

Do Kids Have Too Much Power? Parents agree that children today are spoiled. But a rising number are fighting the tendency to indulge and coddle them

By NANCY GIBBS Monday, Aug. 06, 2001

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Here is a parenting parable for our age. Carla Wagner, 17, of Coral Gables, Fla., spent the afternoon drinking the tequila she charged on her American Express Gold Card before speeding off in her high-performance Audi A4. She was dialing her cell phone when she ran over Helen Marie Witty, a 16-year-old honor student who was out Rollerblading. Charged with drunken driving and manslaughter, Carla was given a trial date - at which point her parents asked the judge whether it would be O.K. if Carla went ahead and spent the summer in Paris, as she usually does.

That settled it, as far as Mark Marion and Diane Sanchez, also of Coral Gables, were concerned. Their daughter Ariana, then 17, knew Carla, who was described in the local papers as the "poster child for spoiled teens." Ariana too had wanted a sports car for her 16th birthday, not an unreasonable expectation for a girl with a \$2,000 Cartier watch whose bedroom had just had a \$10,000 makeover. But Ariana's parents had already reached that moment that parents reach, when they wage a little war on themselves and their values and their neighbors and emerge with a new resolve.

Maybe Ariana would just have to wait for a car, they decided, wait until she had finished school and earned good grades and done volunteer work at the hospital. "We needed to get off the roller coaster," says Diane, and even her daughter agrees. "For my parents' generation, to even have a car when you were a teenager was a big deal," Ariana says. "Today, if it's not a Mercedes, it's not special." She pauses. "I think," she observes, "we lost the antimaterialistic philosophy they had ... But then, it seems, so did they."

Even their children level the charge at the baby boomers: that members of history's most indulged generation are setting new records when it comes to indulging their kids. The indictment gathered force during the roaring '90s. A Time/CNN poll finds that 80% of people think kids today are more spoiled than kids of 10 or 15 years ago, and two-thirds of parents admit that their kids are spoiled. In New York City it's the Bat Mitzvah where 'N Sync was the band; in Houston it's a catered \$20,000 pink-themed party for 50 seven-year-old girls who all wore mink coats, like their moms. In Morton Grove, Ill., it's grade school teachers handing out candy and yo-yos on Fridays to kids who actually managed to obey the rules that week. Go to the mall or a concert or a restaurant and you can find them in the wild, the kids who have never been told no, whose sense of power and entitlement leaves onlookers breathless, the sand-kicking,

foot-stomping, arm-twisting, wheedling, whining despots whose parents presumably deserve the company of the monsters they, after all, created.

It is so tempting to accept the cartoon version of modern boomer parenting that it is easy to miss the passionate debate underneath it. Leave aside the extremes, the lazy parents who set no bounds and the gifted ones who are naturally wise when it comes to kids. In between you hear the conversation, the unending concern and confusion over where and how to draw the lines. Have we gone too far, given kids more power than they can handle and more stuff than they can possibly need? Should we negotiate with our children or just inform them of the rules? Is \$20 too much for lunch money? What chores should kids have to do, and which are extra credit? Can you treat them with respect without sacrificing your authority? Cheer them on without driving them too hard? Set them free - but still set limits?

Some of these are eternal questions. Today's parents may often get the answers wrong, but it's also wrong to say they're not even trying. You don't have to get far into a conversation with parents to hear them wrestling with these issues. And you don't have to look hard to see a rebellion brewing. Just as the wobbling economy of the past year made conspicuous consumption a little less conspicuous, it also gave parents an excuse to do what they have wanted to do anyway: say no to the \$140 sneakers, fire the gardener, have junior mow the lawn. The Wall Street Journal calls it the Kid Recession: overall consumer spending rose slightly last year, but it dropped about a third among 8- to 24-year-olds. The Journal cited a November survey that found that 12% of kids said their allowance had been cut in recent months, while 16% received fewer gifts.

This is a war waged block by block, house by house. If it is too much to try to battle the forces of Hollywood or Madison Avenue or the Nintendo Corp., at least you can resolve that just because the kids down the street watch unlimited TV doesn't mean your kids should too. You can enforce a curfew, assign some chores and try hard to have dinner together regularly. And then hope that the experts are right when they say that what kids mainly need is time and attention and love, none of which takes American Express.

The historians and psychologists have lots of theories about how we got here, but some perennial truths persist: every generation thinks the next one is too slack; every parent reinvents the job. Parenthood, like childhood, is a journey of discovery. You set off from your memories of being a kid, all the blessings, all the scars. You overreact, improvise and over time maybe learn what works; with luck you improve. It is characteristic of the baby boomers to imagine themselves the first to take this trip, to pack so many guidebooks to read along the way and to try to minimize any discomfort.

But a lot about being a millennial parent is actually new, and hard. Prosperity is a great gift, and these are lucky, peaceful times, but in some respects it is more difficult to be a parent now than when our parents were at the wheel. Today's prosperity has been fueled by people working longer hours than ever, and it is especially challenging to parent creatively and well when you're strung out and exhausted. The extended-family structure that once shared the burdens and reinforced values has frayed. Nothing breeds wretched excess like divorced parents competing with each other and feeling guilty to boot. It's not an option, as it once was, to let kids roam free

outside after school, bike over to a friend's house, hang out with cousins or grandparents. The streets are not safe and the family is scattered, so kids are often left alone, inside, with the

TV and all its messages.

Advertising targets children as never before, creating cravings that are hard to ignore but impossible to satisfy. These days \$3 billion is spent annually on advertising that is directed at kids - more than 20 times the amount a decade ago. Nearly half of all U.S. parents say their kids ask for things by brand names by age 5. "I might mention to a child that the dress she is wearing is cute," says Marci Sperling Flynn, a preschool director in Oak Park, Ill., "and she'll say, 'It's Calvin Klein.' Kids shouldn't know about designers at age 4. They should be oblivious to this stuff."

Children have never wielded this much power in the marketplace. In 1984 children were estimated to influence about \$50 billion of U.S. parents' purchases; the figure is expected to approach \$300 billion this year. According to the Maryland-based Center for a New American Dream, which dispenses antidotes for raging consumerism, two-thirds of parents say their kids define their self-worth in terms of possessions; half say their kids prefer to go to a shopping mall than to go hiking or on a family outing; and a majority admit to buying their children products they disapprove of - products that may even be bad for them - because the kids said they "needed" the items to fit in with their friends.

Peer pressure can hit lower-income families especially hard. George Valadez, a hot-dog and beer vendor at Chicago's Wrigley Field, has sole custody of his three young kids. His concept of being a good provider is to pour every spare cent into them. The family's two-bedroom apartment is crammed with five television sets, three video-game consoles and two VCRs. Next month his kids want to attend a church camp in Michigan that costs \$100 a child. So two weeks ago, abandoning their custom of giving away outgrown clothes and toys to neighbors, the family held its first yard sale to raise cash.

Technology also contributes to the erosion of parental authority. Video games are about letting kids manipulate reality, bend it to their will, which means that when they get up at last from the console, the loss of power is hard to handle. You can't click your little brother out of existence. Plus, no generation has had access to this much information, along with the ability to share it and twist it. Teenagers can re-create themselves, invent a new identity online, escape the boundaries of the household into a very private online world with few guardrails. As Michael Lewis argues in his new book, *Next: The Future Just Happened*, a world in which 14-year-olds can manipulate the stock market and 19-year-olds can threaten the whole music industry represents a huge shift in the balance of power.

In some ways the baby boomers were uniquely ill equipped to handle such broad parenting challenges. So eager to Question Authority when they were flower children, the boomers are reluctant to exercise it now. "This is overly harsh, overly cynical, but there's a reason why the baby-boom generation has been called the Me generation," says Wade Horn, a clinical child psychologist and President Bush's assistant secretary for family support at the Department of Health and Human Services. "They spent the 1950s being spoiled, spent the 1960s having a

decade-long temper tantrum because the world was not precisely as they wanted it to be, spent the 1970s having the best sex and drugs they could find, the 1980s acquiring things and the 1990s trying to have the most perfect children. And not because they felt an obligation to the next generation to rear them to be healthy, well-adjusted adults, but because they wanted to have bragging rights."

That's the baby-boomer indictment in a nutshell, but there's a more benign way to interpret this generation's parenting. Those who grew up with emotionally remote parents who rarely got right down on the floor to play, who wouldn't think of listening respectfully to their six-year-old's opinions or explain why the rules are what they are, have tried to build a very different bond with their children. They are far more fluent in the language of emotional trauma and intent on not repeating their parents' mistakes. What's more, having prolonged childhoods, many parents today identify powerfully with their kids. But as Horn notes, "It's difficult to set limits with your children if your primary goal is to be liked. What parents need to understand is that their primary job is being a parent, not being their kids' friend."

It is a natural, primitive instinct to want to make your child happy and protect him from harm or pain. But that instinct, if not tempered, also comes with a cost. Adolescents can't learn to become emotionally resilient if they don't get any practice with frustration or failure inside their protective cocoons. Sean Stevenson, a fifth-grade teacher in Montgomery County, Md., says parents always say they want discipline and order in the classroom, but if it's their child who breaks the rules, they want an exemption. "They don't want the punishment to be enforced," says Stevenson. "They want to excuse the behavior. It's something in the child's past. Something else set him off. He just needs to be told, and it won't happen again."

In September, Harvard psychologist Dan Kindlon, co-author of the best-selling 1999 book *Raising Cain*, will publish *Too Much of a Good Thing: Raising Children of Character in an Indulgent Age*, in which he warns parents against spoiling their children either materially or emotionally, against trying to make kids' lives perfect. Using the body's immune system as a metaphor, Kindlon argues, "The body cannot learn to adapt to stress unless it experiences it. Indulged children are often less able to cope with stress because their parents have created an atmosphere where their whims are indulged, where they have always assumed ... that they're entitled and that life should be a bed of roses."

The parents Kindlon interviewed expressed the bewilderment that many parents reveal in the face of today's challenging parenting environment. Almost half said they were less strict than their parents had been. And they too, like the parents in the Time/CNN poll, pleaded overwhelmingly guilty to indulging their children too much. "It's not just a little ironic," Kindlon writes, "that our success and newfound prosperity - the very accomplishments and good fortune that we so desperately desire to share with our children - put them at risk."

So the job of parenting is harder than ever, parents say they don't think they are doing it very well, and lots of people on the sidelines are inclined to agree. But for all the self-doubt, it is still worth asking: Are today's parents really doing such a terrible job? Are kids today actually turning out so bad?

As far as one can register these things, the evidence actually suggests the opposite. Today's teenagers are twice as likely to do volunteer work as teens 20 years ago, they are drinking less, driving drunk less, having far fewer babies and fewer abortions, and committing considerably less violence. Last year math sat scores hit a 30-year high, and college-admissions officers talk about how tough the competition is to get into top schools because the applicants are so focused and talented. "We have a great generation of young people right under our noses right now," observes Steven Culbertson, head of Youth Service America, a Washington resource center for volunteering, "and nobody knows it."

Maybe this is some kind of uncanny coincidence, that kids are doing this well despite the way they are being raised rather than because of it. Maybe virtue is their form of adolescent rebellion against parents who indulged every vice. Or it could be that the get-down-on-the-floor, consult-the-child, share-the-power, cushion-the-knocks approach isn't entirely wrong-headed. Perhaps those tendencies have done a lot of good for kids, and what's called for is not a reversal but a step back from extremes.

Certainly that is what many parents are starting to do. "I had one over-the-top birthday party for my child, and I'll never do it again," says Carrie Fisher, daughter of Hollywood star Debbie Reynolds and now the mother of nine-year-old Billie. "She got an elephant, and that's all I'll have to say. It will never happen again. I felt like the biggest ass." Fisher had her epiphany when she heard her daughter bragging to a friend, "My swimming pool is bigger than yours." That prompted some new rules. Among other things, Billie has to clean up her room, a change from Princess Leia's own childhood. "I always thought the fairies did it," she says, laughing. "When I moved into my first apartment, I didn't understand how there were rings in the tub and hair in the sink."

Miami interior decorator Nury Feria, the mother of two teenagers, launched her own little crusade within her job as a designer of children's bedrooms. She was finding herself creating rooms that were more like separate apartments. "Large-screen TVs, computers with individual Internet access, refrigerators, sound systems, video-game centers, leather sofas - the only thing missing was a pool," she says. "I realized that as the designer, I'm also supposed to help shape the lifestyle of the kids, and I didn't like a lot of what I was doing in that regard." So she began subtly trying to guide her clients away from certain amenities, advising some parents to scale back on the queen-size beds for seven-year-old girls or the themed bathrooms that rivaled the Small World ride at Disney World.

Despite incessant requests for a Nintendo system by her twin nine-year-old boys, one mom says she compromises by renting a Nintendo console from Blockbuster a few times a year for \$30 each time. "It costs me more to do this, and we could afford to buy it. But I don't want video games in my house all the time. This is our compromise," she says. "My boys are the type to sit there with it all the time."

Dawn Maynard, 44, is a personal trainer and the mother of two boys, 14 and 15. An immigrant from Guyana, she lives in Bethesda, Md., and admits that she spoils her sons with electronics, even though she wishes she didn't. Still, she sees the war being fought all around her and counts the ways she has not surrendered. Some neighbors rented their son a limo to go to the prom. It

seated 24. "My kids are in a county-run math camp that costs less than \$200 for the entire three weeks. My sons' best friend is at golf camp for \$4,000. I'm always fighting peer pressure with my sons."

All parents have to navigate these social, commercial and psychic pressures; it is how they respond that sets them apart. Many parents talk about this as the great struggle of their households. They find themselves quietly shedding old friends when they diverge over discipline; they shop online to avoid the temptation their kids face up and down the endless aisles; they attend workshops and buy books to help bolster their resolve. If you doubt the guerrilla war, just check in with groups like the Center for a New American Dream: three years ago its website had fewer than 15,000 hits a month; today it gets more than 1.5 million.

Parents joke about looking for other "Amish" parents who will reinforce the messages they are trying to send. "Family dating" is an art form all its own, a feat of social chemistry that makes being 25 and single seem easy. In some circles family dating is still driven by traditional hierarchies of status and class, or off-hours' professional networking, or a shared love of sailing or baseball. But for today's concerned parents, it is increasingly driven by values, by sharing a general worldview on everything from TV watching to candy distribution to curfews. Otherwise, time spent together is just too stressful and explosive.

Of course, families engaged in a rollback still have to live in a world where plenty of other children are overindulged. If you live next door to such a kid, or he's thrown together with yours at school or soccer, it can be a challenge always to be explaining why Johnny gets to have marshmallows for breakfast and your kids don't. But the rules send your kids a message all their own, beyond the fact that marshmallows rot their teeth. The rules are a constant reminder that Mom and Dad care, that the kids' health is important to you, that kids are not home alone. And most of all, that it's O.K. to be different.

Parents who give up and back off leave their children at the mercy of a merciless culture. The ones who stand firm and stay involved often find their families grow closer, their kids stronger from being exposed to the toxins around them and building resistance to them. Ariana Marion ended up getting her car. She graduated with honors in June and heads to Wellesley in the fall. "There's a part of us that says we've still given them too much," says her mother Diane, "that wants to take them to live on a farm for a few years and drive a tractor. But we definitely feel we did the right thing by making her earn the car, by making her wait. And the best thing for us as parents was to learn that she was the kind of girl, and now woman, who could step up to the challenge."

- With reporting by Melissa August/Washington, Wendy Cole/Chicago, Lina Lofaro/New York, Tim Padgett/Miami, Jeffrey Ressler/Los Angeles and Rebecca Winters/New York

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