MACLEAN'S

The collapse of parenting: Why it's time for parents to grow up

If anyone can be called the boss in modern, anti-hierarchical parenthood, it's the children

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For modern families, the adage "food is love" might well be more true put another way: food is power. Not long ago, Dr. Leonard Sax was at a restaurant and overheard a father say to his daughter, "Honey, could you please do me a favour? Could you please just try one bite of your green peas?" To many people, this would have sounded like decent or maybe even sophisticated parenting—gentle coaxing formed as a question to get the child to co-operate without threatening her autonomy or creating a scene.

To Sax, a Pennsylvania family physician and psychologist famous for writing about children's development, the situation epitomized something much worse: the recent collapse of parenting, which he says is at least partly to blame for kids becoming overweight, overmedicated, anxious and disrespectful of themselves and those around them.

The restaurant scene is a prime example of how all too often adults defer to kids because they have relinquished parental authority and lost confidence in themselves. They're motivated by a desire to raise their children thoughtfully and respectfully. In theory, their intentions are good and their efforts impressive—moms and dads today are trying to build up their kids by giving them influence; they also want to please them and avoid conflict. In reality, parents are at risk of losing primacy over their children.

The dinner table is ground zero. "When parents begin to cede control to their kids, food choices are often the first thing to slide," Sax writes in his new book, *The Collapse of Parenting: How We Hurt Our Kids When We Treat Them Like Grown-Ups*. A rule such as "No dessert until you eat your broccoli" has recently morphed into "How about three bites of broccoli, and then you can have dessert?" The command has become a question capped with a bribe, as Sax puts it. Dinner at home requires polling kids on what they're willing to eat; the options might include roast chicken and potatoes or chicken fingers and fries. You can bet which they choose. So parents renegotiate: *How about sweet potato fries?*

Parents in North America have become prone to asking their children rather than telling them. "It's natural," says Gordon Neufeld, a prominent Vancouver psychologist cited in Sax's book. "Intuitively, we know that if we're coercive, we're going to get resistance." For trivial choices such as which colour of pants to wear, this approach

is fine, he says. But “when we consult our children about issues that symbolize nurturance like food, we put them in the lead.” That triggers an innate psychological response, and their survival instincts activate: “They don’t feel taken care of and they start taking the alpha role.”

So if the girl served green peas does eat one bite as her dad asked, Sax says, “she is likely to believe that she has done her father a favour and that now he owes her a favour in return.” Food may be the first manifestation of the collapse of parenting, but many of the problems within families are a result of this type of role confusion. In this way, what happens over a meal is a metaphor for how uncomfortable parents have become in their position as the “alpha” or “pack leader” or “decider” of the family—the boss, the person in charge. The grown-up.

That discomfort comes from a loving place, of course. Many parents strive to raise their kids differently from how they grew up. They say, “I can’t do the stuff I was raised with, it doesn’t feel right. I don’t want to yell, I don’t want to spank,” says Andrea Nair, a psychotherapist and parenting educator in London, Ont. “There’s a massive parenting shift between our generation and the one before. We’ve come a long way from when you called your dad ‘sir’ and when he walked in the house you would jump out of ‘his’ chair.”

The evolution hasn’t been easy, though. “We’re trying to pull off the emotion coaching but we haven’t received the training,” says Nair. “It’s like teaching your kids to speak French while you’re learning it in the textbook.” Parents have made it a top priority that their kids feel heard and respected from a young age. They want to be emotionally available to them, and for their children to be able to express their own emotions. “Kids have permission to have tantrums now because [they’re] learning how to manage feelings,” says Nair. “Someone said to me, ‘Are we seeing more tantrums now than we used to?’ And I wonder.”

Parents also want a democratic household where each family member has a say about what happens—*Should we go outside now? Are we ready to have a bath? Would you like to have the party here?*—and they cultivate independence and freedom of thought in their children. Strict obedience used to be praised; now it is seen as outdated and potentially dangerous. Compliance might mean your kid is a pushover, which no parent wants, especially as bullying has spread from the schoolyard to cyberspace.

There are broader influences shifting the parent-child dynamic as well. Over the past half-century or more, the public has come to scorn power imbalances based on gender, race, religion and sexual orientation, and historic gains have been achieved in the pursuit of equality. Even corporations are now replacing pyramidal management with “flat organization.” In Western society, where equality for everyone has become a cultural objective and a constitutional right, children are treated like they are one more minority group to honour and empower. “Empower has come to seem virtuous,” Sax says. “Empower everyone, why not?”

But many kids are actually overpowering their parents. That’s the problem, say those working in child development. A functional family unit hinges on the one social construct that contemporary society has been working hard to dismantle: hierarchy.

“You need a strong alpha presentation to inspire a child to trust you and depend upon you,” says Neufeld of parents. “If we don’t have enough natural power then we’re hard-pressed to [make] the demand or [set] the limit” for children. “The parent always has to be honoured as the ultimate person,” he continues. “We need to put parents back in the driver’s seat.”

If not, the consequences can be far-reaching, starting with children’s eating habits, which might contribute to them becoming overweight and obese. Like the father in the restaurant, many parents can’t convince their kids to eat well. It doesn’t help that junk food is sometimes a reward for acing a test or scoring a goal. The message: healthy food is for losers. On-demand snacking—in the car, at the mall, while out for a walk—appears to disrupt metabolism and circadian rhythms, as well as hormonal balance. That many parents carry with them a canteen of water and a stash of goodies wherever their kids go is further proof of how much they want to satisfy their children, literally and figuratively. “I don’t want them to get hypoglycemic,” one mom told Sax while lugging a cooler of snacks to her car for a 30-minute drive.

Contributing to the extraordinary weight gain among North American children in recent years is a dramatic decline in fitness. There is even a medical term for it, “deconditioning,” which is described in the *Collapse of Parenting* as a euphemism for “out of shape.” It has landed kids as young as 11 and 12 in the cardiologist’s office complaining of heart-disease symptoms including chest tightness and shortness of breath. In fact, some hospitals in the U.S. have even opened pediatric preventive cardiology clinics.

While children are less active than ever, they do not, ironically, get enough rest. A common question Sax asks students is, “What’s your favourite thing to do in your spare time, when you are by yourself with no one watching?” The most common answer in recent years: sleep. That’s because children are too busy with school assignments and extracurricular activities to go to bed at a good hour, or because when they get to bed, they are on their cellphone or computer, or playing video games.

This chronic fatigue may be associated with the rise of attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder and prescription drug use among children. “Sleep deprivation mimics ADHD almost perfectly,” writes Sax. In his experience as a doctor, insufficient sleep is one reason why kids are more likely to be diagnosed with the disorder. In general, “It is now easier to administer a pill prescribed by a board-certified physician, than to firmly instruct a child and impose consequences for bad behaviour.” Stephen Camarata, a professor of hearing and speech sciences and psychiatry at Vanderbilt University in Nashville echoes that point: “Parents say, ‘My child can’t do this particular exercise, they’re not paying attention,’ therefore I have to identify them as having a clinical condition.” A medical diagnosis might negate parental shortcomings or a child’s misbehaviour. “It displaces that failure,” he says.

Camarata worries that parents are asking too much of kids too soon, as he outlines in his latest book, *The Intuitive Parent: Why the Best Thing For Your Child Is You*. He points to the surge of books, toys and software marketed to parents of young children promising to accelerate learning. The ubiquitous metaphor that kids are information sponges has parents saturating them with educational exercises. “We’re

treating them like little hard drives," says Camarata, but "this idea of pushing children to the absolute max of their developmental norm doesn't give them time to reason and problem-solve. It actually undermines both self-confidence and fluid reasoning, or the ability to think."

Schools, too, have been focusing more on academic achievement than socialization. Sax documents how, 30 years ago, American students in kindergarten and Grade 1 learned "Fulghum's rules," which include tenets such as "Don't take things that aren't yours" and "Clean up your own mess" as well as "Share everything" and "Don't hit people." But since the 1980s, as other nations pulled ahead of the U.S. in scholastic performance, the primary objective of educators has become literacy and numeracy. In Canada too, says Neufeld, "we have lost our culture. Our society is far more concerned that you perform. Schools will always drift to outcome-based things."

That's partly why a "culture of disrespect" has sprouted in North America. As kids have become less attached to and influenced by the adults in their lives, same-age peers have come to matter more to them. It's a theme in Neufeld's book, *Hold On to Your Kids: Why Parents Need to Matter More Than Peers*, co-authored by Dr. Gabor Maté. Young children "are not rational beings," says Neufeld. Part of growing up is testing boundaries; little ones, by their very nature, can't be relied on to hold each other accountable—nor should they.

"Kids are not born knowing right from wrong," says Sax, pointing to longitudinal studies showing that children who are left to discover right from wrong on their own are more likely to have negative outcomes in the future: "That child in their late 20s is much more likely to be anxious, depressed, less likely to be gainfully employed, less likely to be healthy, more likely to be addicted to drugs or alcohol. We now know this," he says. "Parents who are authoritative have better outcomes, and it's a larger effect than the effect of race, ethnicity, household income or IQ."

With stakes so high, authoritative parenting would seem imperative. But there is a psychological hurdle that people will have to overcome first, says Nair: "How to respect their child but also be the decider" of the family. Part of the challenge lies in the fact that parents don't want to fail—at nurturing and governing *simultaneously*—and they certainly don't want their children to fail in their personal development, in school and at social networking. These worries feed off each other in the minds of parents; that's why parents second-guess the way they speak to their kids, what they feed them, how they discipline them and what activities they permit.

This is all the more true for the growing number of parents who delayed having children until they were "ready" with a secure job, a good home and a dependable partner. "People purposely wait so they can nail it," says Bria Shantz, a 35-year-old mother of two in Vancouver. "That creates even more pressure. They want to get this perfect." Shantz is, in fact, the daughter of Neufeld, and she has called upon him for advice or reassurance. That Shantz, who has a leading child psychologist in her family, one who helped raise her, can still occasionally succumb to parental insecurity, says everything about its potency: "There's this slight panic. You want to do everything right," she says. "Nothing prepares you for how much you want it to go well."

So as soon as parents conceive, they begin amassing a library of books on how to deal with the fantastic chaos about to enter their lives in the form of a baby; the collection grows with each developmental stage. They subscribe to online newsletters and smartphone apps that alert them on milestones their children should reach by a certain age. From the outset, parents are tracking how quickly their child is growing, how much they are achieving. For every expert a parent consults by phone or in person, they're also checking in with the virtual wise man, Google. That almost never helps.

There is no parental concern too obscure not to have an online group devoted to it. Shantz is part of one focused on "baby-wearing" because she's trying to decide whether a "wrap" or a "ring sling" would be better for her nine-month-old. "It's the weirdest site to be on. You see posts and you feel guilty because [parents] are carrying their babies everywhere, doing all these things, having this connection." And yet Shantz hasn't been able to delete herself from the group, even though she keeps meaning to; nor has she been able to pick between a wrap or sling.

That pull and push moms and dads feel—between caring about how other parents are raising their kids while rejecting the constant comparisons—defines this generation of parents for better and worse. Katie Hurley, a psychotherapist in Los Angeles and author of *The Happy Kid Handbook: How to Raise Joyful Children in a Stressful World*, says, "We've been conditioned to question ourselves—to constantly look for information to make sure we're doing it right. Because of that, parents are in a state of learned helplessness." *[tweet this]*

So what are people supposed to do? The answer is so basic that at first it might seem unsatisfying: For starters, says Hurley, realize that "nobody knows what they're doing when they leave the hospital with an infant. Every parent learns by trial and error"—every year of their child's life, and with every child they raise. That's as true today as it ever was, and parents who recognize this will shed some guilt and anxiety. Building on this idea, Nair says that parents must "have a higher tolerance for things not going well." How they recover from their own occasional mistake, outburst, loss of patience or bad call may say more to a child than how they are in happy times. "We're missing that opportunity, which is how learning works," she says. "That's how we become more confident."

A significant portion of Sax's book is devoted to the importance of parents modelling traits they want to encourage in their children. Chief among them, he says, should be humility and conscientiousness—which run counter to inflating a child's self-esteem and sense of entitlement. To that end, he encourages parents to fortify their adult relationships so they are not overly concerned with pleasing their kids as a way of satisfying their own need for affection. Neufeld also urges parents, including his own adult children, to establish a network of surrogate caregivers—relatives, neighbours, daycare workers—who will not undermine their authority but back them up when they need help.

And invariably, they will. "Parenting is awfully frustrating and often a lonely place," says Neufeld, especially when a child misbehaves. In those moments, he recommends parents reassure kids that their relationship isn't broken. "When parents realize that they are their children's best bet, it challenges them to their own

maturity.” It gives them the confidence that they know what’s good for their kids, and that they should stand up to them—this is, in fact, an act of love required of parents. They become, in effect, the grown-ups their children need.