

## Your children can be upstanding citizens - but it's up to you to inspire them

**Author Michael Ungar gives tips on raising socially conscious kids in his latest book, *We Generation: Raising Socially Responsible Kids***

TRALEE PEARCE

From Tuesday's Globe and Mail

April 21, 2009 at 9:16 AM EDT

An elementary-school principal, driving home after work, passes by one of his students playing road hockey. The principal waves. Instead of a reciprocal wave, the student shouts, "Fuck you!"

The next day, the principal calls the 11-year-old boy's parents, and the mother's response is: "You have no right to discipline my son. He was off school property and it was after school hours. You have no say over what he does."

It is the first of many cringe-worthy anecdotes shared by author Michael Ungar in his latest book, *We Generation: Raising Socially Responsible Kids*. But Dr. Ungar, a clinician and research professor at Dalhousie University's School of Social Work, argues that these kids (and their parents) are not lost causes. Not only can this kind of behaviour be curbed; kids can also be inspired to become socially conscious, upright citizens. We spoke to Dr. Ungar about what seems like a tall order.

### **That's a pretty depressing way to start your book.**

It's a true story. And it's not uncommon. Survey five teachers and ask them about the last time they called a parent with a discipline issue, a kid who told them to eff off. I predict a lot of them ask, "What did you do to my child? Maybe he shouldn't have spoken like that but I understand you were rude to him." We blame kids. But we've made them this way.

### **So, how do you define a "we" generation?**

A "we" generation is this next generation with the advantages of growing up in a world where they perceive fewer boundaries, where connections can be sown with people across borders and where the concerns of others are no longer entirely anonymous. ... The more we teach our children in our homes and schools and communities to make a contribution, the more likely they are to be able to convey this to others they meet online, through the media, in their travels. But it is up to us to show our kids how to do this.

### **What's the link between individual bad behaviour and a wider deficit in social responsibility?**

Just take a moment and think about this ... the child who is always picked up after, why would you expect them not to litter? Or drop cigarette butts, or act rudely?

## **You trace the problem back to the home.**

I didn't write the book with the hope of raising children to solve all the world's big problems. My goal was more modest, more local: to share the wisdom of families who have created "we" thinkers. In almost every case, some adult has modelled this behaviour. What I see, however, is that often families arrive at my office with children who are rude and they feel powerless to influence them. A child who won't put his laundry in the hamper can very quickly be taught to do the laundry. A teen who is surly and rude and acting like a boarder can be reminded of the cost of the driving her parents do for her.

## **One of your chapters singles out the role of our suburban, monster-home culture.**

You can't help but think that our physical environment affects our relationships. If you're raising kids where they can't walk to the store and pick you up a carton of milk, and they have to be driven everywhere, how do they make a contribution? Where are the connections with other adults in their lives? And then we complain that they're always playing on the computer.

## **Not to blame parents, but how could they be doing a better job?**

I never blame parents. We love our children and dote on them. Just ignoring our role as the ones who teach this lesson isn't going to get the work done. And it is work - emotional work, too. Watching our child benched at a hockey game because she forgot to pack her gear properly is tough, but a necessary lesson when you're young enough that the consequences are still minor, at least for the child. For the parent, it would be easier to do things for her, but long term, is this kind of irresponsibility what we want to teach our children? I'd rather my child feel uncomfortable for a brief period at [age] 8 rather than being neglectful of her studies or money when studying at university at 18.

## **What are some other tips?**

For a four- or five-year-old, maybe it's helping to bake the cookies. Then the 10-year-old is getting themselves dressed and taking care of the pet. The 15-year-old is mowing the lawn or doing something nice for a neighbour, maybe a fundraising activity in the community.

## **What about a really stubborn kid?**

I'm amazed by the number of parents who are stopped in their tracks when a kid says they don't want to attend, say, Christmas dinner. And the parents say, "Okay. We don't want to fight with you." ... There are a bunch of things you can say: "Please come down for half an hour." Mostly, the message has to be: "This means a lot to me. You don't come to Christmas dinner because the food is good. You come to Christmas dinner because you make a contribution to the welfare of everyone in this family." You've got to be a pretty psychotic kid, pretty beaten up by life, to not hear a compassionate plea from a parent, not to grumpily come to the table, eat your turkey, spend half an hour, roll your eyes and leave. Which is okay.