

Moral Deprivation Breeds Youngsters with Attitude

We have a child care crisis in our country. I'm not talking about the increasing numbers of working mothers or the greater need for preschool programs. Those are merely symptoms of a more profound problem facing society.

The crisis is a moral one, a devaluation of life at every level of experience that affects our children as they grow and develop what in contemporary slang is called "attitude."

Attitude is a hip word for values. It's the postmodern style for perceiving what's right and what's wrong, mental and emotional processes that determine decisions of judgment — what's okay, and what's okay to "dis" (show disrespect for, in the adolescent idiom).

In the 1950s, those with attitude were "rebels without a cause," young people expressing angst at adult authority but who had no legitimate outlet for creative expression. Values were rooted in Freudian explanations and the corollaries that fostered the need to rebel against parents.

The Beat poets were the spokesmen for the rebels who were on the road seeking independence, howling against conformity and commercialism. In retrospect, that movement was relatively benign, fostering a general attitude to leave the nest, learn to fly and think independently.

During the next three decades evolving adolescent attitude turned the rebellious young into group conformists as their numbers increased and the baby boomers came of age. Angry young men and women became hippies, protesters and, finally, victims — victims of racism, sexism and other convenient "isms." Certain truths lie in such generalizations, but ism-think fosters a destructive group mentality of victimhood.

Feminists demanding equal rights degraded motherhood. Pro-choice advocates who decried back-alley abortions devalued the profundity of pregnancy. Blacks seeking to overcome racial prejudice by color-blind competition became color-conscious and another type of hyphenated

American came into our lexicon.

The government reaching out to the single mother was quickly transformed into Big Daddy taking over for the missing little daddy, and welfare became a way of life for many young people who never learned middle-class values. Babies begat babies to achieve status.

The catalog of ills has shades of gray, but it's the stark black-and-white issues that alert us to the moral crisis of child care — caring for children. Adults in our society abdicated their most precious gift to the next generation when they relinquished their power to pass on the great moral truths of Judeo-Christian tradition, truths upheld and honored for

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It may have been out of a legitimate concern for the separation of church and state to order the Ten Commandments taken down from the schoolroom wall, to forbid the reading of psalms and the recitation of prayer: But the abandonment of repetitious moral teaching coincided with the breakdown of family life, where moral teaching always had taken place, and only the truly dense would call this coincidence.

Many children who would become rebels in adolescence never established a moral center or a creative cause. They were ethical ignoramuses. Attitude was all. Schools that only decades earlier had reprimanded children for chewing gum and using bad language had to install metal detectors to keep out guns and knives.

"Our worst nightmares are com-

ing true," says Marian Wright Edelman, president of the Children's Defense Fund. "The crisis of children having children has been eclipsed by the greater crisis of children killing children."

The Children's Defense Fund blames guns, noting that between 1979 and 1991 nearly 50,000 children were killed by guns — and we're reminded that the figure is equivalent to the American dead in the Vietnam War. But blaming guns is like explaining the Vietnam War in terms of Agent Orange.

Adult attitudes toward the care of children must change, and to do that we must rediscover a sense of awe toward life. Public officials who throw up their hands and give away free condoms in school don't help at all. Joycelyn Elders, the surgeon general, appeals to the lowest common denominator in us when she prescribes teaching kids what to do in the back seat of a car just as we teach them what to do in the front seat.

Driving requires discipline, discovering what it takes to stay within the speed limit, understanding that running a light can bring disaster, knowing that driving while drunk is dangerous for everybody. Getting a free condom won't help the morally underdeveloped take responsibility for what they do in the back seat.

We must find a way to liberate the spirit, to reinstall the value of virtue, the celebration of life-giving love, the sanctity of marriage to raise safe and secure children. Government largess never will repair the damage done to children who have no sense and instinct for moral restraints. Cycles of illegitimacy spiral into cycles of poverty. Welfare becomes a tease of perverse incentives.

No one understands this better than Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the New York Democrat, who warned about the dangers of welfare dependency and became the prophet of the breakdown of the American family. He's right to identify welfare reform as the crux for change, creating work incentives for the underclass.

But we also must have a spiritual reformation. If we can accomplish that we will have re-created child care, and childhood itself. We owe ourselves and our children nothing less.

By Suzanne Fields