

The "Helicopter Parents" hovering over their adult children.

John Abbott's "Overschooled but Undereducated, Society's failure to understand adolescence", demands that we "return adolescence to its rightful place of enabling young people to go beyond their self imposed limitations and exceed their parents aspirations. That is what adolescents do naturally – *given the right opportunity.*" We were all adolescents once and owe our successes to the privilege of walking "with older men and women who have stiffened our sinews and stretched our minds". John writes of "the natural exuberance of youth" predicting "the arrival of fresh potential". He continues "In the saga of the ages, if a generation fails, the fault lies squarely with the previous generation for not equipping them well enough for the changes ahead."

I was lucky. I was born at the very beginning of the second world war and I have a tea towel which reminds me that that was before television, before penicillin, polio shots, frozen food, Xerox, contact lenses, videos and the pill. It was before credit cards, split atoms, and ball-point pens, before dishwashers, tumble driers, microwave ovens and air-conditioning. Fast food was what you ate in Lent, a big Mac was a large raincoat, crumpet was eaten for tea, and sheltered accommodation was where you waited for a bus. We had never heard of FM radio, tape decks, artificial hearts, word processing or computers. A chip was a piece of wood or a fried potato, hardware meant nuts and bolts and software wasn't a word. When I went up to Bristol to read for a degree all I needed fitted into a small trunk which was delivered to my hall of residence by British Road Services while I travelled by train. We didn't own a car or a telephone or even a refrigerator. .

That journey to Bristol **was** a rite of passage. I had travelled to Bristol by train once before, for my interview, and this time I took a taxi from the station, shared with two students I met in the taxi queue and remained friendly with throughout the three years of the course. I was about to open my first bank account, to negotiate the details of my course, join societies and make friends, talk about the world we lived in all night long and become myself, independent and trusted. Communication with home was limited to a letter every couple of weeks. Going home at the weekends or even mid-term was not possible. It could not have been afforded and you required your tutor's permission anyway. Yet I still think I was lucky. The adults around me, my family, the community in rural Staffordshire, and my teachers had "stiffened my sinews and stretched my mind" and I was ready to "go beyond self-imposed limitations and to exceed my parents aspirations".

"Umbilical cords just got longer" was the article by Kate Hilpern in the Guardian in mid September which made me realise that the process of intellectual weaning, so important in the education of an adolescent, was an even bigger problem than I had realised. Those schools attempting to set their students free to think for and be responsible for themselves now have to consider the next phase of a young person's

life. How can young people be prepared for the increasing hands-on involvement of helicopter parents hovering over their adult children through their Higher education and beyond into the work-place?

With a new box on the University Application form to allow students to nominate their parents to act as their agents and complete the form for them, a new line seems to have been crossed. Institutions of Higher Education complain of the difficulty of distinguishing the good from the excellent as a result of the number of A grades achieved in the final Advanced level examination and we must have some sympathy with them, but now we must ask how admission tutors are to know the level of commitment of their applicants to a discipline, a type of course or even to reading for a degree at all. This year, we are told, 10% ticked this box. Of course there will be applicants who are overseas, but few will be beyond the reach of modern communications these days. Surely it is a question of a student's responsibility for his or her own future. "Welcome to the world of helicopter parenting, so named because these mothers and fathers hover closely overhead, whether their children need them or not" writes Kate Hilpern.

Part of the process of becoming adult used to be making your own way to interviews, testing out public transport, possibly staying at the University and meeting fellow applicants and tutors. This was the first really big decision you made for yourself and you knew it had to be right. It was to change your life and required discussion at home and at school. With that support and guidance it was made responsibly and many fewer students failed to complete their courses half a century ago. As a Headteacher I continued to urge widespread consultation before any decision was made but tried to stiffen the sinews of my pupils sufficiently to enable them to go to open days and interviews by themselves and make their own judgements.

Now we are told that parents continue their involvement into the workplace, attending interviews, questioning employers and negotiating salaries. Hilpern refers to the mother of a 25year old who will accompany her daughter to a job interview, offering the excuse that children "are slower to grow up these days". No wonder! The saddest aspect of all this is that so many young people seem to welcome, even need, this degree of dependence. Whatever has happened to weaning?

Recent research in cognitive science and neurobiology suggests that adolescence is a time of significant changes in the brain to which the apprenticeship approach of hands on learning under the guidance of experts is the most culturally-appropriate response. For the apprentice, adolescence was a form of weaning whereby the more skilful and thoughtful the apprentice became, the less dependent he or she would be on the teacher. As the German philosopher, Nietzsche, put it succinctly, "It is a poor teacher whose pupils remain dependent on him".

Formal education seems to have done its best to neutralize the effects of adolescence, depriving recent generations of young people of the strength that comes from knowing that they are not frightened of taking difficult decisions and if necessary picking up the pieces when things go wrong. Now it seems that parenting is following the same course. We seem to have too little time for our children when they are young, forced by economic pressure to leave much of the talking and listening and setting of examples to others; carers and teachers. And then when teenagers' natural instincts are to seek for independence and individuality, we resort to micro-management, creating, even encouraging, a dependence which denies our children the fulfilment of their potential and their natural predispositions.

John's delightful story of a butterfly beautifully illustrates the self-defining struggle that is growing up. "A man seeing a butterfly struggling to break out of its out-grown cocoon, bent down and carefully cut away the strands to set the butterfly free. To his dismay it flapped its wings weakly for a while and then collapsed and died. A biologist later explained to him that the butterfly needed the struggle to develop the strength to enable it to fly. "By robbing the butterfly of that struggle, you inadvertently made it too weak to live".

Every child needs the struggle of adolescence to sort themselves out, to put away childish behaviours. They need space to work things out for themselves, sometimes alone, sometimes with their friends, always supported by the guidance of wise and caring adults in education and at home and in their community. To waste adolescence is to deny future generations their opportunities to build up the strength and confidence for adult life. That is a lesson which must be taken seriously by parents as well as teachers. Kate Hipper's article suggests that young people have come to accept that dependence well into their adult lives.

Watch young men and women, sixth formers and undergraduates, on Deansgate in Manchester on a weekend evening. They have the freedom of money in their pockets as they tumble out of taxis into bars and then weave their way further down the street to a night club. They are free to drink as much as they like and to stay out late. They are dressed in the results of their regular shopping sprees. They are free to make their own friends and have a culture all their own. What they are denied is the freedom to take responsibility for themselves, to make the big decisions, to prepare for adult life.

Freedom without responsibility has serious consequences for democracy and society. By accompanying their children to open days and interviews, by negotiating for them and "making nurturing an extreme sport" (see Hilpern's article), parents seem to believe that they are using their experience, ensuring value for money and protecting their offspring from pressures they are not able to cope with. I wonder if they are also reliving their own golden youth or following dreams of what might have been. One parent I talked to told me "I didn't go to all the interviews with my

daughter, just her visits to the places I would have liked to have studied in, Oxford, Durham and Bristol". Are parents unwilling to let their children go, to make their own way in the world? Are they afraid that a precious relationship will not survive the process? Parents like teachers have come to feel that if they are not controlling, they are not doing their job.

Over-schooling and over-parenting. Both reflect society's failure to understand adolescence. There is undoubtedly some resistance to over-parenting says "Kate Hilpern, but, UCAS (the university admissions system), "looks set to pave the way in the opposite direction". "It is in danger of entrenching even further into our society the message that the next generation are incapable of taking care of themselves or unable to learn from their own mistakes by addressing their own disappointments in life." She ends "And that is not fair on them"

Remember that the word "education" is derived from the Latin "educare" meaning "to lead out", as in the sense of troops being prepared for battle. Education is an evolving process of leading a child out from the security of the home or the classroom through the drilling grounds of early learning, to face its own challenges and be ready for the turmoil of adult life. In just the same way political systems can attempt to discourage people to think for themselves. In 1931 the Pope responded to East Europeans, forbidden to criticise Communism dogma, with the powerful statement of Subsidiarity. "It is wrong for a superior body to hold to itself the right of making decisions which an inferior is already able to make for itself." Not only was it impossible to stop people thinking for themselves, it was a denial of what they were about, not to let them.

If subsidiarity were to be the ruling principle at home as well as at school, children would be taught how to think responsibly from an early age. They would develop a progression of skills and attitudes which would, as they grew older, put them in charge of their own learning and return them to their natural deep seated urge to be really responsible for themselves. They would grow up. They would know that they did not always need to be told what to do. They would have the dignity and sense of purpose of the craftsman and not be children or students or employees waiting to be given instructions or answerable to someone else.

Like education, parenting has to be a relationship of trust not of control, for if our children are equipped to be able to do something and are then constantly over-ruled or micro-managed, they fast lose motivation together with their sense of lack of control and allow others to be responsible for them. They are denied the opportunity of doing what adolescents do naturally, going beyond their self-imposed limitations and exceeding their parents' aspirations. We have not equipped them well.

And that is truly not fair on them.

Janet M Lawley, Nov 2nd 2008