

Parenthood (10): Reliving Life Through Children

January 1996

A mother gives up a promising career to focus upon her family. A father never becomes the all-star athlete of his childhood fantasies. Parents realize that the American dream has passed them by. Such unfulfilled expectations can lead some parents to see in their children an opportunity to relive life and achieve the success that has eluded them.

This attitude places various undue burdens upon a child. First, his own wishes are often pushed aside in favor of his parents'. He is forced into an activity in which he has little or no interest. Secondly, unfair expectations are placed on the child. Doing one's best is not enough; he must be the best. Horror stories abound of little leaguers who are cursed by their parents for striking out in the big game or pixieish gymnasts who are berated for falling off the bars in a crucial meet.

Complications mount when the child shows his disinterest by a lack of enthusiasm or effort. If the child protests, "But I don't *want* to be the world chess champion!", the parent rationalizes this as immature resistance to the regimen of practice and sacrifice necessary to success. They force their children on by the illusion that they are merely helping their children succeed.

A "coaching" mentality that permeates our sports-crazed society motivates athletes by ridicule, humiliation, profanity and constant negativism. Unfortunately, some parents model their parenting after the Bobby Knights and Mike Ditkas of the world, leaving their children starving for a word of praise from the parents they adore. If such negative pressure continues, many children will respond in self-abusive rebellion. Parents guilty of such behavior usually do not see it until it is too late.

Parents must be mature enough to accept their lot in life. Age creeps up on us all, and many wonder about the different paths their lives might have taken. But unfulfilled worldly ambition which hijacks a child's life for one's own sake is wrong. Children need unselfish parents who will help them develop their own aptitudes and interests and will give them loving support in the process.

There will be times when a parent must force a child to do something undesirable. But godly wisdom and honest insight will help parents decide whether such things merely satisfy selfish interests or foster good character in the child. There is no greater reward than to see children reach their own goals and become their own person.