

Challenging children to learn

My granddaughter just turned 10. She called me last Friday, on her birthday, because she is pretty much unreachable these days, with her social calendar and all.

After my celebratory salutations, we proceeded to have the most phenomenal conversation imaginable from a 10-year-old.

She talked about school and how important it was for her to be at good schools, because she needs to maintain a grade point average that will help her become a doctor.

"A doctor, huh?" I asked, "You mean the kind that can write prescriptions?"

Well, that was it. Like a scene out of the movie, "Parenthood," I started to imagine being in the audience, watching my grown-up granddaughter receive her medical degree, and wondered if I brought enough tissues.

"Who is this person?" I thought, as I held the phone away to look at it. "Who are you, and what planet did you come from?"

She talked effusively about what junior high and high school she wants to attend so she can take advanced placement college courses, and how she is taking sixth grade math, which she apparently loves, and gets a kick out of science, too.

"Where did you get all this information about college?" I asked.

Imagine finding out that while her fourth grade teacher was cleaning and preparing to close the room for the summer, she talked to students about the future and what going to college could mean to their lives.

This dialogue of great ex-

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pectations was going on in Nashville, TN, where she lives, and I thought, "What an excellent teacher she must be, and what an extraordinary school she attends."

In our conversation, my granddaughter even thought about the cost of college and how she will have to earn scholarships to make it through. None of our families are wealthy, so it's a big worry for her father and us, her grandparents.

Then, I started thinking about the rest of her peers, who are in less-than-satisfactory schools, and what messages teachers were sending their children off to summer vacation with, as they prepare for fifth grade.

I thought of our national attitude toward education and what – if anything – is being done to prepare these children for the 21st century. It scares me to think of how far behind other industrialized nations we are.

We rank 48th in math and science. We are musically illiterate. Our children are getting no exercise, and there are higher instances of childhood diabetes because of poor nutrition and dwindling physical education programs.

In terms of number of days and time in school, the schedule is based on an antiquated system that was necessary more than 100 years ago, when families needed help on the

farm.

Our children need to be challenged in school, to aspire to greatness, not mediocrity. That means longer days in school, including weekend remedial courses for those who feel they are falling behind. Summer programs can help with reading and math.

My son, her father, keeps reminding me that she has her teenage years to survive; and how do you escape that unscathed?

She carries a lot on her little shoulders, because her parents are divorced and her father has remarried, adopting his new wife's son, and there's another little brother on the way.

So, many unforeseen obstacles can be thrown in her path, and a lot will depend upon the choices she makes.

We talk a lot about how important it is to read and be interested in everything – develop both sides of the brain – be involved in the world around you, and care about people.

She is going to visit us in a couple of weeks. We'll scour my extensive library and dig out some classics that she absolutely has to read.

I realized in my conversation with her that her capacity for intellectual stimulation is limitless.

My husband and I bought her a computer for her birthday. We are setting it up so she can keep a journal and write her papers. I thought my son was going to strangle us, because it is such a powerful computer, more than most people need, but the price was right.

It's the beginning of an intellectual umbilical cord between Tennessee and Minnesota.

She's more than ready.