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WHY IT'S A GREAT TIME TO BE A KID

Did everything just seem so much easier, safer, better when you were young? It wasn't. You're raising a kid at the right time. Here's why.

BY HOLLY PEVZNER

In 2006 our country was at war and still antsy with anxiety over 9/11. I had already been laid off once.

Dateline NBC: To Catch a Predator was a popular show. And yet my husband and I prayed for the best, and made the leap to start a family. Now that baby is 6 years old.

If anything, the world seems worse.

We have a roller-coaster economy, school shootings, online bullyicides, and the unfathomable cost of college. Yet I look at my little boy and think: What a great time to be a kid. Yeah, you read that right. Hope has outpaced dread for me—and I'm not the only one. Sociologists, psychologists, futurists (yes, that's a job), educators, and health experts all see the awesome potential of the post-millennial generation dubbed Gen Z. Have you been losing sleep, wondering what you were thinking bringing a kid into this world? It's going to be OK. More than OK. We can prove it.

THEY'RE SAFER

Who's watching the kids? We are, along with our communities, and we're doing a fine job. "Despite everyone having to work more, parents spend more time with children than prior generations," says Kenneth C. Land, Ph.D., faculty director of the Center for Population Health and Aging at Duke University, in Durham, NC. A new study from the Pew Research Center found that in 1965 moms spent 10 hours a week with kiddos; dads, 2.5. In 2011 they clocked in at 14 and 7, respectively. "We're having fewer kids, so there's more time spent on each," explains Land. And we've largely exchanged the "me" time our moms enjoyed for "we" time. "We chaperone children in situations we were left alone in, like walking to school or going to the park," says futurist Anne Boysen, author of the blog *afterthemillennials.com*, who studies generational trends. "Gen Z has entertainment targeted to parent and child as a unit, like the play space/coffee shop combos that have

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taken hold in [places like] L.A., Chicago, and Columbus, Ohio." Land maintains our involvement is in part a reaction to the divorce and two-income boom we lived through. We fended for ourselves a lot, but we want it to be different for our kids. It's paying off: "Rising parental involvement is providing a buffer, even as other parts of children's environment become less stable."

There's also more community involvement, so overall, kids are safer, Land continues. "It took about fifteen years for communities to realize that all these kids couldn't be at loose ends every weekday. That's when after-school programs—and children out of harm's way—took hold." In 1998 there were 300 federally funded after-school centers, according to the Afterschool Alliance, a nonprofit advocacy organization. In 2010? 11,000.

Technology is also part of the new vigilance. "The 24/7 media cycle began around the time today's parents were born," Land explains. "We started seeing more than local news." We were the first generation to be exposed to the Jaycee Lee Dugards of the world; our kids are better monitored than we ever were. "I watch the kids on my block like my own," shares Jennifer Bein, mom of a 9-year-old in Hicksville, NY. "If I see one walking her dog and it's getting dark, I go out. If I miss the school bus, I know a friend will take my son."

TECH'S A (VERY) GOOD THING

Tech is entrenched in the lives of even our youngest children—and it's been accused of everything from breeding addiction to instant gratification to crushing the joy of reading a book. The digital age was only dawning in our teen years. So when we see

"MY SEVEN-YEAR-OLD NEVER COMMENTS WHEN SHE SEES TWO MOMMIES OR A PERSON IN A WHEELCHAIR."

our 6-year-old only detached from tech in bed (and sometimes not even then), it's kinda cool—yet unsettling.

"Our children are digital natives. That's not inherently bad," says David Bickham, Ph.D., a staff scientist at the Center on Media and Child Health at Children's Hospital Boston and an instructor of pediatrics at Harvard Medical School. "Obviously, technology can be a gateway

to negative, but it's a much wider path to positive." For starters, it's bolstering reading. "They said that technology would edge out reading, but it's not happening," says Francie Alexander, vice president and chief academic officer of Scholastic Education. To the contrary: Scholastic's latest Kids & Family Reading Report

found 21 percent of girls and 26 percent of boys are reading more often for fun after trying just one ebook. Dina Roth's second-grader created 22 valentines on the computer, which took more brain flexing than squeezing her name onto store-bought ones. "She not only wrote a few sentences on each, she downloaded graphics," says the Boca Raton, FL, mom. "She didn't ask for help once."

It goes beyond reading and writing. A national PBS survey of teachers found tech helps kids use resources they otherwise wouldn't. "Hauling a five-pound encyclopedia off a shelf and searching it didn't encourage me to satisfy my curiosity," recalls Lexington, KY, mom Rallie McAllister. "But my kids love to find facts because of the easy access, and I think they're smarter than I was because of it."

THEY GET ALONG

It's our kids who may be the first fully open-hearted population. "Acceptance of diversity and lifestyle choices has been gradually rising," says Boysen. "My seven-year-old never comments when she sees two mommies or someone in a wheelchair," says Linnea Leaver Mavrides of Brooklyn. "Things were hush-hush during my upbringing, but now there's such an emphasis on embracing differences, I really think this will lead to a better life for all our kids."



77%
OF TEACHERS SAY
TECHNOLOGIES
MOTIVATE THEIR
STUDENTS TO LEARN

This shift springs, in part, from media. "A decade ago, kids saw a lot more negative stereotypes," says Melanie Killen, Ph.D., associate director of the Center for Children, Relationships, and Culture at the University of Maryland in College Park. Indeed, a study in *The Journal of Advertising Research* noted a steady increase of diversity in children's advertising over the past 20 years. "Positive images help kids reject stereotypes," says Killen.

Another reason for the positive trend: No other generation has lived with such diversity. Between 1990 and 2010, the percentage of Hispanic public school students went

THIS IS THE FIRST GENERATION WHERE BIAS IS UNCOOL, BULLYING WRONG. THERE'S SHAME CONNECTED TO THEM.

from 12 to 23 percent, according to the U.S. Department of Education. Also on the uptick: Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American, and mixed-race students.

THEY'LL SUCCEED

"Because Gen Z is being raised in tough times, I believe that they'll be far more pragmatic about money, and hence better off financially than we are," says Tim Elmore,

Ph.D., founder of the nonprofit Growing

Leaders. Face it: Many of us are struggling because we overspent and undersaved. Elmore may be on to something: According to a recent study by TD Ameritrade, 76 percent of Gen Z'ers said saving money is important. "Where we had a lot handed to us, our

children are much more likely to be told to wait or earn it," notes Elmore. Laura Rowley said "No way" when her daughter pleaded for an iPad. "Then we talked about how she could earn the money," says the New Jersey mom. Her daughter raked in \$400 dog sitting. "She decided to get a Kindle Fire for \$200 so she could bank the rest. So proud!"

Cash for a Kindle is great, but what about college? "Already, many are questioning whether a traditional four-year experience is worth the cost," says Elmore. By the time your child is ready, there will probably be a different landscape. Trade schools—less

expensive than even public colleges—will be more respected as the demand for skill-specific education increases. "If things keep moving toward online learning, you'll be able to earn a certificate noting you took a job-market-relevant class from Harvard, Yale, or DeVry. The Internet is the great equalizer. So many more will have access to education that is affordable—and lands them in a solid career," says Elmore. Neurologist Judy Willis, M.D., a neuro-education consultant in Santa Barbara, CA, agrees: "Colleges will use new technology in innovative ways that allow students to develop in-demand skills at a lower price."

"I get so tired of hearing negatives," says clinical child psychologist Rebecca Resnik, Psy.D., of Bethesda, MD. "I see kids with a solid sense of right and wrong, who embrace diversity. I see smart kids with varied abilities. This is a great time to be a kid: What I see is hope." ☐

HOLLY PEVZNER lives in Brooklyn with a houseful of boys: two kids, a husband, and a tabby cat.

WANT MORE GOOD NEWS?

Glad you asked!



1

REDUCED VIOLENCE

Children as victims of violent crime have fallen more than 60 percent from 2001 to 2011, according to the Foundation for Child Development's annual Child Well-Being Index.

2

LATER SEX

The April issue of *Pediatrics* reported that 95% of 13-year-olds are virgins. At 14, it's 89%; at 15, 80%; at 16, 67%. And a quarter of males and females have not had sex by age 20.

3

LESS BOOZING

The annual Monitoring the Future report of more than 45,000 eighth-, tenth-, and twelfth-graders found that alcohol use reached historically low levels in 2012.

4

NO SMOKIN' IN THE BOYS' ROOM

Smoking rates fell among all grades studied in the 2012 Monitoring the Future report. Eighth-graders had the biggest drop.

5

A SLIMMER START

"Today's kindergartners don't know anything but the healthy school-lunch program," says Sandra Ford, president of the School Nutrition Association. "It sets up better choices for life."

65%

OF GRADE-SCHOOLERS WILL HAVE JOBS THAT DON'T EXIST NOW

