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When an Adult Befriends YOUR Child!

Asked about what advice the (Santa Barbara County) sheriff would give to parents about their children visiting Neverland, he responded: "Don't do it."

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Most parents are not asked to decide whether their children may spend time in the company of celebrities such as Michael Jackson. There is no question that children face dangerous exploitation by adults both within and outside of their family, including adults who are powerful and respected public figures, as the recent Penn State child sexual abuse scandal reminds us. However, friendships between children and unrelated adults are quite common. Parents, who find their children befriended by adults, are often faced with difficult decisions. Consider the following scenarios, each based on a true story.

Jennie, age 14, has been the Patterson's baby-sitter since she was twelve. She likes to hang out at their home whenever possible, especially when she can sit and talk with Mrs. Patterson. She tells her mom, "Mrs. Patterson is really cool. She understands me." This is surprising to Jennie's mother who has recently found her daughter nearly impossible to fathom. One day Jennie comes home and announces that the Pattersons are planning a trip to Cabo and have asked her to come along. They have assured her that the children are old enough to require much less attention and that Jennie should consider this a vacation and not a babysitting job.

How does Jennie's mother respond?

Robbie, age 12, is an only child whose father passed away six years ago. Lately he has been spending a lot of time with the neighbors, the Greens, who have two daughters away at college. Mr. Green had always hoped for a son and has taken a genuine liking to Robbie. He loves to attend sporting events and go fishing while his wife and daughters never really shared these interests. One day Robbie announces that Mr. Green would like to take him camping for a few weeks this summer.

Robbie's mother understands that Robbie is at an age where having a man in his life could be a real benefit. Should she welcome the invitation? Is there anything more she needs to know before she gives approval to the trip?

Kevin, age 9, is an alter boy. He is quite fond of a particular priest, Father O'Connor, who has a great sense of humor. The other priests in the parish remark that Father O'Connor has "a real way with boys." Father O'Connor's parents have a cabin in the mountains and he frequently invites Kevin along with several other boys to spend a part of their holiday times hiking and fishing.

Is this a relationship that Kevin's mother should celebrate?

Then there is Karen, age 15, who goes to Yoga class at the YMCA. There she meets Susan, age 45, and the two became fast friends. Soon they get together after Yoga for coffee and, eventually, dinner and a movie. One day, during a particularly heated argument with her mother, Karen says, "Sometimes I wish I wasn't your daughter! I wish Susan were my mom!" Mother asks, "Who is this woman?" Karen replies, "She is someone who cares a lot about me and that is all you need to know!"

Is this a relationship Karen's mother should forbid? Or should she try to learn more about Susan, but how, if Karen and Susan fail to cooperate with her?

Are these stories unusual? Not at all. Research conducted at the University of California at Irvine, looked at the role of “very important” nonparental adults (VIPs) in the lives of over two hundred adolescents in southern California. They found that 83% of girls and 63% of boys reported having such a person in their lives. More than twice as often as not, boys chose men and girls chose women as VIPs. About half the time this non-parental adult was a family member: an aunt, uncle, grandparent or older sibling. Adults outside the family included friends of the family, the parents of friends, neighbors, teachers, coaches, and clergy. The adult could be a step-parent, or even an “ex-step-parent.”

The children in the examples above generally benefited from these relationships. Not all children are so lucky. Jennie continued to spend time with the Patterson family until she became more interested in her peers, and, by age 17, a boyfriend. Robbie loved the camping trip, but does not see much of Mr. Green anymore. Father O’Connor is not a pedophile. He simply enjoys the company of the boys in his parish. Karen eventually became uncomfortable seeing Susan, in part because Susan began to share personal problems Karen could not understand, and in part because of her mother’s continuing disapproval of Susan.

As parents respond to such relationships it is important they first develop some understanding of their own feelings about what is happening in the life of their child. Parents react in a variety of ways. They may feel hurt, jealous, angry, sad, afraid, or some combination of these emotions at once. Some parents feel that if their child bonds with another adult it is a sign that they have been found lacking in some way by their child. On the other hand, some parents may have a sense of relief that there is someone

out there who seems to understand and care for their child. They may even abdicate their important and irreplaceable role as a parent, deferring to the child's adult friend and withdrawing from their child. They may attempt to join the child in this new relationship and ask if they can be included in outings.

Perhaps the most helpful reaction would be to attempt to learn more about this adult whom their child seems to enjoy so much. Because children can sometimes be exploited in such relationships, concern and a protective stance is a healthy response by caring parents.

They need to become informed about this adult friend. What experience has this person had with children and teenagers in the past? Did they have children themselves and how is their relationship with their own children? Are they trying to make up for past mistakes made with their own children, even attempting "to right a wrong?" Are they looking to replace a child lost through death or divorce?

The world is full of loving adults who are good with children. These adults may give freely of their time, talents, and empathy in ways that truly enrich the lives of youngsters. Not all adults, however, have a positive influence on the children they befriend. The problem is finding the "bad apples." The UCI study mentioned above did strongly suggest that how a child perceives his VIP personal traits may have a significant impact on that child's later development. Also, adults with the best of values and morals may possess many of the same traits that the undesirable and possibly dangerous adults exhibit: they listen, they give unconditional affection, and they may offer an alternative to what might be a difficult home situation for a child.

Ultimately, nothing substitutes for a parent's good judgment combined with open communication between parent and child. Let us assume (although it is clearly not always the case) that parents are able to recognize those adults with the potential for criminal behaviors, such as sexual abuse or drug and alcohol related activities. Still, there remain some more subtle "red flags" which might be useful in prompting parents to take a closer look at a relationship between their child and a given adult.

First of all, does the adult VIP show an interest in getting to know you, the child's parent? Do they sometimes invite you to come along on outings or special occasions? Are they interested in your thoughts, your hopes, and your concerns about your child?

Second, do they show a respect for your role as a parent? Do they ever make plans with your child before first consulting you? Do they ask you first before giving your child a gift to see if you feel such a gift is appropriate? For example, parents may want their children to wait until a specific age before they see an R-rated movie, or listen to particular kinds of music, or play an M-rated video game, or wear a certain style of clothing, or travel to a particular destination. The VIP adult can ask a parent first, "I was thinking your son might enjoy this (movie, CD, concert, trip), what do you think?" Does the VIP adult generally defer to your opinion in such situations, or do they ever take sides, with your child, in advocating activities that you are not comfortable with?

A related concern may be that the adult friend has a great deal more time, money, or both, to lavish on your child than you do. This may make your continuing efforts as a parent pale in comparison to what this adult can offer your child. A younger child might not understand that his parent is doing her best under difficult circumstances to provide for her children and such children can become unfairly and painfully critical of their

parents. Occasional “spoiling” by grandparents, uncles, or unrelated adults is not harmful in and of itself, and, in fact, can often boost a child’s morale at critical times. It is important, however, that parents not be “upstaged” by such gifts, and that they be given with no strings attached, other than the child’s appreciation.

Does the adult seem “stuck” at the level of your child? If your son has a thirty-year-old “Big Brother,” for example, it is important that this mentor be able to relate to your child on his level, say that of a ten year old, at appropriate times. This was illustrated several years ago by a series of television spots for Big Brothers and Sisters showing adults “cutting up” with their Little Sisters and Brothers, for example, throwing pencils at the ceiling or eating junk food. The tag line was: “Being a Big Brother is not all algebra homework.” However, it is crucially important that these adults are involved productively in their work and in adult relationships. The best volunteers in the Big Brothers and Sisters organization are known to be adults who are stable in their marriage and their careers and are now in a position to give something back to the community. The adults with the most to offer children are able to be “thirteen and thirty-three” simultaneously, maintaining their adult judgment while regressing temporarily in the interests of bonding, empathy, and just plain fun.

Does the adult confide or even burden your child with their own concerns? Does she share her health problems, marital problems, parenting problems, or money problems with your child?

Watch your child for “red flags” as well: Is this relationship with an adult taking the place of important experiences the child or adolescent should be having with his peers? Do they choose to spend weekends with this adult rather than with friends?

Adolescence is a crucial time with respect to a person's success in developing a sense of themselves as a separate individual with his or her own identity. One cannot achieve this simply by transferring one's identification from parents to an adult outside the family. Instead it is a complex process involving the young person's family, important adults outside the family, and peers. A sense of belonging to a group of other youngsters of similar age is crucial to growing up psychologically healthy.

It is difficult for many parents to accept that their child has developed a bond with another adult, even if that adult is a grandparent or an aunt. It may be extremely difficult to accept and support if that person is your child's step-parent to whom you are no longer married. Parents often feel they must provide all that their child needs in the way of guidance and nurture. We know, of course, that this is not always easy and that the world is rich with people who have much to offer our children. Some are paid professionals such as teachers and therapists, but others are relatives, friends, and neighbors who find their own lives enriched by a connection with a young person.

Ironically, children may eventually experience the same feelings their parents felt when a younger person, outside of the family, becomes important in the life of one of their aging parents. Adults are often unhappy about relationships that their senior parents form with young adults. They may fear these younger friends, of their generation, may exploit their parents in some way. They may feel the young people who show kindness and attention to their parents will highlight their own neglect of their aging parents. Thus, so-called trans-generational friendships can be viewed with suspicion at any age and at any point in the life cycle.

Still, when people reach across generations to care for each other it can be a wonderful experience. There are countless Hollywood movies, such as *The Karate Kid*, that portray a benevolent relationship between a needy child and an unrelated adult. Audiences love these stories. Jack Nicholson beautifully illustrated this point in the final scene in the movie *About Schmidt* as he is brought to tears by a drawing he receives from a foster child whom he has been supporting far away in Africa. Although he has never met this child, this simple connection he made gave meaning to his life when he seemed to have lost hope. Many adults will recall relationships from their childhood with adult friends who were there for them at important times in their lives, who may have even transformed their lives. As is so often the case with parenting, the strongest way to protect your child from a harmful relationship is to maintain that sense of trust which allows your child to feel they can safely talk with you. Parents owe it to their children to consider both the risks and benefits these relationships hold for their children and celebrate those relationships that will enrich the lives of all involved.

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