

[The best way] of bringing up the child of a samurai: from the time of infancy one should encourage bravery.<sup>22</sup>

Each culture constructs its rules of right behavior differently. I'm not saying our way is right and the Japanese samurai was wrong. I am saying that *no child is born knowing the rules*. Every child must be taught.

We used to do a much better job of teaching the rules specific to our culture. Thirty years ago, kindergarten and first grade in American schools were all about "socialization," as it was then called: teaching Fulghum's Rules and more. Beginning in the mid-1980s, many American schools and school districts decided that the first priority of early elementary education should not be socialization but rather should be literacy and numeracy. There was great concern in the United States at that time because Japanese students had pulled ahead of American students on some measures of academic achievement.<sup>23</sup> The unspoken assumption seems to have been that kids would learn the basic rules of good behavior—the most important part of enculturation—in some other way: either from their families at home or from the larger culture.<sup>24</sup> At the time, throughout the 1980s and 1990s—and in many districts, even today—school administrators prided themselves on introducing "rigor" into elementary education. I was living in Montgomery County, Maryland, when the local superintendent garnered national praise for making kindergarten "academically rigorous," cutting down on "fluff," such as duck-duck-goose, field trips, and singing in rounds, and requiring instead that kindergarten teachers spend more time teaching phonics.<sup>25</sup>

The change in the early elementary curriculum and the consequent neglect of teaching socialization places a greater burden

than ever before on the American parent. But just when kids need parents more than ever to teach them the whole package of what it means to be a good person in this particular culture, the authority of parents to do that job has been undermined. We now live in a culture in which kids value the opinion of same-age peers more than they value the opinion of their parents, a culture in which the authority of parents has declined not only in the eyes of children but also in the eyes of parents themselves.

Parents today suffer from *role confusion*. "Role confusion" is a plausible translation of *Statusunsicherheit*, a term used by German sociologist Norbert Elias to describe the transfer of authority from parents to children.<sup>26</sup> Elias observed that in the second half of the 20th century, Western Europeans became less comfortable with any sort of power differential in social relations. Elias noted that before World War I, power differentials were sharply defined in multiple domains: between aristocrats and the lower classes, between men and women, between managers and employees, and between parents and children. Throughout the 20th century, and especially in the decades after 1945, people in Western Europe—and in North America too, I might add—became uncomfortable with all such power differentials. With regard to the power differential between men and women: in the name of social justice, women acquired equal rights, though at a varied tempo from one region to the next (women in Appenzell, Switzerland, did not gain the right to vote on local issues until 1991). Regarding the power differential between managers and employees: in recent decades, many companies have abandoned the old-fashioned hierarchical management system in favor of "giving employees a voice." With regard to the former deference

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of the lower classes to the upper classes: the aristocracy has nearly vanished, at least in the traditional master-and-servant *Downton Abbey* sense of the term. And with regard to parents and children: the authority of parents, and, even more significantly, the *importance* of parents, in the lives of their children has declined substantially.<sup>27</sup>

More than 50 years ago, Johns Hopkins sociologist James Coleman asked American teenagers this question: “*Let’s say that you had always wanted to belong to a particular club in school, and then finally you were asked to join. But then you found out that your parents didn’t approve of the group.*” Would you still join? In that era, the majority of American teenagers responded No. They would not join the club if their parents did not approve.<sup>28</sup> In that era, for most kids, the opinion of parents mattered more than the good regard of same-age peers.

Not so today. I posed an updated version of Professor Coleman’s question to hundreds of children and teenagers at dozens of venues across the United States between 2009 and 2015. I asked them, “If all your friends joined a particular social media site, and they all wanted you to join, but one of your parents did not approve, would you still join the site?” The most common response to the question was neither Yes or No, but laughter. The notion that kids would bother to consult their parents about joining a social media site was so implausible that it was funny. *My parents don’t even know what ask.fm is. They would probably think it was some kind of radio station! So why would I ask them if I should join? If all my friends are joining that site, then of course I am going to join.*

In American culture today, same-age peers matter more than parents. And parents are reluctant to change the rules—to insist,

for example, that time with parents and family is more important than time with same-age peers—because parents are suffering from the “role confusion” described by Elias. They are unsure what authority they ought to have and how to exercise it. As a result, it’s much harder for American parents to teach Fulghum’s Rules to their kids. And the older the child, the more true that is. In one study, the attitude of American teenagers toward their parents was described as “ingratitude seasoned with contempt.”<sup>29</sup>

As Canadian psychologist Dr. Gordon Neufeld has observed: in most cultures in most times and at most places, the job of enculturating the child is not primarily the job of the mother and father. The entire culture takes part: schools, the community, and even popular stories all are in synch in inculcating the basic rules, the fabric of the culture.<sup>30</sup> In our time, the schools have retreated from normative instruction about right and wrong in order to focus on academics. It’s less controversial to concentrate on phonics than to teach Fulghum’s Rules or any other absolute notions of good behavior. It’s easier for teachers and school administrators to suggest that a child has Attention Deficit / Hyperactivity Disorder and /or Oppositional-Defiant Disorder and might benefit from medication than to exhort parents to work harder at the task of teaching social skills to their child. The end result, as I have already said, is that parents today shoulder a greater burden than parents in previous generations but have fewer resources to do their job.

**B**efore we go any further in our discussion of the loss of parental authority, I have to make sure you and I are on the same page with regard to what I mean by “parental authority.” I have learned that when I speak to parents, many confuse “parental authority” with “parental discipline.” They think that parental

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authority is all about enforcing discipline. In fact, parental authority is primarily about a *scale of value*. Strong parental authority means that parents matter more than same-age peers. In contemporary American culture, peers matter more than parents.

For most of the history of the human race, children have learned culture from the adults. That's why childhood and adolescence have to last so long in our species. But in the United States today, kids no longer learn culture from the grown-ups. American kids today have their own culture, a culture of disrespect, which they learn from their peers and which they teach to their peers.

When I speak about the culture of disrespect, I am referring not only to the "ingratitude seasoned with contempt" already noted, which is now the characteristic attitude of many American kids toward their *parents*; I mean also that American kids now commonly show disrespect *toward one another* and that they live in a culture in which such disrespect is considered the norm. Five decades ago, the Beatles' single "I Want to Hold Your Hand" was a worldwide hit. In 2006, Akon released a single titled "I Wanna F\*\*\* You." (The clean version, titled "I Wanna Love You," was broadcast on radio, but the original version with the foul language was the one which reached #1 in the United States.)

T-shirts. Here are some of the slogans I have seen American kids wearing on T-shirts recently:

DO I LOOK LIKE I CARE?

OUT OF YOUR LEAGUE

IS THAT ALL YOU GOT?

YOU LOOK LIKE I NEED ANOTHER DRINK