

# Kids? What's Wrong With Parents Today?

By Bob Welch

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If you're a regular Register-Guard reader, you've probably seen Dr. Todd Huffman's letters to the editor or op-ed pieces.

He's a younger, noncardigan Mr. Rogers, a man with a heart for kids, a hatred of war and a lot of something that's vanishing from the new frontier of parenting: common sense.

Which is why, after a column I did on the gone-crazy escalation of kids' birthday parties, I wasn't surprised to hear from him. Wanting to learn more, I sat down with the pediatrician at his McKenzie Pediatrics office in Springfield to discuss the changing landscape of parenting.

"It used to be you raised your children to prepare those children to be adults," says Huffman, a father of 11- and 9-year-old girls. "Now, the goal seems to be to be your child's buddy and provide things for that child to do."

Sure, he says, there's a time when a child needs a parent to be a friend. But too many parents have no other tool in their bag.

"This leaves children effectually as balloons floating anchorless against the storms of life, effectually parentless during those many times throughout childhood when firm guidance and a firm grip is needed."

Lots of children today are proficient in academics, sports, and the arts, but are offered little time or encouragement to use their imaginations, he says.

That vacuum is filled by the imaginations of camp directors, TV screen writers and video game creators.

"The bottom line is that parents today are not so much letting their children watch television but asking television to watch their children.

"Children today are wired but disconnected. Trust in others is built by having shared experiences, and as our screen time increases, our trust in others *decreases*."

Huffman is no generation-batterer. Anyone who knows him realizes his bottom line is inspiring parents to help bring up healthy children.

But at 40, he's old enough to have perspective on past generations and young enough to understand new ones.

The World War II generation, he says, leaned toward the authoritarian side in terms of parenting. But they were strong when it came to discipline and teaching children respect, which is becoming an endangered social species.

"Sometimes, (a parent's) cell-phone will go off three or four times right here in the office," he says. "I'd like to hang a sign like the one you see on bumpers, only: 'Hang Up and Parent.'"

The WWII era parents drew on their parents' experiences and those of their extended families. Increased mobility and technology, Huffman says, have changed that.

"Parents today are turning more to morning news shows, daytime television talk shows, and to the Internet for parenting and medical advice."

And that's wrong?

"Like silver or fine china, parenting wisdom is best gained passed on generation to generation, and when sought instead from magazines and cable television, the product is usually a cheap knockoff."

In his perfect world, the Internet would have a divine editor who is well-schooled in children.

"Just because something is posted on the Internet doesn't mean that it's true, or the full story," he says.

Huffman applauds the new generation of parents for its adaptability. And he points out that today's economic stresses offer challenges that many post-Depression parents haven't had to face.

But, interestingly, here's what he's found about high-income, on-the-go families whose kids are scheduled to the max, whose subconscious mantra is "keep up with the Joneses," and whose parent-kid time is miniscule.

"They're not happy," he says. "Parents who keep things simplest are more apt to have a happy family. My low-income families are happier than the others."

Such thinking flies in the face of everything our stress-for-success culture seems to be telling us.

Maybe that's the very reason we should take it so seriously.