

Your Kids Can Handle Dangerous Ideas

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In the middle of a recent Thursday dinner, my 13-year-old daughter, Sasha, had a question for my wife and me: Can I skip school tomorrow?

This seemed pretty understandable to me. Middle-schoolers in New York City — and elsewhere — have had it rough the last few years, caught between the pandemic, their fast-changing bodies and emotions, and their parents' unchanging ambitions and expectations. As eighth grade ambles to a close, Sasha has handled those pressures well. I could see why she would want a break.

Still, obviously, the answer was no. You can't skip school, my wife, Jean, and I told her. You just can't. Not allowed. Nope!

But I offered Sasha a bit of unsolicited advice, too: Next time you want to skip school, don't tell your parents. Just go. Browse vintage stores, eat your favorite snack (onigiri), lie on your back in Prospect Park and stare at the clouds. Isn't that the point of skipping school, after all? To sneak around, to steal time and space back from the arbitrary system that enfolds you? To hell with permission! That's being a teenager — carving out a private life for yourself under the noses of the authority figures who surround you.

Sasha said no, she would not be doing that. Not because she's a Goody Two-shoes but because she's too lazy to plan the subterfuge — it sounds as exhausting as algebra. This dynamic is also, perhaps, to be expected: Generation X's detached rebelliousness butting up against Generation Z's lackadaisical sincerity.

But when I look at the broader cultural landscape, I feel isolated in my permissiveness. Parents — or at least the parents who seem to win media attention — are freaking out over everything their kids see, read and do.

Recently there were the parents who hated "Turning Red," the Disney Pixar movie about a 13-year-old Chinese Canadian girl who transforms into a giant red panda at moments of intense emotion or embarrassment — and who rebels against her perfectionist mother, crushing on boys, lying about her extracurricular activities and (worst of all) listening to terrible pop music. Those parents complained that the film promoted bad values and that its portrayal of puberty and metaphorical menstruation was just too mature for an impressionable audience.

Then there are the parents across this country who continue to be up in arms about what's taught in public schools. For some, the fact that this nation has historically failed to live up to some of its ideals is apparently so distressing that they are pushing for strict laws about what teachers can say about that in class. For others, any discussion of L.G.B.T.Q. issues is the boogeyman. And while the bulk of the 729 challenges to books and educational materials tracked by the American Library Association last year were about works addressing Black or L.G.B.T.Q. people's experience and many were deemed too

“sexually explicit,” there have also been classic novels banned from schools in more liberal districts because of objections to racial slurs in their pages.

Leaving aside the usual political battles between left and right, what’s at play here are two fundamentally different conceptions of parents’ responsibility to their children, with the same ultimate goal: Do you offer your kids broad exposure to the world, in all its beauty and foulness, and hope they make good decisions? Or do you try to protect them from ideas and activities that you see as dangerous or immoral — and also hope they make good decisions? Obviously, both approaches involve a leap of faith. And it’s impossible to adhere entirely to either philosophy.

I understand the desire to coax your children to think and live as you do. I mean, who wants his or her progeny to reject wholesale the values, tastes and beliefs they’ve been brought up in? To pick up ideas, frameworks and plans that we disagree with or even find morally repugnant? I’m surely hoping that Sasha and her 9-year-old sister, Sandy, follow in my metaphysical footsteps, in one way or another. Ideally, they’ll grow up to be polyglot globe-trotters with predilections for spicy food, subtly funky fashion and making new friends. But as long as they don’t end up greedy, selfish or the leader of a fascist personality cult (I’m looking at you, Sandy), Jean and I will be satisfied.

To me, the more hands-off approach is also the more realistic one. It acknowledges that our children are, in some basic sense, beyond our control: not precious innocents to be culturally cocooned, but thinking, feeling, increasingly independent human beings who are busy making up their own minds (and who are anyhow likely carrying around devices that give them unfettered access to billions of ideas and images, without any meaningful controls).

I want my kids to read, watch, and listen to what piques their interest, even if I don’t like it myself. Sasha loves “Attack on Titan,” a luridly violent anime series with fascist undertones, and I’m fine with that — but I worry about my kids watching “90-Day Fiancé” and becoming Kardashian-curious. They can tell fantasy from reality, but reality TV from reality? That’s trickier.

Still, I won’t dictate their preferences: I want them to navigate this huge, messy planet on their own, when they’re old enough to — and be ready for things not to go their way. Letting go can be scary at times, as a parent, because they will encounter real dangers. Last year, for instance, we had a delightful discussion about what Sasha should do if — or, really, when — a man exposes himself to her on the New York City subway.

This isn’t modern liberal parenting; if anything, it’s old-fashioned. Before the era of helicopter parents, baby boomers raised Gen Xers like me as latchkey kids who made our own snacks and watched TV for hours. We might not have appreciated it at the time, but it bred a self-reliance that I don’t know we would otherwise have developed.

I’d thank the boomers for that, but I doubt it was a conscious parenting decision on their part. More likely, it’s just how things went in that era of work, school and American culture. They didn’t have much choice, just as we don’t actually have much choice today, no matter what we tell ourselves. We’re all just making do, fixating on those rare opportunities where we can decide, crossing our fingers and hoping we got it right.

Most of all, I want my daughters to see clearly, be prepared and trust their training — much of it delivered via dinner table discussion like the one we had about skipping school. So far, this strategy is working out. Recently, Sasha and a friend watched an episode of “Euphoria,” the HBO show about teenagers navigating a world filled with drugs and sex, and she decided it was too grown-up. (Jean and I watched it to understand — and decided it was too adult for us as well.)

Will Sasha skip school? I hope so — and I hope not. But if she does, she shouldn’t tell me. At least not for another decade. Then we can laugh about it over cocktails.