

**Dawn Beintema**

**SDLI Servant Leadership Certification 2002-2003**

**Portfolio**

### **Teenagers and Servant Leadership**

Preach the gospel at all times, and if necessary use words. If you really think about it, I could finish this article right here. Is there anything more you need to know about raising children? How many times have we all heard, “it’s not what you say, it’s what you do that counts”? This is not new information, yet it could make a profound difference in the way we raise our children. As the author I need to admit up front that I am not a perfect parent, far from it. However, it has been the hard lessons that have increased my awareness of what a disservice we parents are at times to our children.

#### Boomers Rule

As a child born in the mid-fifties, I grew up in a suburb of America’s Finest City, San Diego. The San Diego of today, and that same suburb do not even closely resemble what they were in my youth. I could be gone for hours exploring, and no one thought twice about my absence. There were many freedoms we took for granted that no sane parent would approve of today.

When my friends and I thought about being parents one day we idolized the experience. It would be fun, and our children would love everything about us. Boy did we miss the boat. Life is hard, and parenting is the hardest thing anyone will ever do. I think the Army’s slogan “The toughest job you’ll ever love” is more related to parenting than being in the army.

#### I’m So Confused?

In college I studied both Sociology and Psychology. My favorite discussion with fellow students was the differing behavioral theories of the sociologist and psychologists. The psychologists believed that a human was born with a complete personality in tact at conception. On the sociology side, a human was born a blank slate and the personality developed based on experiences since conception. I often found myself thinking that there had to be a midpoint somewhere that was more correct. Then, I had a daughter.

I see patterns that started in the womb, that are still part of her at age 14. I thought she’d be like I was as a child, very shy and quiet. Nope, quite the opposite. As many parents have found, no matter what I did or said, it didn’t really make much difference. But I had so much that I wanted to teach my daughter! I had to share my experiences, to mold

her... The reality is there were times I just held on as she ran through life at breakneck speed. But I had to stay in control, didn't I?

### The Girls Scouts Meet the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

As you are, I too am involved in too many things. I have learned to say "no" over the years, and only say, "yes" to those things that really excite me. During my daughter's elementary school years, I chose to be involved in her activities ranging from music lessons, sports and the inevitable participation in Girl Scouts. During my youth I also was a Girl Scout and had some fond memories of camping, learning to cook and the competition for earning badges. Girl Scouts of today, while having the same basic doctrine of earning badges and positive growth experiences, are not the same. The girls in this troop did not want to wear their uniforms to school because it was embarrassing. They did not really care about badges or camping.

As the girl scouts entered middle school they wanted to talk about current issues. September 11<sup>th</sup> happened, the school was in lock-down for a possible violent threat, and we all realized that this was not the 50's and 60's anymore. It was a hard lesson to learn as a parent.

What I did learn, however, was that these girls were amazing. I found them intelligent, interested in their world, environmentally aware, and with incredible social skills. The rest of us got this eventually, but not this early! The girls really understood peer pressure, their own psychological needs, as well as those of all their friends. As I compare them to myself at that age, I realized that there really is no comparison.

### To Spock or not to Spock

Without even trying, I was raising my daughter in much the same way that I was raised. Yet she lived in such a different world that it was no wonder that we had conflict. I also found that teens don't really listen to their parents. I know this may come as a surprise to some of you, but it really is true. They tune out most of what you say. They tend to use what is known as selective listening, which really means that they only hear the things they want to. The rest of your wise words just go whizzing by their ears. So much for all that great stuff you were saying!

So, if they don't listen to parents, then whom do they listen to? Friends mostly, teachers at times, or other adults that they like or admire. Embracing this idea changes the paradigm of what we think of as parental responsibility.

### The heart of the matter

If a parent only has *some* influence over the child, then society cannot continue to blame the parents when something goes wrong. If you truly think about the idea of children being our collective future, then the collective "we" needs to take some responsibility for that. All the children in our world are our responsibility, whether we give birth to them or not. Each of us has the ability to positively influence a child's life.

My lesson in this theory came from another thing I couldn't say "no" to. I was asked to be a mentor for some high school students at a high school within the city that I worked. I looked at it as more of a chore in the beginning. I had been responsible for coordinating a mentor program for my organization, so I thought I might learn something that would help my program. That is not what I learned.

I was given two 16-year-old girls to mentor, both juniors. I had two because there were not enough adults who were willing to be mentors, so the kids had to share. My two girls were friends, so that worked out fine.

The differences between the environment in which they live, and the environment that I live in were significant. I started off thinking that I had to find something to teach them each time we met. These were boring meetings for all of us. I eventually learned to just listen and ask open-ended questions about their classes, their friends, boys, and life in general. It took awhile for comfort to grow and I was surprised that they wanted to know things about me. That was a change! Ultimately it came out. **If I gave them advice they would listen, but if their parents gave them the same advice they would not.** If you really think about it, it is very true. Not 100% of the time, but true none the less.

Our own children can't see us as others do. We may be smart, successful, and attractive - - everything they say they want to be. But to them we are just Mom or Dad. It takes many years of maturity for children to begin to recognize their parents from the same perspective that the rest of the world does. It is often not until our children have children of their own that we can begin to see each other on equal footing.

If parents cannot affect 100% of their child's learning and development, then who fills in the gaps for them? I think we all do. You don't need to have children to influence a child's life, and, you can have children and still make an impact on another child's life. How many times have we heard the phrase at work "it's not my job". I think society has been using this same phrase when it comes to our youth. It's too bad, because I think it is everyone's job to create a positive future for all youth.

### Servant Leadership

Robert K. Greenleaf, began the movement of Servant Leadership with his 1960 essay, "The Servant as Leader". Greenleaf says, "The servant-leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The best test is: Do those served grow as persons; do they while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?"

I especially like the last part about those being served, growing as persons who will one day want to be servant leaders themselves. What a wonderful way to look at raising our children! It would seem that the ideal goal is not only to raise happy and well-adjusted children, but, to give them enough skill to do the same thing themselves.

The Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership has published a list of 10 traits that they believe embody the servant leader. In developing future servant leaders we should pay close attention to focusing on each one of these. Since our teens are watching us more than listening to us, we can take some great parenting and mentoring tips from each of these traits.

1. Listening

When dealing with teens, adults can't listen enough. It takes nerve for a child to speak to a parent sometimes, especially when it is important to them.

- ✓ Take a breath before you start in on that lecture.
- ✓ Find good listening opportunities, like driving. I have found that when I drive it is easier for me to be quiet, so my daughter talks more. I've learned some really interesting things this way.
- ✓ Ask open-ended questions, and don't be afraid of long silences.

2. Empathy

Try to remember what it felt like to be a teenager. You thought you knew a lot, your parents were idiots and you couldn't wait to grow up and get out on your own. Today it is much harder.

- ✓ When *they* think it is important, it *is* important.
- ✓ If you can't understand them, then a hug will do.

3. Healing

Servant-leaders strive to make themselves and others whole in the face of failure or suffering. What you may define as failure or suffering is much different than what your children will. A fight with a friend can be earth-shattering for a teen.

- ✓ Don't belittle their feelings.
- ✓ Give them time to grieve in their own way.

4. Awareness

We may have a great, or not so great, understanding of our own strengths and weaknesses. Most of us have really tried to build our children's self-esteem, so we don't focus on the weaknesses. However, we learn humility from our weaknesses, and this is good thing in servant leadership. The best way to teach this is to live it.

- ✓ Be honest about what you are not good at. It will teach your children that they don't have to be perfect.
- ✓ Play to the strengths. Find out what they are good at and give them opportunities to succeed.

5. Persuasion

Servant-leaders rely more on persuasion than wanting to be the decision maker. But it only works when you are willing to really listen to the other's point of view. When you can repeat someone's position to them, then, and only then, can you influence a decision. It all comes back to the need to listen in order to really understand what someone is saying. It goes deeper than the words, it has to go to

feeling and the other person needs to feel that you care about their feelings for you to be persuasive with them.

- ✓ Reexamine how do you handle decisions in your home?
- ✓ Model persuasion, then, let your teen decide.

#### 6. Conceptualization

Seeing the big picture and the long-term effect of a short-term statement or action. When our children are very young we give them small tasks to do, usually one at a time. As they grow, we need to provide more explanation of why we do things, how all the pieces fit together, and how important each step is in completing the whole task.

- ✓ Explain the big picture.
- ✓ Talk through why you made an important decision.

#### 7. Foresight

Thoughtful planning can help anyone anticipate what may happen in a given situation. The ability to anticipate and then plan for the possible outcomes is a helpful skill for any individual or team. A servant-leader takes the time to anticipate before jumping into unknown situations. Our teens need to understand this skill as well.

- ✓ Ask if/then questions. If you do this what are the likely results?
- ✓ Pausing a movie to guess what you think will happen next.
- ✓ Explaining more about why you make some decisions and the long-term implications of those decisions.

#### 8. Stewardship

Servant-leaders accept responsibility for other people who need help. They also accept responsibility for their environment. In this trait, actions speak the loudest. Feeding the hungry, literally. In our Girl Scout troop, we put together bags with non-perishable food items like granola bars, crackers, and fruit snacks. The girls also put personal notes of encouragement in each bag. We stapled them shut then asked the families to keep them in their cars. When we see someone in need we have something to offer. Even the smallest offerings, will be remembered in a big way by your children.

- ✓ Pick up a piece of trash, rather than walking past it.
- ✓ Acknowledge the needy with *at least* a kind word.

#### 9. Commitment

When a servant-leader commits to something, they stay committed. The greatest learning here is breaking the cycle of quitting when things get too hard. Your commitment and attendance with groups you belong to will demonstrate this to your children. What do you do when your teen wants to participate in a new sport, or play an instrument, then doesn't like the time it takes to practice? The lesson of meeting short-term needs, vs. the long term ones is a valuable one.

- ✓ Keep your commitments
- ✓ Push your children to keep their commitments

#### 10. Building Community

Servant-leaders strive to create a sense of community in any activity or organization they are involved with. We demonstrate this by practicing inclusion.

- ✓ Seek out the new person and welcome them.
- ✓ Introduce yourself to someone you have seen often yet never met.

#### I like the idea, now what do I do?

In my involvement with the San Diego Leadership Initiative, I have been given the opportunity to apply the concept of servant leadership to local youth. I organized a Youth Leadership committee that has been working toward the development of a servant leadership certification program for San Diego high school students. One of the most unique aspects of this committee is the active involvement of several youth. I am most proud that one of the young girls I mentored is participating on this committee. The youth have been able to keep the adults grounded in developing a program that high school students will like. They don't mind learning about concepts, but keep it brief. They most enjoy learning and working together as a group. They want to live the learning, not just hear about it. In our design meetings we are looking for experiences that will demonstrate the 10 key traits.

We all believe that mentoring is a key component of a successful program. Having an adult to advise, support, listen and basically model good servant leadership is the best "community parenting" that we can provide.

#### **Our Future**

It is an overused phrase: "Our children are our future". What I hope that you take with you after reading this is that *all* children are our responsibility. We do not need to have given birth, adopted or be a guardian to offer support, assistance and guidance. Servant leadership is about accepting responsibility beyond our immediate view. If you had the opportunity to rescue a child from being hit by a car, I don't know any who would stop and say, "Sorry, that's not my child". Yet unless we take this feeling of collective responsibility into our hearts, our inaction may have the same results. Our future will be directly impacted by those of us who accept that responsibility.

Be a good parent, be a good role model, be a good mentor, be a servant-leader.