

Danger Signs: Families Headed for Trouble

by James B. Stenson



Kids in trouble

Clearly, something is seriously wrong in today's society. For some reasons, large numbers of parents around us are failing to form character in their children.

We look around in our workplaces and neighborhoods and see young people in their 20's who are immature and irresolute, soft and irresponsible, uneasy about themselves and their futures. They may be technically skilled in some field and hold down decently paying jobs, but their personal lives and marriages are a wreck. In their conduct and attitudes, these young people seem permanently stuck in adolescence, that dangerous mixture of adult powers and childlike irresponsibility. Some are crippled or destroyed by substance abuse. But even if they remain drug-free (what a strange term!), many see their professional work as mere ego gratification or (an adolescent attitude) just drudgery endured for the sake of "spending money." Great numbers of them live as heartless narcissists, caring little or nothing about their parents or their children, if they choose to have any. They retain within themselves, sometimes tragically, the flawed attitudes and habits of childhood. For some reason, they never quite grew up.

It's clear, certainly, that many young people like this were wounded by a childhood spent in dysfunctional families: drug and alcohol dependency, physical and sexual abuse, hopeless poverty.

But what is striking today, and more to our point here, is the huge percentage of seriously troubled youths from *normal* families. It seems that in our society the distinction between normal and dysfunctional has blurred. Or, to put it another way, some sort of subtle dysfunction is corroding large numbers of typical, middle-class homes.

We see this the results of this all around us. Children today grow up in busy families where father and mother live together, life is comfortable and physically secure, everyone enjoys the bountiful pleasures of a prosperous suburban lifestyle. Yet later on in adolescence and young adulthood, their lives are ravaged by alcohol and other drugs, grievous and ongoing marital discord, childish irresponsibility, lack of ideals or even goals in life, professional aimlessness and instability, reckless pleasure pursuit, trouble with the law, shapeless self-doubt and self-loathing, even murder and suicide.

Consider this disturbing fact: *The suicide rate among young people in the United States is directly proportional to family income.* It is kids from our wealthy and middle-income suburbs, not our poorest inner-city neighborhoods, who most often take their own lives.

What is going wrong in our supposedly normal middle-class families today that could account for these problems? What is happening at home--or not happening--such that children grow older without growing up, that they arrive at adulthood without enough judgment and will and conscience to set their lives straight?

Let's approach the problem this way:

Normal American families seem to fall into two broad categories. One we could call the self-absorbed *consumerist* family; the second is the character-forming *sporting adventure* family.

In the self-absorbed family, parents do not set out, on purpose, to form character in their children. They treat family life like a picnic, a passive pleasure-centered experience, and their kids often meet with later trouble.

In the *sporting adventure* family, by contrast, parents do set out to form character, and they work at this for years. As a result, their family life becomes an ideal-driven adventure, a great sport, and their kids largely turn out well. Why is this?

Let's look at the self-absorbed family first. In the following chapters [of *Compass: A Handbook on Parent Leadership*], we'll contrast it with life in the sporting adventure family--where things, it seems, are done right, where the parents direct themselves and their children with a moral compass, where character is imparted for life.

Consumerist parents are self-absorbed and unconcerned with growth in character strengths (i.e., virtues), whether for themselves or their children. So they make family life mostly a steady series of pleasant diversions. Life for parents and kids centers around leisurely enjoyment, fun-filled entertainment--a seamless array of sports, abundant food and drink, t.v. shows, computer games, movies, music, parties, shopping.

Boredom, it seems, is the consumerist family's enemy, to be shunned at all costs. So children in families like this are kept relentlessly busy, constantly amused. The parents' rules in the house, if any, aim mainly at damage control: keeping squabbles and hassles to a minimum, keeping the kids out of trouble, keeping the kids from wrecking the place.

Consequently, in consumerist homes children are steadily apprenticed through childhood as consumers, not producers. Every day, they avidly practice living as self-absorbed enjoyers and shoppers.

Not surprisingly, youngsters from such picnic-like homes see life as mostly play, a lifetime entitlement to happy amusement. The life of grown-up work (as they dimly understand it) is solely for piling up "spending money"--we work in order to spend, we produce in order to consume. Who can blame them for this life-outlook? After all, this is all they experience in family life; and, as we've seen, children learn character mostly from personal example and repeated experience.

Sooner or later, of course, any picnic dwindles down into boredom; people get up and amble on to more alluring diversions.

And the same happens in the picnic-like consumerist family. Starting in their middle-school years, an appalling number of self-absorbed kids grow bored with juvenile amusements and avidly turn to novel kinds of powerfully pleasurable sensations: alcohol, drugs, the erotic and increasingly violent rock culture, vandalism, reckless driving, recreational sex. Kids raised to see life as play will treat the automobile as a toy, and so will be prone to kill or cripple. Because their life has centered on things, they're disposed to put things ahead of people--to treat people as objects, mere tools and toys for their use or amusement. Related to this, they see sex as a toy, a high-powered form of recreation, and so fall headlong into promiscuity, cohabitational "relationships," unwanted pregnancies, abortions, and disastrous marriages. This is no exaggeration. It happens literally every day.

The consumerist family: a composite picture

It's worth our while here to look more closely at the consumerist family's typical traits. What follows below is a composite picture of those unfortunate normal homes where children are poised for later trouble. That is, if you looked back to the childhood of many troubled adolescents and young adults, as described above, what traits of their family lives would you see over and over again with striking regularity?

Even with plenty of variations in detail, this is the pattern of consumerist families. Let's look at the parents first, then the children.

Parents Headed for Trouble

- Consumerist parents live divided lives. They live as producers at work but consumers at home. In fact, to their children they seem to work only in order to consume. Their home, far removed as it is from the real-life world of responsible adult achievement and ethical interpersonal dealings, is a place arrayed with entertainment gadgets, a site devoted to comfort, relaxation, and amusement. But this universe of comfortable delight is all that their children see--and for children, "seeing is believing." This cocoon of pleasant escapism wholly envelopes children and shapes their sole experience with life. It becomes the ambiance within which they fashion their deepest attitudes and habits, indeed their whole outlook on life: "Life is all about pleasure."
- Being self-absorbed and centered mainly on the present, consumerist parents seldom think about their children's futures--that is, what sort of men and women their children will grow up to become. Their time horizon stretches, at most, only a few months or couple of years ahead. Almost never do they picture their children as grown men and women in their late 20's with job and family responsibilities of their own. When the parents do think of their kids' futures, they think in terms of career, not character. They think of what their children will *do*, not what they will *be*.

- The parents seem to expect--in fact, utterly take for granted--that their children will naturally grow up OK as long as they're kept busily amused and shielded (more or less) from outside influences. In other words, they think that adult-level ethics, conscience, and sound judgment will just gradually form in their children in a natural and unaided way, along with the children's physical stature. When the parents think of character at all, they think it's something to be *maintained* in children, not *formed from scratch*.
- The parents come down to the children's level, as indeed all parents should--but (and here's the point) they *stay* there. By their own evident devotion to a "hassle-free" existence at home, off the job, they neglect to raise their children to grown-up levels of responsible thinking and acting. They do little to prepare the children for later life and lead them toward responsible service. Indeed, their children seem to have no concept what "adulthood" means--except for what they see in movies and t.v. dramas. The parents seem clueless that they have a job to do, an action to take, a change to make in their children's minds, hearts, and wills: to strengthen each child's conscience and character for life.
- Both parents give in readily to children's wishes and "feelings," even when they judge that this might be a mistake. Very often in family life they permit what they disapprove of. That is, they let children's pleas and whining override their parental misgivings. The parents are moved by their children's smiles, not their welfare, and so they will give in on many issues to avoid a confrontational "scene." Unwittingly, through their example of giving in, these parents teach their children to let strong desires, or even whims, routinely override judgments of conscience. So the children fail to distinguish between wants and needs; to the children, wants *are* needs. As a result, "feelings," not conscience, become a guide for action. (So, what happens later when the kids are tempted by the powerfully pleasurable sensations of drugs, alcohol, promiscuous sex? What is there to hold them back?)
- The father is a weak moral figure in the home. He does not teach right from wrong in a confident, purposeful way, and he does nothing to prepare his older children for their later lives outside the home, especially in moral matters. He defers "children's things" to his wife. To his kids, he appears mostly as an amiable, somewhat dull figure, even a sort of older sibling. In family life, the kids see him wrapped up entirely in his own leisure activities (like watching t.v., playing sports) and minor repairs. Since they never see him work, they have no idea how he earns his living, or even what this term means. Moreover, he seldom shows much outward respect and gratitude toward his wife--so she, too, seems a weak figure to the children.

- Parents are minimal in the practice of religion. Though the family may attend a house of worship from time to time, even regularly, this is done as thoughtless social routine. Family life includes little or no prayer, not before meals or at any other time. So children never witness their parents living a sense of responsibility toward God or some strong internalized ethic. "God" is just a word (sometimes an expletive), not a person, certainly not a friend. In the children's eyes, parents do not seem answerable to anyone or anything, except a relentlessly busy calendar.
- Parents watch television indiscriminately and they allow "adult entertainment" into the home. Though they may restrict, more or less, their children's access to inappropriate material, they are driving home a powerful message: "When you're old enough, anything goes." Consequently, to the children, the right-wrong dichotomy becomes strictly a matter of age: "Whatever's wrong for kids is OK for grown-ups, so just wait till I turn 14!"

Children Headed for Trouble

- At first glance most children from consumerist homes don't seem seriously troubled at all. Typically they're cheery and well scrubbed, pleasant and smiling, often very active--but only for things they enjoy. They're habituated to pleasant sensations. They like to be liked, and in fact they expect to be liked no matter what they do. Since they're used to treating adults (including their parents) as equals, they appear naïvely lacking in respectful good manners. With some troubled exceptions here and there, they seem entirely carefree. Indeed most of them really are carefree, for now.
- Children have a low tolerance for discomfort or even inconvenience. They are horrified by physical pain, however slight, or even the threat of it. They successfully plead and badger and stall their way out of unpleasant commitments and "hassles"--promises and previous agreements, music lessons, homework, chores, appointments, deadlines.
- Children believe that just about anything may be done for a laugh. If a prank or ridiculing remark toward someone amuses them and their peers, they blithely indulge in it no matter who gets hurt. They think their entitlement to fun must shove aside other people's rights and feelings. Indeed, the existence of other people's rights and feelings almost never enters their minds. Their outlook on life remains unchanged from infancy: "Me first!"
- Children enjoy an abundance of spending money and leisure time. As a fixed habit, they overindulge in soft drinks, sweets, and junk food. They spend countless hours wholly absorbed in electronic sensations (computer games, television, the Internet) and other

types of amusement. They are generally free to consume whatever they want whenever they want it, and this they do.

- Kids show little or no respect for people outside the family: guests, their parents' friends, teachers, salespeople, the elderly. They seldom, if ever, display good manners in public. *Please* and *thank you* are missing from their speech. On birthdays or holidays, children rip through a mound of presents, but they neglect to write or call to say "thank you" to relatives--and see no reason to. In some instances, children may be superficially pleasant to people (as long as this costs them nothing) but have zero concern for others' needs or interests.
- Ironically, for all the parents' efforts to provide a pleasant home, the children hold little or no respect for them. The kids view their parents as "nice," and they'll admit they "like" Mom and Dad most of the time. But they simply do not esteem their parents as strong, and therefore emulable, people. When asked whom they do admire, they rattle off a long list of entertainment figures, especially comedians and rock performers.
- Children know next to nothing about their parents' personal histories, and nothing at all about grandparents and forebears. So they have no sense of family history and moral continuity, that is, how they are the latest in a long line of mutually loving people who struggled, often heroically, to serve each other and stick together through good times and bad.
- The children have no heroes in their lives, no real people or historical or literary figures who surpassed themselves in service to others and, by fulfilling duties, accomplished great deeds. In the absence of heroes to imitate, the kids admire and pattern themselves after coarsely freakish media "celebrities" and make-believe cartoonish figures. (As someone wise once said, "If kids have no heroes, they'll follow after clowns.")
- Children don't care about causing embarrassment to the family. Often they don't even understand what that might mean, for they have no framework for grasping what's shameful. They are unmoved by any cultivated sense of "family honor." If children's dress and public behavior cause shame to the parents, that's just too bad.
- Children complain and whine about situations that can't be helped: bad weather, reasonable delays, physical discomfort, moderately heavy workloads, personality differences, and the like. Their most common word of complaint is "boring." Since their lives at home are micromanaged rather than directed, they're accustomed to having their problems solved by oversolicitous grown-ups. They've found through experience

that if they hold out long enough, someone will eventually step in to make their troubles go away. Consequently they learn to escape problems, not solve them. They learn to shun discomfort, not endure it.

- Children have no serious hobbies except television watching, computer games, surfing the Web, and listening to music (mostly rhythmic noise). Their lives seem entirely plugged in to electronic devices and they don't know what to do without them. Their thinking is dominated by the entertainment culture; in some senses, they *believe* in it. They know the words to dozens of songs and commercials, but they know nothing of the Ten Commandments.
- Children (even older ones and teens) tend to form opinions by impulse and vague impressions. They are scarcely ever pressed to rely on reasons and factual evidence for their judgments. Thus they're easily swayed by flattery, emotional appeals, and peer-group pressures. They fail to recognize claptrap--as in advertising, pop culture, and politics--when they see it. They follow the crowd wherever it goes. They loosely sense that something is "cool," but they cannot express why.
- Children never ask the question "Why?" except to defy directions from rightful authority. They are intellectually dull, even inert, showing little curiosity about life outside their family-school-playground universe. In school, moreover, they're often incorrigibly poor spellers and sloppy writers. That is, they are careless in work and do not take correction seriously. For them, nearly all enjoyment comes from escapist amusement, not from work well done, serious accomplishment, fulfillment of duty, serving others, or personal goals achieved through purposeful effort. If a task isn't "fun," they're not interested.
- Children have little sense of time. Since they hardly ever have to wait for something they want, much less earn it, they have unrealistic expectations about the time needed to complete a task. They estimate either too much or too little. Consequently, large tasks are put off too long or small jobs appear mountainous. Even older children approaching high-school age have virtually no concept of deadline or of working steadily within a self-imposed time frame. The children seem to drift along in a free-floating, ever-present *now*--and this state of mind continues well into adolescence and even young adulthood.
- Throughout high school and college, they view school as one last fling at life, not a preparation for it. Graduation looms as a poignantly sad event, for they see the best part of life as behind them, not ahead. What lies ahead is trouble--the "hassles" (as they put it) of real-life work, responsible commitments, day-to-day routine, budgets

and bills, two-week vacations, sharply diminished freedom, and a decline in their standard of living. So who looks forward to this? Who can endure it? Why grow up?

As explained already, this picture of a family headed for trouble is just a composite sketch, not a comprehensive description. Certainly there are gradations among families; some families will show some of these characteristics, but not all of them. Nonetheless, over and over again, the features listed here show up in the personal histories of troubled adolescents and young adults who have come--we must stress this again--from apparently normal homes.

[So, what can parents do to turn things around and give health to their family life? See *Compass: A Handbook on Parent Leadership* by James B. Stenson, available through Amazon.com or Scepterpublishers.org.]

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