

# Whose life is it anyway?

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When I gave my daughter, then ten years old, a cell phone hidden in a lunchbox (cell phones were forbidden) to carry to school each day because she was the first to get into the school bus and the last to get down, and no teacher or attendant's presence was stipulated by the school, it was for her safety, so she could call us in an emergency.

A decade later, a mother who has just got her 14-year old a cell phone, is enquiring furiously of others on Facebook for recommendations for an app to monitor the kid's cell phone activity. A cell phone is no longer a safety gadget; it has in itself become the source of anxiety for parents. Parenting grows tougher by the years. If you know how many times you have given in to an impetuous response on social media and have regretted it later, you will understand how easy it is to slip. How difficult it is to have the World Wide Web in the palm of your hand and not get sucked into the virtual world.

Of all the challenges that we face in our current expeditious, technology-driven lives, the challenge of bringing up children must be the toughest. Relationships have evolved with time and not necessarily deteriorated. It is imperative to embrace change. Those who refuse to move with the times will be left behind.

In simpler times, the foundation of family rested on a simple principle — parents and elders loved, cared and provided for the children; children in turn respected and observed complete obeisance to them and followed their wishes, demands and expectations. The world view was limited. All this has been radically updated. The process has been gradual and there is no reason for parents and elders to have not evolved with the times.

Last October, in a small town in Karnataka, a 14 year old girl died mysteriously. Whether it was a suicide or a killing is mired in uncomfortable questions with communal undertones. But the overwhelming question is why a life so young that is yet to attain fruition worth only this much — to live or to die to uphold a vague idea that societies impose mainly upon women — honour?

If reports are to be believed, is it fair that a child so young be sacrificed to save a family's social face? Knowing that this is not a stray incident, the issue begs much soul searching. Why did the child have to die? Why parents who do much to bring a child up cannot tolerate the child's fleeting impetuosity, a little veering off the toed-line? Why is it that they prefer to lose their child forever than to guide them gently through their tumultuous teenage and after? There has been an alarming rise in suicides among children.

#### Burden of expectations

The younger generation has discovered a completely new world of independent thinking, learning, living that they are covetous of. Their thinking and world view is being radically modified by the plenitude of information they receive and the awareness that comes with it. Parenting is no longer a one-way street. Parents cannot impose their ideas and decisions on their children without considering their point of view.

According to a United Nations report, about 5,000 women die every year in honour killings perpetuated by family members. Rigid, hollow and meaningless social norms are upheld, especially in smaller communities, for fear of social boycott, but they are not unheard of across all social classes and religious communities.

In December, according to media reports, a girl studying in class 4 left a suicide note in which she said, "Amma, I didn't go to school for over a week. Please forgive me." Bangalore hasn't forgotten the horrific incident where a 13-year-old boy committed suicide because he was made fun of by classmates for failing to make it to the NCC. Earlier last year, a 16-year old girl who was allegedly reprimanded several times by her college principal for speaking with a boy, consumed pesticide and killed herself. Before she died, she wept and said sorry to her mother.

Why do children have to die over such trivial matters? Who are they shaming? They are shaming us as a society for our inability to reach out to them when they need us; for our lopsided view of what is important in life; for our failure to recognise that all children are not the same and do not have to be physically or intellectually on the top to matter; that they are good only if they obey elders unconditionally, unquestioningly.

It's a tough life

Bullied or stressed; physically or emotionally abused, how is it that parents don't come to know? There is brouhaha in support of quality time. Every difficult, hesitant conversation in the world needs time — no one begins to talk of their problems in measured hours. Children, with who we also have an age gap, have to be observed, their moods gauged, their problems coaxed out of them gently and with sensitivity.

On the one hand are parents reluctant to liberalise their parenting style, and on the other, those that think children these days are smart enough to 'manage' on their own. Parents and children live under one roof only so children can be provided for until they become financially independent and move out. It is a fact that children today are smarter and more 'aware', but there is a lot of learning that comes from life that they haven't experienced. Also, knowing a lot has little to do with maturity of the mind. Haven't we seen maturity elude older people? There are no cookie cutter minds — some children learn early and some late. It would be unwise to expect them to grow up without any guidance from elders. In fact, with the kind of challenges growing up demands today, gentle, non-intrusive counsel and direction from elders is imperative.

In a lot of cases the hurried, harried parents of today, when called upon to deal with a child's problem, either over-react or slump into denial. When a child comes to them with a problem, parents either dismiss it as nothing, or provide a ready solution. In the first case, parents have lowered the child's self-esteem, and in the latter, by failing to discuss it, they have left the child with unanswered questions. But parents seem to have neither the time nor the patience to discuss, gently guide, provide insight from experience and knowledge, listen to contrary points of view; and help children arrive at decisions that they find acceptable.

In these times of convenience-consumption where everything is just a click away, everything is also remote and distant. We lead private, lonely lives. Technology isn't bringing people closer as we falsely believe. Buying online, learning online — everything is convenient, but has removed and minimised human interaction. Hyperconnectivity creates a sham of friendships. Children may find it easier to reach out to 'friends' on Facebook and unburden themselves of their worries than to ask their parents in the next room. What makes them trust a large network of shallow, superficial connections? Can these 'social connections' replace family and true friends? Living their lives as they are at breakneck speed, and consuming unprecedented volumes of information that children may falsely believe is crucial for them to keep up, the FOMO — fear of missing out, the virtual world begins to seem more real than the actual.

What happens when a child fails? On social media, everyone seems to be living a fairytale life — everyone is happy, excelling in studies and sports, getting awards and recognition. Anyone who is facing disappointment or frustration is bound to feel the pressure of having failed more keenly. Also, others can be rude and insensitive. It all makes coming to terms with one's failures extremely difficult. It is the parents who have to take charge and stop making setbacks seem like catastrophes and help them build perspective. There was a news report of how a 22-year old woman from Lucknow and a boy of the

same age from a Punjab village became friends on Facebook and married in court without either family's consent. Fearing family censure, they immediately filed a writ petition in the High Court demanding protection. When the boy was threatened by his family, he snapped ties with the girl. The girl tried remonstrating with the boy and his family, but failed. Rejected and humiliated, she hanged herself.

What are families for if not for offering unconditional love and support, especially when the going gets tough? Parents and families form a circle of protection and security within which a child is nurtured and nourished. There is much truth in Robert Frost's words: "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in." If these children who chose to end their lives instead of seeking parental help were assured of their family's support, would they have still chosen to die?