

# EXCERPT FROM *WINGS NOT STRINGS:* *PARENTING STRATEGIES TO LET GO WITH CONFIDENCE*



Why are the adolescent years such a challenging season for parents? There are several reasons, not the least of which is that many are simply unprepared to deal with the pressures and changes in their kids. It happens so quickly and intensely that parents can be caught off guard. Also, with comparatively few support groups for parents of tweens and teens, they can feel alone and disconnected. Finally, let's be honest: when we contemplated having kids, we weren't exactly imagining teenagers—and all that comes with that!

There is another important factor at work. Most parents are so focused on their *kids* that they can underappreciate how significant this transition is for *them*. We need to remember: while high school graduates are closing a chapter on their childhoods, parents are also closing a chapter of their own. So, in order for a launch to be a successful, it means that *both* parents and teens are prepared and confident. Generally speaking, when parents aren't, their kids aren't either.

In our experience, when teens aren't ready to launch, it is often because their parents didn't, figuratively speaking,

move over from the driver's seat to the passenger seat in their child's life. The end result is a teen who remains stuck in Neverland—a kind of part-child, part-adult place in life. Unfortunately, this has become a pervasive issue.

**The good news is that there is a better way—to parent with a vision of releasing an eagle to soar to the heights, rather than a kite we continue to control.** It's giving children *wings, not strings*. It's being strategic and purposeful about parenting a *future adult*.

*Wings* are the empowering things we do to prepare our children to be secure, confident, and independent adults, who will live with purpose, integrity, and impact. We grow wings when we train them with strong internal guiding principles and give them freedom, opportunity, and accountability to apply those principles responsibly. Like an eagle, they are free to explore far and wide, while navigating the turbulence life often brings.

*Strings* are anything that ties down our children and prevents them from achieving their full potential. We constrain them when we control and manage them with a tight grip—even as they mature through the teen years. It can also happen when we pressure, coddle, enable, or ignore them. Regardless of which extreme, they are inhibited rather than equipped and empowered. Picture a kite—it can never fly freely to its natural destination. It is tied down, constrained, and maneuvered by the person controlling the strings. This is the end result **when parents allow nurture to interfere with nature.**

We wrote this book because so many families are struggling with what ought to be a natural evolutionary process. To counter these influences and help you with your

family's eventual launch, we tackle these important topics in this book:

- » current perspectives from organizations (e.g., colleges and employers) receiving our graduates and the reasons for these outcomes, including parenting styles
- » empowering parenting strategies that grow wings, not strings
- » when and how to let go (moving from driver to passenger)
- » building the personal leadership skills children need for adulthood
- » strategies for dealing with adolescent anxiety and technology
- » the prize that awaits when parents navigate this successfully

We hope this book encourages and equips you, and that you will take the opportunity to self-evaluate your parenting style and methods as you read through it. No one, including us (!), is a perfect parent, but we can all stand to sharpen our techniques to be the best we can be. It is a privilege to come alongside you in your parenting journey—to help you parent with purpose and let go with confidence! We wish you and your children every success.

CHAPTER ONE

# A CONCERNING YOUNG ADULT LANDSCAPE

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*“Houston, we have a problem.”*  
—*Apollo 13* film line

Up until recent years, it seemed an inarguable fact of life in America that most children would grow up attending school, graduate with a diploma signifying their accomplishment of certain minimum standards, and go on to either post-secondary education, the military, or the workforce. They would leave their parents’ homes, establish independent households of their own, create economic and emotional self-sufficiency for themselves, find a life partner, and likely marry. They would follow lifelong career paths that would provide them with consistent income and a way to contribute to the community and society at large. Obviously, there would be variations within this path, but that was the typical scenario. And, it is likely still the objective that most parents think they are working towards today.

*However, something has changed.*

These days, many parents of young adults find themselves navigating a bewildering and peculiar landscape of circumstances that includes such new terminology as “adulthood,” “technology addiction,” “safe spaces,” “trigger warnings,” and “failure to launch.” Many of the statistics on the younger generation are perplexing, if not downright

alarming: 30% of college students drop out after the first year and only 40% graduate with a four-year degree. A third of all 18- to 34-year olds live with their parents. Most kids over 13 are spending 60% of their waking moments consuming media.<sup>1</sup> And more children, teens, and young adults than ever before are being treated with medication for anxiety and depression.

It is into this landscape that we are launching our next generation. And, while most parents may not necessarily know the details of why the landscape has become so challenging, most intuitively recognize the perplexities and the perils.

The question is: *what can we do about it?* How can we as parents do our part to raise and release into the world mature, responsible, motivated, and productive citizens who will soar in adulthood, and be the contributing members of their families and communities that we want and need them to be?

You are likely wondering how we arrived at this state of affairs. Unfortunately, it's the result of a multitude of factors and contributors, only some of which involve the family and our parenting. Here are several key reasons for the difficulties many young people are facing as they transition into adulthood:

- » High schools generally aren't prioritizing next-step training in their course requirements. Many "adult preparation" courses, such as personal finance, life skills, leadership, independent living, and college/career readiness, if offered at all, are generally electives rather than core requirements. Most colleges

aren't filling the gap either, presuming their first-year students have acquired these skills before. The void in *practical living* education is pervasive and disconcerting.

- » Parents and educators are often erroneously assuming the *other* is covering these important topics; students are bearing the consequences of this training deficit and finger pointing.
- » The “college for all” mentality is hampering students who are either not college ready or would be better served pursuing other avenues to their careers.
- » Grade inflation is producing a false sense of academic prowess that college has a way of exposing; this is a major source of anxiety for young adults.
- » Colleges and universities are increasingly coddling students instead of building grit and resilience.
- » Many teens are lacking valuable job experience due to tighter government regulations of student workers or involvement in other activities.
- » Smartphones and screen time are consuming valuable free time, shortening attention spans, increasing distractions, inhibiting personal communication, heightening anxiety, promoting addiction, and reducing motivation.
- » Our culture has grown more casual, caustic, entertainment obsessed, and child-centered at a time when experts are extending the age of adolescence to the mid-to-late twenties. Consequently, maturity levels are not what they used to be.
- » Growing family dysfunction and fragmentation are adversely affecting socio-emotional health and support systems and preparation for adulthood.

## *Parenting Influences*

In addition to these general influences, parents also have to accept responsibility for their contribution to the young adult landscape. As primary caregivers, we play the lead role. So, let's put our egos aside and be truly honest with ourselves as we consider the impact of our own *parenting strategies and methods*.

Our goal is to give our children wings, not strings. But the fact is, despite the best of intentions, sometimes our own parenting strategies can get in the way of achieving our objectives. Although our children bear the primary responsibility for how their lives turn out (don't you forget it!), parenting influences can be significant.

We can all agree that we want to see our children happy, of admirable character, and successful. But, the different ways parents try to achieve these objectives can be all over the map. For example, when we (these authors) were growing up, authoritarian parenting was typical. Those were the days of, "Because I said so," non-negotiable orders, and self-sufficiency. Teens were expected to leave home after graduation, whether that meant to college, the trades, a job, or the military. The ball was in the graduate's court to sink or swim. Tough love ruled the day.

Times have changed, in part because of the pitfalls associated with extreme versions of this parenting philosophy. However, as it usually happens, the pendulum swings to the opposite extreme. We overcorrect, and new issues and unintended consequences emerge. Such is the case now, with overprotection, coddling, and control permeating the parenting landscape.

This is the generation of highly involved parenting. Today, fathers are inside the delivery room (rather than

pace in an outside hallway or in the hospital at all!). In many cases, moms (or dads) are giving up lucrative careers to take on the full-time job of parenting. And, when they do, they give it every bit as much effort as they did in their careers. Enter the “professional parents” who . . .

- » routinely attend *all* sports and dance practices
- » make their teens’ beds and pick up after them
- » bend over backward to keep their children happy and content
- » sometimes DO their kids’ homework
- » plan their lives around the non-stop schedules and resumé-building activities of their children
- » place undue pressure on their children to perform
- » when talking with other parents, revel in their own children’s accomplishments
- » advocate for their children at teacher conferences and school board meetings and defend their children’s misbehavior with authority figures
- » fill out their children’s college and employment applications
- » make every personal effort to help their kids make the team, land the lead role, earn a 4.0, get the job, win the promotion . . .

So, is it any wonder why Junior struggles with self-confidence, anxiety, entitlement, motivation, decision-making, problem solving, and the overall demands of adulthood when he or she leaves home? Or why employers and universities are characterizing young adults the way they are? And why parents struggle with letting go when Junior is about to enter the real world?



We'll have much more to say about the role of parents in our next chapter when we explore the nature and impact of today's most common parenting styles. Suffice it to say, when it comes to parenting, Houston, we have a problem, too.





# TAKE FIVE

1. How did the “parenting influences” list resonate with you? What other factors would you add to the list?
2. How would you assess the degree to which your children’s schooling is *practically* preparing them for independent life? Which topics and subjects do you need to take the lead on to ensure the bases are covered? Don’t assume that these are being covered by other parties!

