

WE HAVE just seen Pete off for a month at camp. He's our oldest boy, just twelve years old. He is paying for one two-week period with money he earned running errands for the neighbors and performing extra domestic chores for his mother and me. We are paying for the other period.

Financially we can afford to pay Pete's way through the entire month, for the camping fee is not great. Parentally we cannot. As parents we can easily deprive ourselves of the money required for Pete's month in the northern woods; but also as parents we cannot deprive him of his boyhood triumph in paying for part of his vacation.

It is rather wearing on a parent's ego, this yielding to the individuality of a child. How nice it would sound for Ruth and me to say solemnly, "Yes, Pete earned money for part of his vacation, but we simply couldn't bear to see him spend it that way after he had worked so hard for it . . . so we told him to put his money in the bank, and we financed his entire trip up North."

It would sound pretty to our ears; it would have a tinny tone in Pete's. For which is the greater satisfaction, the more real achievement for a twelve-year-old—a sum written in a bank book, or two weeks in the North, where every energetic moment may tingle with his prideful realization that he put himself there by his own hard work?

So we're really trying to be generous by permitting our boy to spend his money. And that presents a rather uncomfortable paradox, because it makes his parents appear selfish. I might add that it makes at least one of them feel selfish, too. For years I've been polishing my own vanity by dispensing largesse to the best of my limited ability. And now that one of my charges stays my proffered hand and advises me to keep my money, I feel guilty. I don't like it. It diminishes my importance, at least in this particular aspect of parenthood.

But that, I suppose, is part of growing up . . . for parents, that is. As Pete lives each day nearer maturity, Ruth and I must grow up with him without leaving his little brother John and their sister Susan in the lurch. Watching Pete grow this way makes the growth of Johnny and Sukie more apparent to us, and Ruth and I can see that even the very young must be permitted to feel the selfish hand of parenthood relax, however slightly.

For example, little Sukie (really not much bigger than a medium-size mama doll you see in store windows) has reached the I-can-do-it-by-myself stage. Little things like hurriedly preparing for a flying trip to the bathroom, opening a door that sticks, spooning creamed corn or string beans from the serving dish into her own plate in her high chair next to mine—these things Sukie can do, or thinks she can do, for herself now. She doesn't need us as much as she did two weeks ago when she relied upon us to perform these little services for her, she very plainly tells us. The fact that she, like Pete and Johnny, will need us both in many ways for many years to come, doesn't occur to her, naturally. In her own shining eyes, if she ever takes time to look at her (Continued on page 58)

PARENTS' MAGAZINE • MAY 1950

GROW WITH YOUR CHILDREN

By WILLIAM J. MURDOCH, a father

It is often hard for parents to keep hands off and allow their children to become increasingly independent. But boys and girls need freedom to grow



GROW WITH YOUR CHILDREN

(Continued from page 31)

young life, she is growing up. And what must Ruth and I do? Refuse to relinquish our grasp upon her? Turn selfish and insist that she depend completely on us, even down to performing these little things she has mastered? Deny, by denying her the opportunity to be independent in these little ways, that she is growing up? Well, of course not. We grow up with her. We relax the grip of our parenthood sufficiently so that she can do these little things for herself, just as we let Pete pay his way to camp. Neither of these displays of filial independence are real body blows, and yet they do constitute a smart rap upon the knuckles of that policing, ever-extended hand of parenthood.

Parenthood is rife with selfishness that must be shredded away as the days wear on and the years build up on the shoulders of our children. Johnny reminds his mother and me nearly every day, in one way or another, that he is an individual and that by generously acknowledging his entity his parents can make it easier for him to grow up and be the man his individuality insists that he be.

Consider the directness of Johnny's speech. Sometimes it is nearly terrifying. He does not hurt, for he is not thoughtless or flighty. He sees his point clearly and he announces it. There was the day not long ago, for instance, when Ruth reprimanded him rather sharply for crisply uttering "damn" at his play. After being dressed down orally in short order, Johnny defended himself.

"Daddy says it," he told Ruth.

"No, he doesn't," she lied loyally.

"He says, 'darn.'"

"All right," Johnny replied mildly. "But I say 'damn.'"

RIGHT HERE and now the choice between the two words is beside the point. The point is that Johnny of the tawny hair and the unwavering gray eyes saw no need to dissemble. He rarely does. He is direct without being blunt or brutal or rude. Ruth and I and elders like us may tactfully prance around a situation and rack our brains for the less strenuous means of entrance and exit, because such circumlocution seems correct to us. But we have not selfishly attempted to make Johnny's clear-thinking processes as cluttered with inhibitions as ours. So long as he does not wander beyond the bounds of what we and the rest of society consider good taste, we will let Johnny speak directly to the point.

Like other parents, Ruth and I would gladly give our children the moon—if we could and if they wanted it. But children do not ask for such outlandish things. Their chief demand upon us grows as they grow: they want independence even as we wanted it. Our greatest gift to them, after we have given them life, is giving up supervision of as many of their acts of living as they can perform and enjoy completely without us.

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