any previous generation.

Shaw at the University of Miami says that this electronic bombardment of information has completely altered the way our children are growing up: "The tragedy is that popular culture has superseded the family and the school and even religion in educating our children."

Bronfenbrenner puts it this way: "We haven't invented anything yet that's more effective than a human being for building competence and character in children," but when parents are paying so little attention to their kids that the media take over: "They get the power from the vacuum."

These days, there's a lot of vacuum. Virtually any parent you talk to is shocked by the language and sexual knowledge exhibited by even 10-year-olds. Where's that coming from? The answer might be it was directly from a school chum, but count on this: indirectly it was coming from the media. As one North Dade mother complains, her kindergarten daughter is "almost 6, going on 15."

The most visible examples can be found at the movie theaters. A Coral Gables attorney: "You see this all the time. Go to a 10 p.m. showing of an R-rated movie like Face/Off, and you'll see parents there with 7-year-olds."

Frequently, the R rating isn't so much for sex as it is for violence. Last year's top space opera for the kid audience was Starship Troopers, which was Star Wars meets Mortal Kombat. The movie justly deserved its R rating with hundreds of images of graphic mayhem -- sliced, blood-gushing body parts flying everywhere.

Most often, kids see these images in the comfort of their own homes, thanks to the proliferation of premium pay channels that show all sorts of unexpurgated movies. Even "regular television" has become a cacophony of revelations, with daytime talk shows discussing mothers and daughters sharing the same lovers or the fascinations with varying forms of bondage. Vaginal spray commercials, MTV videos extolling the virtues of "booty," plus 8 p.m. comedies that talk about wedgies, foot fetishes and many other things that would have never been mentioned in the popular media before the '60s.

For most of us, television is an electronic baby sitter or, as anthropologist Margaret Mead once suggested, "the second parent." The busier the parents are, the more television takes over.

An array of surveys have shown that the average American child watches four to five hours of television a day -- compared to a year-round seven-day-a-week average of two hours a day spent in school. According to a University of Oregon survey, before a child reaches elementary school, he will have witnessed 8,000 electronic murders.

The American Medical Association and many pediatricians advise that children not watch more than two hours of television a day -- and then only shows carefully monitored by parents. That is probably the most ignored medical advice in the country.

Sometimes at night, the exhausted parent just wants to flop down in front of the television and watch a show. And she's not about to pass over Basic Instinct on HBO in favor of Barney, even if the kid is curled up on the couch beside her.

"The fine line between the adult and child is disappearing," says Shaw. "All the traditional values of moral authority and adults are undermined." Shaw points to how shows like Father Knows Best of the '50s have vanished. Now we have father figures like Homer Simpson and Al Bundy. "On TV, it's absolutely permissible to undermine the authority of the mother and father, particularly the father."

The leader in warning about the decay of innocence has been Neil Postman, author of *The Disappearance of Childhood*. Unlike print media, he writes, the television image instantly makes information available to any child, regardless of her level of education. "Electric media find it impossible to withhold any secrets. Without secrets, of course, there can be no such thing as childhood. . . . If there is no dark and fugitive mysteries for adults to conceal from children, and then reveal to them as they think necessary, safe and proper, then surely the dividing line between adults and children becomes dangerously thin."

Some parents, trying to wean their kids from television, have been encouraging video and computer games as alternatives. At least, the games are interactive, and the kid isn't just passively sitting on the couch. But these games, too, are pushing the curve. One Miami Shores father was shocked when he found that his 9-year-old's request for a birthday present, Carmageddon, "a simple driving game," turned out to award points

for running over pedestrians.

Warns Shaw: "The value is generally placed on self-interest. Things like Nintendo games feed one's narcissism and provide an unrealistic sense of power."

The answer: Get tough. Enforce those less-TV edicts you keep making. Kick them outside in the year-round sunshine and bar the door if you have to. Maybe you should even cancel your pay channels.

## **5: KNOW WHERE YOUR CHILD IS**

The cops say it happens all the time: Weekday afternoons, the parents at work, three 11-year-olds roaming the neighborhood, daring each other to see who's the toughest. One throws a rock through a neighbor's pool screen. Another takes aim at a window. On the quiet suburban street, no adults are to be seen.

In one of the houses, a lonely pre-teen boy roams the Internet. His parents thought that, rather than have him be a couch potato, giving him his own online account would allow him to learn about the world. And soon, in the quiet of his own room, he's finding the most graphic images of nude women playing with zucchini.

"Unsupervised kids at home is a huge, huge problem," says Larry Steinberg, author of a major book on adolescence. "We're talking about millions of kids. The prime time to experiment with drugs and alcohol and sex is between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m. And the prime place to experiment is the home." What's more, if there is anything more dangerous than having your child in your house alone, it's having your child in your house with another kid, and no adult to supervise.

The good news is that it is not impossible to compensate for parental absence. Steinberg cites studies that show some kids do quite well even in families where the adults are away at work. "Why? We have some pretty good clues. One is that some parents do a good job of monitoring their kids from a distance. Kids who are on their own in unstructured time do worse than kids who have some organized plan of activities."

Conscientious parents, says Steinberg, give their kids "a fairly organized day," even if its from afar, by stringing together a network of after-school programs, family, friends and neighbors who keep an eye out for the children.

Still, the older kids get, the tougher it is to keep track of them. Many parents of teenagers use beepers to stay in touch, but that doesn't always work. Colin Neiburger, a Miami father of a teenager, recalls one night when a bunch of boys dropped by to pick up his son and take him to a party. Several hours later, Colin suddenly heard "little beepers going off like crazy." He went into his son's room and saw a row of beepers that the kids had left behind.

## **6: DON'T PROTECT THEM FROM HARD KNOCKS, OR: DON'T GET CARRIED AWAY WITH 'SELF-ESTEEM'**

Since the '60s, America has been awash in the idea of self-esteem: Kids need to feel good about themselves, and adults are frantic to do anything to re-enforce that notion. The 7-year-old outfielder who spent the entire season picking his nose and staring at the sky as part of a team that went 0-19 marches proudly to the podium to pick up the same kind of three-foot-tall trophy the slugger on the championship team gets.

What's wrong with that? Sociologist William Damon laments in *Greater Expectations* that "just about every parent, teacher, and guidance counselor today is convinced that building self-esteem is the answer to all childhood problems." He complains that his daughter once came home from kindergarten with a card that said simply "I'm terrific." Every kid in class received a similar card.

Like many other experts, Damon now considers self-esteem a "meaningless concept. . . . When we tell children that their first goal should be self-love, we are suggesting to them that they are at the center of the universe."

Damon points to the Spur Posse, a group of middle-class California boys who brutally gang-raped a girl. After their arrests, they defiantly told reporters that they were just normal kids and they still felt good about

themselves. "I'm all right," one said happily. In fact, Damon reports, "boys with conduct disorders -- those who routinely cause trouble -- often score extremely high on many self-esteem measures."

What the experts say is that we need to return to rewarding praise for real achievement. If the nose-picking outfielder never gets a hit, he shouldn't be made to feel like he's a worthless reject, but neither should he be treated like a champion.

Psychologist Wade Horn: "Studies show that real self-esteem comes from achieving something challenging." Of course that means that sometimes a child will be faced with something too challenging, and fail.

"You shouldn't put them in position of doing an impossible task," says Horn, "but if they're never allowed to try, they're not going to learn."

Some parents, if their children are having trouble getting along with a teacher, will get their kids transferred to another class. That could be a mistake, says Dade psychologist Cigales. "Children need social skills. Particularly in dealing with authority figures."

If a girl is given a bunch of expensive skating lessons and then decides after one lesson that they're too much work, if a boy gets an expensive pair of soccer shoes and then decides the game involves too much running, parents might be tempted to give in. But they shouldn't.

Wade Horn: "One of the rules of life is that those who never have to deal with challenges and frustrations are going to have very low frustration tolerances throughout their lives. If you protect them too much, they'll never develop the ability to overcome problems."

## **7: TEACH THEM RIGHT FROM WRONG**

After decades of being absent from most discussions of child-raising, the concept of teaching kids right from wrong is making a comeback.

Recent generations of parents have dreaded branding children as "bad" or evil for doing things all children do. But the experts point out that the focus should be on a child's actions, not her essential nature. A parent can say, "You did a bad thing," without saying, "You're a bad boy." The child can still have a healthy sense of confidence -- "I'm a fine person" -- even when acknowledging that sometimes they make mistakes.

"Today's children, like children throughout the ages," writes Damon, "do best when they grow up within a cultural climate of purpose."

Allen, the Virginia psychologist, urges parents to get their kids "volunteering in their community." Decades ago, kids were naturally expected to help out on the farm or assist aging relatives, and he thinks it's important that kids be equally involved in urban areas. Some leading pregnancy- and dropout-prevention programs are now getting youths active in volunteer services. "It's a way for them to feel important, that they're really doing something that matters, rather than simply talking about delaying gratification."

Many academicians are even suggesting that it's easier to teach a sense of values through religion. Urie Bronfenbrenner, the Head Start founder, points to a survey of high-school seniors, that shows that 69 percent of those who go to church at least once a week report never using drugs, versus 49 percent who go less than weekly.

Many other surveys show similar results, and while sociologists can argue that religious attendance may be an indicator of other factors (more stable home life, stronger parental involvement in child-raising), a growing number of social scientists are now saying that religion should not be ignored.

Damon cites a major developmental psychology study that shows that as children adapt to difficult circumstances, a good outcome usually depends on the absence of things -- drugs, parental conflict and so on. The only positive correlation is with religious training.

## **8: HAVE A GOOD MARRIAGE, OR AT LEAST STAY MARRIED**

The above may seem obvious advice -- or simply impossible to follow. But no discussion of good parenting techniques can ignore it: In recent years a growing body of research is revealing that the quality of the parents' marriage is crucial. "Over and over," says Bronfenbrenner, "we are seeing that the relationship between the parents is one of the most fundamental conditions for the children. If you don't have the harmony and joint commitment, it can make a big difference."

Or as Gary Stroope, the University Baptist youth counselor, puts it: "First basic rule: Healthy marriages produce healthy kids."

A leading researcher in this field, Jay Belsky of Penn State: "Being around two people who are squabbling can be frightening and threatening. Indirectly, the irritation of the arguing parents spills over into the parenting. Sometimes they'll argue about what's best for the children. Sometimes it's 'I'm not getting love and support from my spouse, so I go seeking it from my child.' That's really not healthy. And sometimes the child feels like she should be the peacemaker."

Whatever the quality of the marriage, there is an overwhelming statistical certainty that the single thing any parent can do to give their kids the best shot at growing up healthy is to stay married. Nothing else even comes close, say the experts.

In every way that can be used to examine how children turn out, kids living with their biological mother and father come out best. Children growing up with only one biological parent in the house are twice as likely to drop out of high school and 2.5 times as likely to become teenage mothers. They're less likely to make the honor roll, less likely to finish college. They're more likely to become juvenile delinquents. When they reach adulthood, they're less likely to establish a stable, intimate relationship. Plus, they feel less secure about themselves and less positive about the future than do children of two-parent families.

Virtually all child-raising experts view the decline of two-parent families as a crucial link in the ills that are seen in today's youth. Almost a third of all children today are being born out of wedlock, and the vast majority of these kids will be growing up without two parents. For kids born in the past decade, more than 50 percent will not be living with both parents at some point before they're 17. Many children of divorced parents turn out all right, but in the aggregate, divorce is having a devastating impact on American society. Every piece of previous advice in this story -- particularly spending time with your kids, supervising what they watch on television, monitoring their whereabouts, taking time to enforce consistent discipline -- becomes much harder when there is only one adult in the household.

What's more, divorce takes an immeasurable emotional toll. Stroope at University Baptist: "If a married parent is up to 11 o'clock helping a child with a science-fair project, she thinks, 'Boy, that was a lot of work.' But a single parent does that and thinks, 'That blankety-blank so-and-so left me with all this responsibility.' There's an anger and a frustration level that has to seep into the child's thinking."

Just as bad, divorced parents often feel they must compete for a child's affection, and that gives the child a lot of power. "The worst thing," says Stroope, "is to let the kid in the driver's seat in the family."

Still, no expert is proposing that adults stay married regardless of how awful the situation is. "I'm not saying that at all costs people should stay married," says Wade Horn, who heads the National Fatherhood Initiative. "Still, most people don't divorce because of domestic violence or sexual abuse--but 'the thrill is gone,' 'I found someone else,' 'I'm not feeling fulfilled.' The question is what's the optimum environment to raise a child, and it's very clear statistically that the answer is two parents married to each other and committed together to the welfare of their children."

Though the experts usually talk of "single-parent" households, that's often a euphemism for "single-mother households." In American society, it's usually the father who has dropped out. In *Life Without Father*, David Popenoe, a Rutgers sociologist, cites a study showing that "52 percent of all adolescents age 12 to 16 who were living with separated, divorced or remarried mothers had not seen their fathers at all in more than a year."

In the past few years, social scientists have been spending a huge amount of time examining the roles of biological fathers. Most revealing is the work of Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur. In a study of 1,000 families, they found that children living with biological fathers had the least delinquency, while those living with stepfathers had the most behavioral problems. Single-parent children fell in between.

To Horn, author of the upcoming book for fathers, those findings are not surprising. "They're quite interesting

because step-families have incomes quite a bit more than single-parent families. So the first thing we can say, 'It's just not about money, stupid.'

"The thing is that there are all sorts of emotional issues with step-families. The vast majority of children of divorce harbor a fantasy that their parents will reconcile, and with a stepfather you're taking away that fantasy. This becomes a difficult psychological ground for the child to negotiate. The stepfather says, 'Call me dad.' Well, the child has a dad already. Usually, the new step-parent is kind of a nice guy until the wedding ceremony, and then suddenly he becomes a disciplinarian. One study shows that it takes a rough four to six years for a step-family to settle in to a reasonable degree of adjustment."

Horn's advice to stepdads: Move in gently.

But to biological fathers, he adds this, which could serve as advice to mothers as well: If your marriage gets rocky, hang tough, for the sake of your kids.

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