

For Parents of young children



Children and Their Heroes

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Can you recall who your "heroes" were when you were a child/teenager? Did they include George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, John Kennedy, Clara Barton, Eleanor Roosevelt, Douglas MacArthur, Dwight Eisenhower, your parents, James Dean, Joe DiMaggio, Ted Williams, Roy Rogers, Elvis Presley, Helen Keller, Winston Churchill, a scout leader, coach, or teacher? Most likely you had one or more, and they changed from time to time as your experiences and orientations changed. How important were these figures—living or dead—and how did they influence you?

How about your children today? Do they have heroes? Who are they? In what way are they being influenced by their heroes?

One important aspect of a child's development is the acquisition of a set of standards, ideals, or values with which he can guide his future behavior. How do children acquire values? They do not learn all at once what is moral and ethical, good and bad, right and wrong. They gain this understanding incidentally as a result of their everyday interaction with the significant people in their lives. Especially important in their moral development are their parents. Another source of values, standards, and aspirations are a child's "heroes"—those persons, real or imaginary, whom, because of their qualities or achievements, are admired, praised, regarded with awe, identified with, followed, set up as models.

A child's "heroes" may include his/her parents. Children usually identify themselves first with their parents. At the age of about 8 years, children begin admiring people outside the family. They may pick a teacher or coach or scout leader, a professional or local high school athlete, a movie or TV star, a popular musician, a community hero, or the leader of a teen-age gang to admire and emulate. In their teens, youngsters often make up a composite, imaginary hero—the self they would like to become—picking one person's looks, another's mannerisms, another's courage, someone else's talent, status, money, or fame.

What place do these heroes have in a child's life? Are heroes necessary? I believe they are—like rituals, holidays, ideals, and national goals, "heroes" perform a function. Professor Orrin Klapp, in his book *Heroes, Villains, and Fools*, says that the hero functions like a jack, raising our aspirations, pushing us to do better than we might without him. In a similar vein, novelist Bernard Malamud has a character in *The Natural* explain: Without heroes we're all plain people and don't know how far we can go ... It's their (hero's) function to be the best." Dale Harris, the famous child psychologist, said "... boys and girls need heroes, like vitamins, to grow on. Good heroes are vitamins of the spirit; the more inspiring the hero, the more inspired the child." All

three of these statements have this in common—heroes expand the sense of human capability. As writer Josette Frank expressed it: "Keeping high company with the hero of our choice is a rich and felicitous experience—an experience no child should miss."

A child finds models (or "heroes") everywhere—adults he knows or sees, "official" heroes, figures in the news, celebrities, characters in stories or movies. As children grow, their taste in heroes should mature. But a concern expressed by a number of persons within the past few years is that in this supermarket age, where goods, services, and heroes, too, are mass-produced, packaged, and sold off the shelf, it's just as hard to find the intrinsic merits in people as in cars or liquid detergents. As Dale Harris put it: "Sixty years ago kids looked up to what might be called the "official" heroes, men recognized and admired because they built empires, saved nations, eased pain, wrote poems. Today our children's heroes are sensations of the moment...If we want our kids to respect worthy...successors, we must cope with the fact that our society rewards most the conglomeration of values represented by Louella Parsons rather than by Homer."

An even stronger statement made by writer Leslie Lieber concluded an article on "The Age of Anti-Everything Man" this way: "Hero hunger has become a 20th century children's ailment. We improve the food our children eat. But no one thinks of feeding them heroes—real-life heroes—to nourish their ambition. The anti-hero flourishes among us because parents have neither opposed him nor put up another candidate."

I think there is at least some validity to these concerns. However, I do not like raising the anxiety levels of parents by continually blaming them for one condition and ailment after another.

Instead of indicting parents, there are some steps parents might take if they are concerned about their child's values and heroes:

1. Consider what values, ideals, and characteristics you would like your child to develop.
2. Consider what type of heroes your children should have if they are to learn these values and ideals, and what specific individuals embody these traits.
3. Determine who your child's heroes are—who does he admire, who does he want to be like or to resemble? How do his heroes stack up against the ideal?
4. Examine the nature of your own hero-worship. To ask who our children's heroes are is to ask about our own. Smooth, cool "secret agents" such as James Bond or Matt Helm or sadis-

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tic, ornery characters such as those typically played by Clint Eastwood or Lee Marvin evoke responses not only from teenagers but also from adults. But they are questionable "heroes"—or anti-heroes.

Our heroes-of-the-moment suggest to a growing child that fame, money, adulation, sex appeal count more than spontaneity, honesty, charity, craftsmanship. Yet the latter values may be found in many official heroes and in others who, lacking glamour, rarely make headlines. Our job is, then, to steer our kids toward heroes who stand for excitement plus growth. "Growth, like any ongoing function," writes Paul Goodman, "requires adequate objects in the environment to meet the needs and capacities of the growing child, boy, youth and young man, until he can better choose and make his own environment. It is not a 'psychological' question of poor influences and bad attitudes, but an objective question of real opportunities and worthwhile experience." If our children are to grow by way of heroes, they need real heroes to grow on. To tell our kids who and what we think matters, we need a strong sense of right and wrong, of good and bad, of competence and incompetence, of what counts and what doesn't, of what is exciting and what is boring. Until we sort out our own feelings about who the heroic people are and why, we cannot communicate them to our children. For example, we must be able to tell children that even though virtue isn't always rewarded, or the hero can be more brutal than the villain, we still value virtue and deplore brutality. Character traits are not all the same, to be accepted equally because they are there.

Even television, the cause of much of our anguish, can be a good laboratory in which to experiment with the truly heroic. Each day the real and unreal, the phony and genuine, are pictured by the television tube. Kids soak it all up uncritically. They need us to point out the difference between the girl who sings the soap commercial and the leading soprano at the Met. The process needn't require a cynical, headlong assault on popular culture. A casual remark may start the wheels turning in the heads of children who are forming their imaginary selves. Remember Paladin? We could praise his classical scholarship and still comment, "You know he seems like a pretty savage guy to me." Thinking out loud, we can show our children they too have a right to challenge the traits, events, values which appear on TV.

Children's books offer a wealth of fine hero material for all ages. To a small child, a book hero may be a human, an animal, or even a machine (such as Mike Mulligan's steam shovel, Mary Ann). Children identify themselves with the characters in the books they read, face their problems, and reach solutions with them.

5. At the same time we have to learn to accept the heroes our kids discover themselves. These too are "facts", and we can't wish, pray, or punish them into exile. We mustn't get upset if Robert Redford seems to say more to them than Washington or Lincoln. When a child picks a hero from the social supermarket, we must understand that this hero fills a need for our child, even if he seems to stand for values which contradict our own.

Sometime our 11-year-old may try his ego (and ours) by flaunting the idol of that sneaky kid down the block we don't like. One of these days our daughter, growing fast, is going to begin tacking up pictures of rock musicians. We can't knock these heroes on the head. Anybody who has tried knows it usually ends in defeat. Attacking tends to bind a child's attachment. We need enough faith to accept our youngster's struggle to grow up. But our faith needn't be passive. We show our children what qualities we think people should have by the way we talk, act, and respond to others. Our silences show them, too. If justice, tolerance, faith, and patriotism mean more to us than newspaper cliches, we must find ways to act out our beliefs. Finding our own ideal selves, living like our heroes, we give children courage and encouragement to find their own.

For all of its shortcomings, our society produces plenty of honest, witty, concerned, spontaneous, creative people. To choose and identify with good heroes, our children need guidance. Lacking real direction from the popular culture and from his age-mates, where does a child learn who is admirable and who isn't? The answer seems clear: he learns from us. Parents must produce interesting alternatives for their children. The challenge to us all is to show children that the works of mind and spirit can be exciting, too.

6. Those parents involved in discussion groups might find this an interesting and beneficial topic for discussion. They might want first to sit down and think about their own childhood and teen heroes; then talk with their own kids or others about their heroes.* This material can serve as the basis for discussion with other parents.

Readings

1. "On the Difficulty of Being a Contemporary Hero," Time, June 24, 1966, pp. 32-33.
2. Lyle M. Spencer, "The Changing Face of Children's Heroes," PTA Magazine, November 1962, pp. 35-36.
3. Dale Harris and Marvin Weistbord, "Who Are Your Child's Heroes?" Parents' Magazine, June 1963.

* The question asked of children might be phrased somewhat as follows: "Of all persons whom you know, or have heard of, or have read about, or have seen, whom would you most care to be like or to resemble—that is, whom do you most admire?"

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