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THE SATURDAY ESSAY

How to Raise an American Adult

Many young Americans today are locked in perpetual adolescence. Nebraska Sen. Ben Sasse on how he and his wife are encouraging their own children to become fully formed, independent grown-ups

By *Ben Sasse*

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We all know the noun *adult*. But I was perplexed last year to hear the new verb *to adult*. In social media, especially on Twitter and Instagram, it birthed a new hashtag: #adulting. As in: “Just paid this month’s bills on time #adulting,” or “Decided I couldn’t watch Netflix 8 hours straight and went to the grocery store instead #adulting.” It even got a nomination from the American Dialect Society for the most creative word of 2015.

“Adulting” is an ironic way to describe engaging in adult behaviors, like paying taxes or doing chores—the sort of mundane tasks that responsibility demands. To a growing number of Americans, acting like a grown-up seems like a kind of role-playing, a mode of behavior requiring humorous detachment.

Let me be clear: This isn’t an old man’s harrumph about “kids these days.” I still remember Doc Anderson standing in the street in 1988, yelling at me to slow down as I drove through his neighborhood in our small Nebraska town. I was 16 and couldn’t stand that guy. Years later, when I had children of my own, I returned to thank him. Maturation.

What’s new today is the drift toward *perpetual* adolescence. What’s new is seeing so much less difference now between 10-year-olds and young adults in their late teens and early 20s.

As many parents can attest, independent adulthood is no longer the norm for this generation. Data from the Pew Research Center show that we crossed a historic threshold last year: “For the first time in more than 130 years, adults ages 18 to 34 were slightly more likely to be living in their parents’ home than they were to be living with a spouse or partner in their own household.” Fully one-quarter of Americans between 25 and 29 live with a parent—compared with only 18% just over a decade ago.

A great many factors have contributed to this shift toward perpetual adolescence. The economy has something to do with it, of course—but social and cultural developments do too. The list of culprits includes our incredible wealth and the creature comforts to which our children are accustomed; our reluctance to expose young people to the demands of real work; and the hostage-taking hold that computers and mobile devices have on adolescent attention.

Our nation is in the midst of a collective coming-of-age crisis. Too many of our children simply don’t know what an adult is anymore—or how to become one. Perhaps more problematic, older generations have forgotten that we need to teach them. It’s our fault more than it’s theirs.

My wife, Melissa, and I have three children, ages 6 to 15. We don't have any magic bullets to help them make the transition from dependence to self-sustaining adulthood—because there aren't any. And we have zero desire to set our own family up as a model. We stumble and fall every day.



Sen. Sasse with his children. PHOTO: RYAN NICHOLSON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

But we have a shared theory of what we're aiming to accomplish: We want our kids to arrive at adulthood as fully formed, vivacious, appealing, resilient, self-reliant, problem-solving souls who see themselves as called to love and serve their neighbors. Our approach is organized around five broad

themes.

Resist consumption. Although we often fail at it, Melissa and I aim to imprint in our children the fact that *need* and *want* are words with particular and distinct meanings. When our 6-year-old son points to a toy at Target and says, "I need that," we let him know that "need" actually has nothing to do with it. His survival doesn't depend on securing that toy.

In a 2009 study called "Souls in Transition," Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith and his colleagues focused on the spiritual attitudes and moral beliefs of 18- to 23-year-old "emerging adults." They were distressed by what they discovered, especially about the centrality of consumption in the lives of young people. Well over half agreed that their "well-being can be measured by what they own, that buying more things would make them happier, and that they get a lot of pleasure simply from shopping and buying things."

Maturity requires imagining life without material wealth.

But consumption is no route to long-term happiness, as a raft of studies by

psychologists, neuroscientists and sociologists demonstrate. Part of learning to be an adult is figuring out that our real needs can be separated from the insistent call of our wants. Maturity requires imagining life without material wealth, resolving that we could be happy in such a state, and actually experiencing mild deprivation from time to time.

Parents can impart such lessons many ways. The occasional camping trip, off the grid, can teach the basic definition of shelter—and make the comforts of home look like the luxuries they are. You can shop differently too. One of our daughters is a serious runner, so we purchase high-quality shoes to protect her developing bones—but most of her other clothes come from hand-me-downs and secondhand shops.

We want our children to learn the habit of finding pleasure in the essentials of life and feeling gratitude for them. We'd like to think that, when they strike out on their own someday, they'll have a clear sense of what they really need.

Embrace the pain of work. Many of the same social scientists highlighting the emptiness of consumption point to a very different key to happiness: meaningful work. Over the years, I've found that just about everyone interesting I've ever met possesses a strong work ethic, focused on doing even humble jobs well, and they typically learned it early in life. They usually have a passionate answer to the question: "What was the first really hard work you did as a kid?"

Character comes before credentials.

Suggesting that our children should have similar experiences seems countercultural today. Strenuous, unpleasant work seems harsh, potentially scarring. Worse, for middle-class parents hoping to get their children into selective colleges, it might interfere with the “enrichment” activities that impress admissions committees. But character comes before credentials. If our children are to become real adults, they need to know that difficult tasks are things to be conquered, not avoided.

Last year, we sent one daughter to spend a month working on a cattle ranch. She was 14 and surprisingly eager to get her hands dirty. We left her with little advice other than to make us proud by working hard, to ask for coaching and never to let her bosses hear her complain.

Once she settled in, she would send regular text messages about what she’d done that day. It was smelly, wet, demanding work, but she reveled in it: *Got an orphaned baby girl to take her whole bottle. (Also got tons of nose slime & snot on my jeans.)*

I don’t mean to suggest that there are no hard workers among young people now. But “work” is more than advancement in school. Our children need to appreciate not just the privilege they enjoy in being free from the demands of physical labor but also—especially—their own capacity to fix the messes that life will throw at them.

Start young: Send your 2-year-old to get your socks every morning. It creates a rhythm and pattern that can be easily upgraded to more complicated and “adult” tasks. Re-evaluate every service you’re paying for at home and ask if your children could do it instead. Mowing is a good example; household repairs count too. Babysit together. Make your children learn to change diapers.

Connect across generations. Today, young people’s lives are driven by one predominant fact: birth year. In person and online, teenagers hang out overwhelmingly with friends of the same year in school. Correspondingly, senior citizens live out their years in nursing homes where they interact mainly with their age peers.

A 2014 Boston Globe article neatly summarized much of the recent research on this question. One study found that, among Americans 60 and older, only a quarter had discussed anything important with anyone under 36 in the previous six months. And when relatives are excluded, the percentage drops to just 6%.

Adolescents acquire vital social skills by interacting with people outside their peer bubble.

This isolation is no way to raise responsible adults. The anthropologist Alice Schlegel, co-author of a classic study of 186 preindustrial cultures, concluded that age segregation is correlated “to antisocial behavior and to socialization for competitiveness and aggressiveness.” Social science confirms what parents know from watching older siblings care for younger ones: Adolescents acquire vital social skills by interacting with people outside their peer bubble.

There are many ways to make these connections. The simplest are activities like taking your children to bake cookies with an elderly neighbor or volunteering at a senior center. But the occasional visit isn’t enough. We need to encourage our children to build lasting connections—some degree of friendship and familiarity—with older people who aren’t members of the family.

Perspective is invaluable: It lets your children hear about previous eras, including those first hard jobs, and gives them a longer view of what it means to struggle with hardships and

persevere.

Travel meaningfully. Decades ago, the historian Daniel Boorstin drew a distinction between the nobility of travel and what he saw as the boredom of touring, with its large groups and controlled itineraries. What he called “the lost art of travel” involved going out “in search of people, of adventure, of experience.”

When we travel this way, we subject ourselves to the vertigo that accompanies leaving familiar surroundings, customs, language and food. It’s especially valuable for adolescents. Like hard work, it makes them appreciate not just the comfort of their own lives but the satisfaction of trying new and difficult things. It also forces them to look at the material nature of their lives. Do I really need so much stuff when I feel freer away from it?

Children will obviously not all have the same experiences as they learn about travel. Some of us come from more outdoorsy families; others come from wealthier families that can afford the airfare to fly overseas. “Where” isn’t nearly as important as how.

The key is putting children into situations outside their comfort zone, seeing things they don’t ordinarily see. And when you’re done with your trip, don’t just return immediately to everyday life. Pause to summarize the experience and reflect on it.

The average American now reads only 19 minutes a day.

Become truly literate.

Reading done well is not a passive activity like sitting in front of a screen. It requires attention, engagement and active questioning. Unfortunately, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average American now reads only 19 minutes a day—and the younger you are, the less you read.

That our young people take so little interest in reading is sad, but not just for them. It also keeps them from growing into the sort of engaged, responsible citizens our republic needs. America’s founders understood literacy as a prerequisite for freedom and self-government, and we are paying the price today for failing to take that truth seriously.

The first step is to encourage them to become quantity readers. A friend introduced Melissa and me to a challenge called “The Century Club.” To be a member, you must read 100 books in a year. Quite a few people can read two solid books in a week, but knocking out almost two a week for an entire year is daunting.

With children, you have to start with light books to set them on the path to 100. But as they develop the habit of reading, you can add more challenging titles. Our children haven’t yet hit a hundred in a year, but it has become a healthy, behavior-shaping goal.

Quantity is important, but quality is the bigger, long-term goal. When our girls were not yet teens, we let them pick just over half of the books in their sequence. Now we have them propose a handful of books for us to select from, and if the books aren’t rigorous enough, we intervene more aggressively.

They’re pretty good about wanting to stretch themselves, but we’ve also steered them to especially important books that will help them not just to learn their place in the world but also to comprehend the riches of the traditions they’re inheriting.

What’s on that bookshelf? Other people’s broad headings will vary, but ours include God, the Greeks, Shakespeare, the American idea and markets.

These are just some of the ideas—the habits—that Melissa and I are developing with our children to ensure they won’t be paralyzed by the prospect of adulthood. Other parents will have their own ways of tackling the challenge, but it isn’t a duty that any of us can shirk. The

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country
needs this
broader
conversati
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reaching
adulthood
,
especially
in an era

of lifelong job disruption.

The analogy that we've embraced for parental duty is teaching children to ride a bike. I'm a decidedly "no training wheels" guy. My method: pad them in coats and ski pants, set them off down a slightly declining street and run behind them straddling the back wheel. I gently knock them side to side in the shoulders as we move along, and at some point, they suddenly find their balance, mostly by accident. And then they can ride! It's a life-changing moment.

Mr. Sasse, a former college president, is the junior U.S. senator from Nebraska. This essay is adapted from his new book, "The Vanishing American Adult: Our Coming-of-Age Crisis—and How to Rebuild a Culture of Self-Reliance," which will be published on May 16 by St. Martin's Press.

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