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It has become increasingly more difficult for village to raise children

By Diether Haenicke
June 24, 2009

In 1996, Hillary Rodham Clinton published an interesting book titled, "It Takes a Village."

Playing on the African proverb that it takes the whole village to raise a child properly, she pointed out that, ideally, not only fathers and mothers raise a child but many other people too -- grandparents, siblings, other relatives, neighbors, teachers, policemen, doctors and more.

For most members of my generation, that rings perfectly true. When I was growing up, everyone with whom I came into regular contact contributed to my upbringing, whether invited or not. Neighbors watched and looked out for us children. The parents of our friends fed us and provided shelter when needed; they were extended family. They cared for us, which meant that they also felt perfectly comfortable correcting us when appropriate. We children considered their authority just as valid as that of our parents. If we misbehaved outside our homes, we could be pretty sure that our parents would hear about it. The village minded, cared and helped raise us.

Most adults today still help and look out for children other than their own. But they are definitely no longer inclined to criticize or discipline other children, not even their own nephews and nieces, let alone the children of friends and neighbors. A recent article in the Wall Street Journal deals with some of the reasons for our reluctance to reprimand children who are not our own. Some parents dislike seeing their children criticized because it might reflect poorly on themselves, the author surmises. Or they are overprotective and see in everyone who addresses their child a potential predator. Or they are too indulgent and coddle their little darlings and will not allow any remark that may affect their child's self-esteem.

At a Tigers game in Detroit I watched with disgust as a 10-year-old boy scattered popcorn in a hallway and then poured Coke on it, making an ugly mess and creating a slippery hazard for those passing him. When I told the young fellow to please stop it, I drew a sharp rebuke from his father who shouted that what his kid was doing was none of my (expletive) business. The boy smiled slyly at me and continued his senseless activity right under his father's eyes. A security guard refused to interfere. The cleaning crews would take care of it, he assured me. Detroit is obviously not a village.

I often run across newspaper stories reporting that parents, after their child is disciplined, show up at school with a lawyer in tow. For many parents, what their child tells them is the truth; the veracity of the teacher's version of the story is to be decided in court. What a change from my days!

Whenever I was disciplined at school, I fervently hoped that nobody would tell my father. Unlike many modern parents, my father, when informed about his children's misbehaving, always sided with the teachers, and occasionally, additional discipline followed at home.

Some incidents, nowadays not rare in our schools, would have been simply unthinkable. In all my school days, I never heard a fellow student call a teacher names to his face or saw a student verbally threaten or physically attack a teacher. What we did and said behind our teachers' backs and without their knowledge is another matter, but an outright confrontation with a teacher was quite inconceivable. We were respectful to our teachers, and we were respectful, in general terms, to all adults and to older people especially.

The anti-authoritarian education of the 1960s and '70s may have had a profound impact on the many changes in child-adult relationships. But the world has also become more dangerous, and many now teach their children to be suspicious of all strangers.

Is the village no longer working? I fear not, and we may all be the poorer for it. We are losing a lot when fair-minded and caring adults may no longer be part of the village that occasionally criticized and disciplined its children while it loved and guided them.

*This column was first published Aug. 9, 2006 in the Kalamazoo Gazette
mlive.com/kalamazoo*