

Are Successful Parents Bad for Their Children?

In being "good providers," they may fail to supply the most important possessions of all

By JOHN A. ROSE, M.D. Director, Philadelphia Child Guidance Clinic

DRIVING in the country last week, we stopped to admire a low white house that overlooked a river. In the driveway stood a new station wagon and on the lawn a resplendent English bike and a beautiful doll's pram.

I hoped that the parents and children of this house were not paying too dearly for their possessions. For parents who extend themselves to give their children advantages—most likely, advantages they themselves never knew—sometimes cheat their children of that which they need most: closeness, love, and understanding.

As if in answer to my thoughts, a boy of about 12 came barging out of that house and shouted, "I won't! And you can't make me! I hate you!"

The Family Service Association of America, celebrating its 50th annual conference last November, called family breakdown "America's No. 1 social problem." What causes this state of affairs? Many things. But often—far too often—it is the result of undue striving: a father striving to get ahead faster; a mother striving for social importance; the incessant striving for possessions—a bigger house, a better car, appliances, sports equipment.

Only a slothful family does not aspire to have things. What is to be deplored is striving—whatever it is for—which pushes parents to the brink of their mental, physical, and spiritual capacities. Such overextended parents lack the patience, time, and energy to give their children adequate companionship or understanding.

IT IS IMPORTANT for young people to know that someone strong and able is on their side. Boys and girls of all ages who get the feeling their parents are more concerned with other things become frightened, lonely, resentful.

The most competent family I know—I'll call them the Bryans—consists of a mother, father, and three children of modest means. Occasionally, I'm sure, they wish they could afford a new dress or suit, a new rug or lamp. But this never seems to upset them. They're too busy enjoying what they have. Whether making Christmas cookies or decorating Easter eggs, a project in the Bryan

family seems important and zestful.

I do not find it surprising that the neighborhood children, most of whom come from more bountiful homes, seek the Bryans' house as one would seek shelter from a storm.

Many of the neighbors are so preoccupied maintaining the scale of living they have set for themselves that they emanate an atmosphere of insecurity, worry, and fatigue. Their children sense this family stress.

Down the road from the Bryans live a very successful executive and his wife and son. Their doctor suggested to the mother that she was not giving the boy sufficient attention.

Horrified, she invited her son to sit down with her from 4 to 5 o'clock every Thursday and talk over any problem he had. After a few sessions the boy, affronted at being expected to turn a sense of closeness on and off like a faucet, began expressing resentments he may not have realized he had and finally told his mother that she was a selfish five-letter word.

SHE FLEW TO THE DOCTOR. "Junior," she wept, "talked like one of those awful boys who get into trouble with the police!"

The doctor tried to explain that juvenile delinquency almost always occurs when an adult-child relationship loses its thread of meaning and a boy or girl proceeds to identify within his age group and to reject adult standards.

That evening the boy's father visited the doctor. Bitterly, he told of all the things he and his wife had given their son: "He's just more than we can handle. We're entering him in a military academy. That should fix him!"

What this boy needed was understanding and companionship, not ostracism.

It is ironic that in this age, which provides leisure time for the pursuit of happiness, so many of us don't know how to pursue it.

Children basically need very little: to be a loved and loving part of their parents' lives, not relegated to the side lines. But in the striving atmosphere that has become part of our cultural climate, parents often cheat their children of these basic needs. And inevitably, the more ambitious parents are, the more likely they are to make this serious mistake.

PHOTOGRAPH BY RICHARD CHECANI

COVER:

Easter wouldn't be complete without a saucy new chapeau. This one, photographed by Walter Herstatt, is a brimmed turquoise straw by Betmar, bound with black velvet around the crown. More on hats, page 16.

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