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## HOW MUCH DO WE OWE OUR CHILDREN

Written by Emily Hourican

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How much do we owe our children? For a while now, the answer to that one seems to have been ‘everything!’ Or certainly ‘the best we can manage.’ Which, translated into the real world, means, we owe them countless personal sacrifices, on every level, regardless of the cost to ourselves.

My amateur interpretation of this is that we are over-compensating because deep down inside we know they have lost an awful lot in terms of freedom. The freedom to knock around for hours with pals, damming streams or trespassing orchards (yes, I know it sounds like Famous Five land, but even I did that stuff, not so long ago). The freedom to find out about grown-up things, like sex and luxury goods, at a leisurely pace that allowed time for plenty of misinformation and years of very gradual acclimatisation when you experimented with a bit of light petting and a trip to C&A. The freedom to believe that life would muddle itself out and that interesting jobs would be available to those who wanted them.

Those freedoms are gone now, swallowed up in the headlong dash of modern life, and in their absence we are a) guilty and b) terrified that our children will be left behind. And so, enter the new world order. Children must be made the number one focus of our lives. Everything we do, we must do for them, to prepare them for the rigours of life ahead. As if they were, every one of them, little athletes in Olympic training.

But I’m not sure that washes really. I mean, do I owe my kids 30 years in a job I hate, for example, so they can go to private school and do a million after-school activities all costing €200 a pop? Do I owe them my weekends, spent behind the wheel of a car as I drop them to various sports, play-dates and parties? Do I owe them years of shopping in Dunnes Stores so they can shop at Abercrombie & Fitch? More and more, I’m thinking – no.

Now, I know that sacrificing themselves is what parents do – in the natural world this takes the form of throwing themselves between predators and their young, for example – and obviously I would willingly do the same thing. That’s Nature’s Imperative, a way of ensuring the species survives. And I also know that part of being a middle class parent is depriving yourself – of sun holidays maybe, or a second TV – so that your kids get the best possible

education. I'm fine with that. But there is a limit, and to me that limit kicks in when the sacrifice is more than you can bear. Say it's a job that is going to take you away from home for two weeks out of every month? And that this is going to make you miserable, but the reward will mean maintaining a standard of living that the kids are used to? What then? Do you grit your teeth and get your passport renewed, focussing on the end result to get you through it? Do you owe it to them to stay in a relationship where you aren't happy, forgoing all chance of finding someone else to love and who loves you, in order that your children have a stable family life? Will they thank you?

I'm not so sure you do. After all, why should you be miserable just so your kids can be happy? And really, what chance do they have of being truly happy if you are miserable? Wont the sub-conscious knowledge of your unhappiness (that's if you are really good at hiding it), mess up their own serenity? Of course it will. And we all know that. Which is the Achilles heel of the whole argument.

A wise man said to me recently, "Whatever you do, they'll hate you anyway, so you may as well suit yourself." That might sound harsh, but actually I found it very liberating. Because he's right. If you make them play tennis every second day, or practise piano for 15 minutes every evening, they'll hate you for it. If you don't, they'll say you never gave them the chance to become aces or pros or whatever. Beggar yourself to send them to private school, and they will turn round and tell you they were miserable because all the other kids had private jets and teased them. Send them to the local national school and they will accuse you of scuppering their chances of greatness by not getting them taught by the Jesuits or the Holy Ghost Fathers. If you go and work in Saudi Arabia for ten months a year so as to afford all the material things they aspire to, they'll say they have grown up emotionally damaged by the lack of your presence.

This is their biological imperative – to turn on you and find in your careful, tentative, desperately hopeful managing of their early lives, the source and cause of all their misery. And so, knowing that, you are free to find a happy medium, released from the notion that every second of your life must be led for them. Having children is supposed to be a blessing, not a life-sentence, and so we need to start living it as if there is a bit of give and take on both sides. You'll do your best, and after that, they should shut up and be grateful.

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