

Preparing Children for the “Real World”

by Dr. Ray Guarendi

Dear Dr. Ray,

I try hard to keep my kids innocent and to raise them more slowly than their peers. Regularly, I hear, “You can’t protect them forever. That’s a real world out there. They have to learn to deal with life.”

—Cautious Mom

Yes, you can’t protect them forever. Yes, that is a real world out there. And yes, they do have to learn to deal with life. What does any of this have to do with raising your children at your pace, and not the world’s?

What you are hearing makes my top ten list of nonsensical notions assaulting good parents today. Mindlessly repeated by so many so often, they have assumed child rearing truth. We think they are correct just because everybody is saying they are.

Let’s go back a couple of generations, when it was still considered intrusive and impolite for people to give you their unasked for opinions about your parenting. Protecting kids—socially, morally, emotionally—was considered a very good thing. Indeed, a prime duty of grown-ups was to shield children from the ugly and immoral stuff of life while the child’s character was being formed. Keeping kids innocent was a worthy goal, a sign of responsible and wise parenting. Soon enough a youngster would face what was out there beyond childhood.

In the last generation or two, we’ve taken a step backward toward “enlightenment.” It is now arguably more psychosocially savvy to help kids deal with seamy reality as it assails them. Further, if you put it off too



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long when the child finally does confront the “real world”—whatever that means—he will be emotionally and morally shell-shocked. He’ll be overwhelmed, or seduced by evil, or crushed into despair. His very innocence will be his undoing.

I have some questions regarding this “real kids know the real world” assertion. Who is better able to navigate the temptations and challenges of life—a mature child or an immature child? Is a seven-year-old better or worse off for knowing what life is all

about: Who is more able to cope with life’s ugliness—a moral eight-year-old or a moral eighteen-year-old?

The opposite of innocence is not maturity; it is worldliness. And worldliness doesn’t better equip a child to cope with the world. It just makes him more likely to be comfortable with it.

Most parents nowadays accused of being over-protective are no such thing. They are not “babying” their children emotionally. Nor are they running ahead of their kids, bulldozing all of life’s obstacles and frustrations out of the way. Their protectiveness is morally driven. They want to shield their kids from situations and people who could overwhelm their judgment or their young consciences.

Compared to under-protective parents, a good parent can easily look over-protective. In fact, her supervision, or caution, or pop-cultural vigilance is healthy and wise. Only when it’s too late do many parents come to realize they weren’t protective enough. Over and over again, my experience with families has taught me a real life truth: Far more children have trouble as adults not because they grew up slowly, but because they saw and learned too much too early.

So stand strong, Mom. Give social freedom later than the peer group. Protect innocence. Lay a strong moral base before you let the world assault it. Your “over-protectiveness” will be rewarded by real life. ■

Dr. Ray Guarendi is a father of ten, a psychologist, and an author. He can be reached at www.DrRay.com.