

YOU SHOULD BE A SELFISH PARENT!



Are you a selfish parent? If not, you ought to be!

The statement may surprise, perhaps even shock you. But as a psychologist who has practiced for many years, I believe it is high time to puncture the widely held myth that parents must be totally unselfish when it comes to their children and that the best parents are those who neglect their own happiness and welfare for their children's sake.

For the most part, these ideas are dangerous nonsense.

In the first place, being completely unselfish when it comes to children is not only cheating yourself but seriously handicapping the youngsters for their coming battle with life.

And secondly, the parent who exhibits the right kind of selfishness in bringing up children is showing a deeper and more real love than self-sacrificing mothers and fathers.

In my files is the case of a two-year marriage that appears headed for destruction because the young wife's parents have martyred themselves for her. The father and mother are now piteously dependent upon their daughter, for whom they "gave up everything"—including themselves.

In turn, the young wife is unable to break her reliance upon them and runs to Mom and Dad with all her problems. She forced her husband to give up a fine business opportunity in another state because she couldn't bear to leave her parents. She visits them several nights a week and is now urging her husband to sell their home

and buy another one that is closer to them.

Naturally, the young husband has become increasingly resentful, and bitter quarrels have erupted. It is painfully clear that the "all-sacrificing" parents have succeeded only in snaring their daughter into a permanent dependency relationship. The outlook for this young couple is gloomy.

Now let me focus sharply and clearly upon the heart of the problem:

Why, exactly, am I warning against the hazards of all-sacrificing parenthood?

Students of human behavior agree that one of the basic influences in the development of any individual centers around his need for security. Certainly, this is the key to emotional health. Every person must develop within himself a feeling of importance, of worth-whileness. He must grow up with confidence in himself and in his ability to face and handle the problems of living.

But if a child has a parent who is always giving and giving, that child never gets the chance to handle his own affairs and obtain crucially important experience in overcoming problems. The result? A lifelong dependence.

The consequences can be tragic. Here are some of the possible aftermaths of all-out parental unselfishness:

The child may develop a "school phobia."

Each fall, nearly every neighborhood has a number of children who refuse to start school unless accompanied each day by their mothers. I know one woman who sat patiently in kindergarten for months. Finally, her child permitted her to leave but only if she would be waiting when school ended.

This pattern can continue through the third

or fourth grade, until the youngster becomes acutely embarrassed over it. But, the insecurity feelings will still remain within the child and can crop out in many ways.

Other youngsters may have headaches or stomach-aches in the morning that disappear miraculously if they are permitted to stay home. Many parents mistakenly believe these youngsters fear school. But that is not so—they fear separation from their mothers.

The child may be unable to perform any project that takes a little initiative.

A youngster brought up to believe he comes first lacks a self-starter mechanism. He can only operate on a push given him by his parents. For example, he might not even be able to do homework by himself unless his parents help or start him off.

When he approaches a schooling level where parents can no longer help, he must sink or swim—and often sinks. Unable to get going, he fails to develop to his fullest intellectual capacity.

The youngster may become a social outcast.

If a child is not emancipated from his parents, he is a prime candidate for unpopularity. He wants other children to behave as generously toward him as his mother and father, but they have no intention of doing so. His bewilderment turns to frustration and then to anger. "If I can't have my way," he says (and often in so many words), "I won't play."

So he doesn't play—and the other children really couldn't care less.

I know a boy, now 12, whose mother has devoted her life to him. As a result, he has failed in every single social experience. Already, he has