

TRAGIC CONSEQUENCES FOR CHILDREN GONE WRONG IS THE PARENTING BUSINESS IN TROUBLE?

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As Margaret poked her pencil at the assessment she was taking upon her court ordered admission to the behavior re-direction program, angry raw red slashes on her wrist peeked out from under her sleeve. When we met later to discuss her placement in the program, I asked, "Tell me about the cutting on your wrist." Margaret jammed her hands firmly into the pockets of her jacket. Looking at me in stunned disbelief, her mother wrestled Margaret's hand from her pocket. Glaring at the fresh red marks she blurted, "What did you do that for?" Margaret did not answer. She shoved her hands back into her pockets. "Aw!" said mother, "She's always doing things like this for attention." Margaret had been arrested for public intoxication and underage drinking. She is thirteen. I only knew Margaret for twenty minutes. Her mother lives with her, daily. She never noticed the festering gashes on her daughter's wrist.

Eyes brimming with tears, Alonzo struggled to keep his voice from cracking as he confronted his father, "You and your 'shaky nights'! You've got no idea what I do when you come home 'shaky' night after night!" Alonzo was arrested for possession of cocaine and aggravated assault, after being involved in a gang attack on another youth. Alonzo is fourteen. His father is forty. He is also an alcoholic, which the family enables under the camouflage of "shaky".

When Phillip was court ordered into the behavior re-direction program for aggravated assault on a younger school-mate, in whispers he haltingly told of being sexually abused by his mother's boyfriend. His mother, seated beside him, threw back her head and let forth raucous laughter. At first it seemed the laughter was a nervous reaction. Questioned about the reason for laughter upon learning her son had been so traumatized, the mother exclaimed amidst continued laughter, "He should have been a girl. He's such a drama queen. He knows that's not true." Phillip hung his head in shame. I called child protective services.

One by one the children come, dragging angry reluctant parents in tow.

A year and a half ago, I thought I had entered a leisurely semi-retirement when accepting what appeared to be an easy consulting job. I would simply review files and do brief assessments for acting out children court ordered into a behavior management program, making referrals to appropriate counselors who would set them on the right track. I was not looking for an easy way to exit my professional life. It was simply that after thirty years in the counseling business, I had other plans for my life. It seems a higher authority also had plans for my life, and gratefully I am now utilizing my thirty year experience to do more than slap on band aid clichés. The job has not been simple, but that is not because of the children whose painful stories I hear repeated perhaps twenty times a week. After thirty years, one learns to put the stories aside and focus on the remedy. However, the shocking multitude of parents who ignore their parenting duties and expect children to raise themselves never becomes mundane.

“Sunny,” such a bright name bestowed on such a woeful girl. At sixteen she was caught having sex with a school mate under the steps at the school. Her history included attempted suicide at age eleven and again at fourteen and again at fifteen. Despite medical treatment to pump bottles of pills from her stomach, she never entered counseling. “You know what you can do with your referral,” her mother screamed contemptuously when it was suggested that counseling was critical to her daughter’s mental health. “I won’t accept a referral to any counselor. I don’t have time for her self pity. She only wants people to feel sorry for her.” The mother stormed out, as Sunny wept. Between sobs she sputtered protectively, “I’m sorry. She’s got a lot on her mind.” She’s sorry! Why is it the child’s responsibility to be sorry when parents shun their duties?

When the headlines scream “Child in Trouble,” we are quick to point fingers at the child’s hideous behavior as we speculate on how a child could possibly wander so far off track. We ache for the parents’ misfortune to have such an errant child. How devastated they must be for their child to bring such tragedy and shame to their family. Friends and family rush to comfort the traumatized parents, while, “as it should be” the child sits alone, locked in a dreary gray cinderblock room. We virtually pray the judge throws the entire book at them, so that they never see the light of day in our neighborhood again. How could a child stray so far off track?

While not always the case, all too often behind a “bad kid” may very well be a “bad parent.” In fact, the children behind the horrid headlines are not always the ogres we expect they are. To ever stop the raging headlines announcing “Another Kid in Trouble,” we must look beyond the child to determine the possible culpability of the parent.

A colleague recently told me of a twelve-year old standing before the judge for being truant 76 times in a four month period. The judge was preparing to order the child into my colleague’s behavioral program. Apparently thinking with logic and rationality, the judge asked the father to make a choice. The father could pay a \$2500.00 fine, or choose to enroll the child in this community boot camp program for \$250.00. To the judge’s astonishment, the father chose to pay the \$2500.00 fine, because he did not want to be bothered with “dragging this kid to some stupid program night after night when I can be home relaxing in front of the TV.” Where will fingers be pointing when that child appears in our headlines a few years from now?

Years ago judges became aware that parents were often responsible for their child’s behavior and began attempting creative interventions with the parents. It made headlines when a judge in our community sentenced a child to detention and also “sentenced” the parents to read a book on parenting and submit a “book report” to him. There was an angry outcry from outraged parents insisting they were in no way responsible for their child’s behavior outside of their home, where peer influence might lead a child to foolish decisions. In response to the outcry, most frequently these creative well-intentioned judges backed off. After all, most judges are elected. Parents vote, children don’t. Votes and money talk. So, when the child does the crime, the child, not the parent does the time.

It is true that children of some very devoted and committed parents are misguided by peers and make reckless decisions. In the past eighteen months, of perhaps two hundred children who have filed in for assessment, those with parents dedicated to the business of parenting can be counted on one hand. There were three. Three who had clearly done their very best and yet the child had made the wrong choice. Three out of two hundred! Even the most mathematically challenged among us know that with statistics like that the headlines will keep screaming the errant deeds of very troubled children.

Until parents take the business of parenting seriously and until we consistently hold parents accountable for the responsible operation of their parenting businesses, the headlines will continue to scream “Child in Trouble.” Until then these virtually un-parented children will continue to turn to gangs and sex to gain acceptance and approval; violence to express their rage and drugs to quell their emotional pain.

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