

Gift to our children: Roots and Wings

By ROSS GIBSON

As a parent of two grown sons and grandparent of a five-year old granddaughter, I give a lot of thought this time of year to the roots and wings that we give our children. With great weather, graduations, proms, parties, events, and so on, our young people have both so much to do, yet, too much time on their hands. When my sons were teenagers, we were challenged with keeping them busy and knowing where they were in the summertime on almost a daily basis.

“I will be at Alan’s house – see you tomorrow”, “We are heading over to Jay’s and are spending the night there” and “Mike is having me over for the night” and so on. We heard these types of “lines” all the time from our sons as they grew up. Wasn’t he lucky to have such good friends? Nice of their parents to always let them come over and spend the night. Looking back and thinking about life’s challenges, were there other questions to be asked? Were there other responses we should have had?

We love our children – that is a given. Most parents believe in the truism that there are two things we give our children: one is roots and the other is wings. As a parent of two grown children I found the hardest aspect of being a parent was the adjustment from the roots to the wings. When do we let go and allow our children to fall down, to scrape their knees, to take a hard knock or two to learn some of life’s most valuable lessons and when do step in to soften the blow, to make things easier and to keep our children out of harm’s way? I recently had this discussion with a very successful retired CEO who told me some of the best lessons he learned as a child was working on a local railroad station at 5am by himself shoveling snow when he was eleven years old. It was the hard knock he took there that he credits for making him a successful adult.

We all think it is a lot tougher today to strike the right balance between the roots and the wings, given the omnipresent promotion of alcohol along with the resurgence of illegal drugs that seemingly surrounds us. We cannot lock our children in and try to create an alternate universe. Nor does any parent just turn their backs and say “there is nothing I can do”. But there are reasonable things we can do, reasonable questions to ask and meaningful conversation that have to take place.

Did we ask enough questions? More importantly, did we ask the right questions? Parent’s, myself included, often wonder if life’s paths might have been altered if there had been different responses, different questions. Were we too trusting? Maybe. Did we think asking the tough questions was too inquisitive or invasive? Perhaps. When things don’t go as expected with a child’s life path a parent can spend too much time agonizing over the “what ifs..” and “if I had onlys..”. It is an easy trap.

What I do know is that asking the tough questions, being inquisitive, even invading is OK if it means you need to know. As Shannon Albritton of the Brattleboro Area Prevention Coalition put so well in the Matters of Substance column last December (<http://bit.ly/17M6vcN>), “Consider it fashionable to know where your child is at all times.” You may be giving them wings but knowing where they are flying while learning is not just OK, it is necessary.

Stephen Covey, the author of the seminal book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, stated “Between what happens to us, that is the stimulus, and our response, is a space. In that space is our power and our freedom to choose our response.” What will your response be? What questions will you ask? The right response and the right questions may give your children their wings to fly!

It’s never too early or too late to change how your child feels about drugs and alcohol. With tools and resources, Parent Up Vermont can help parents talk to their children about the dangers of underage drinking and substance use. Visit ParentUpVT.org or call 211 to find resources near you.

Ross Gibson is a parent of two grown sons. He and his wife live in West Brattleboro with their five-year old granddaughter. Ross has written the above as a contributing guest writer for Brattleboro Area Prevention Coalition (BAPC), a local nonprofit that organizes community efforts to be involved in the ongoing prevention and reduction of alcohol, tobacco, and other drug abuse in the Windham Southeast area. Visit www.BrattleboroAreaPreventionCoalition.org or call 802.257.2175 to learn more about their prevention efforts and to get involved.