

From the Heart. . .

. . . Life Skills for Today

By Sharon L. Benedict MS, ACC



Growing up God's Kids—Childhood Wishes

(published in Boerne Star, Friday, September 3, 2010)

How are children a part of your life? No matter what we experienced in our childhood, I believe none of us can look into the eyes of a precious, sweet, and innocent child and not feel somehow moved in our hearts; and, maybe even, touched by the love of God in some way.

For those of us who have been privileged to bear children, even adopt a special soul, we all understand the feeling that can last forever. We were all one of those precious babies hopefully welcomed into this great big, wide world. And, the first sight we saw and touch we felt was our Momma's loving arms and Daddy's sweet smile. Is this how your childhood started? Or do you have another story to tell? I know I did. But the more tragic memories are also accompanied by some very sweet ones that made all the difference for me today.

The following questions are not intended to provide counseling. They are simply questions to encourage some reflection and creative connection between your own childhood and those of your own children now or in the future. I encourage you, by all means, to seek professional or pastoral counsel to resolve those deeper issues of your past.

From diapers to dating, life is always an adventure of growing up, testing things out, finding our own way and purpose. Some childhood memories may be the sweetest or the saddest. Whether those memories are pleasant or painful, they are woven into the fabric of our life today. Memories are sometimes illusive in how they change the way we see relationships and how we behave in everyday life. Sometimes, we just can't make the connection when they are something we would rather forget. And my own personal journey can intimately relate to this connection. Pleasant memories are always easier ones to remember. Yet, both help balance out our perspective and the challenges that come our way. Both need to be recognized and reconciled in order to move forward.

So, let's go down memory lane for a moment. Do you remember how proud you were when you took your first step, set out on your first tricycle, your first day of school, that special present Daddy gave you, the trip you made with Grandma and Grandpa, your first best friend, or the time you were really sick and how Momma made you feel better?

So, ask yourself, *"What do I remember most about my childhood?"* Write down or record your memories. *"What one significant experience do you remember in your early growing years (before age twelve)?"* Continue recording your answers and share with your spouse or close friend.

Was there something special you wanted to experience as a child and never got the chance? Well, how about fulfilling a childhood wish today? How would you like to experience today what you may have missed in childhood or that wonderful moment again?

Do you know it's possible! You may wonder, "How is it possible?" We know we can't go back into the womb or get on that bicycle for the first time with the same excitement and fear of falling. Yet, you can redeem that special thing in ways that might surprise you. Consider all the possibilities as a grown up human being. Remember, you may have an adult body, but somewhere inside your child still plays, feels happy and sad, courageous and timid.

Right now, put on your creative cap and dream a little, dream big for creating possibilities just right for your wishes to come true! Write down what childhood wish you want to experience again or for the first time. Describe how it will look like. Then under your description in a column put one of these words on each row, *What, When, Where, With Whom, and How*. Start filling the blanks to plan more specifically *What* you want to do, *When* you want to do it, *Where* you want to, and *With Whom* (if anyone—doing it alone can definitely be part of the plan if that is what you want). Then start detailing the *How* for fulfilling your childhood wish or finding a way to experience that memory again.

Sometimes going down memory lane can be a bumpy ride for some, particularly childhood ones. If this activity is uncomfortable for you, please feel free to opt out. If so, I recommend you consider seeking counsel to resolve that discomfort you may be experiencing. Then for this month's lifeskill, *Childcare*, return to those thoughts and memories where childhood wishes can come true no matter your age.

Sharon L. Benedict, MS, ACC, is a certified life wellness coach-consultant, specializing in life skills, wellness, and creative arts development for individuals, businesses and organizations (www.harvestenterprises-sra.com). She welcomes your questions and comments and can be contacted at seekreachachieve@gvtc.com.

From the Heart. . .

. . . Life Skills for Today

By Sharon L. Benedict MS, ACC



Parenting in Today's World

(published in Boerne Star, Friday, September 10, 2010)

I could go on and on with all the wonderful, warm, and fuzzy thoughts about my own precious daughters and the joy they have brought into my life. Yet, most parents know raising children in today's world is not an easy road to travel. Although we all desire for children to have the best life possible, particularly our own, we also need to more clearly understand the trends happening in our society today. Awareness and action will help us protect and guide our children in this complex world we live in.

First, our children are gifts, not given to us as a diversion or hobby. They are humanity's heritage and hope in society's future. As children observe us as adults, they learn by example . . . words become idle, even harmful, if our walk doesn't match our talk. Today, though, so many children are borne into single family households and unmarried. Many of these children "just happen."

Can I ask us to acknowledge that having children should never be an afterthought after having sex? Children are ideally conceived into this world as a result of two persons committed to covenant love for each other for a lifetime. Unfortunately, this statement is no longer the norm for most of our society today.

According to the US Census Bureau (2009), there were 11.6 million single parents living with their children. Of these, 9.9 million were single mothers and 1.7

million were single fathers (source: America's Families and Living Arrangements: 2009, Table FG5, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2009.html>). Of the number of unmarried opposite sex couples, over 85% male partners were in the labor force, and 75% female partners (source: Table UC3). These growing trends happening in our world today make it even more imperative to chart the right path for ourselves and our children.

Although there are many touchy and emotional topics around this, let's focus on those areas we need to understand as parents. We still live in one of the most rich and abundant nations in the world. Opportunities and challenges abound all around us. So, remember this as we chart our nation's parenthood trends that will impact children throughout their lives.

According to Child Trends (www.childtrends.org), a nonprofit research center that studies children at all stages of development, "*Compared with previous generations, fewer young adults today are married, and the age of first marriage has risen. . .In fact, cohabiting unions have become the most prevalent type of relationship among men and women in their twenties. Such increases in cohabitation have changed the context of relationship and family formation for young adults. In the past, teen births have comprised the majority of nonmarital and unintended births in the United States. However, in the context of changing patterns. . .the majority of births to 20- to 24- year-olds currently occur outside of marriage. The highest rates of unintended pregnancy and childbearing also occur to women in their late teens and early twenties. Research shows that unintended and nonmarital childbearing are associated with a host of negative consequences for both parents and children. Thus, the sexual and romantic*

relationships that young adults form influence not just their own lives, but also the lives of their children. This reality underscores the importance of increasing understanding about the context in which young adults view how they form relationships and create families." (source: Young Adult Attitudes About Relationships and Marriage: Times May Have Changed, But Expectations Remain High. Mindy E. Scott, et.al. July 2009).

Child Trends offers an interesting parallel to this cohabiting, unmarried trend. "Although young adults' beliefs about successful relationships differ by gender, the majority of both men and women regard love, fidelity, and lifelong commitment as very important to a successful relationship." One wonders how achieving these aspirations are possible without a marriage vow. For many senior, married couples, I hear the axiom, "You can't have your cake and eat it too." Then add having a child enter the picture.

Needless to say, raising a child as a married, co-habiting, or single parent is a daunting responsibility today. The difficulties that come with being a single parent only increase and abound. According to Child Trends Databank (www.childtrendsdatabank.org) there has been a significant decline in % of children (under age 18) living with two married parents—from 85% to 67% (1970-2005), and a significant increase of births to unmarried women—from 5.3% to 37% (1960-2005). With separation, divorce, or single parenting:

- ✓ Fathers tend to disengage from children they no longer live with.
- ✓ Fathers make less frequent visits and calls to them over time.

Children born to unmarried mothers will more likely grow up in a single-parent household with these potential instabilities—

- ✓ Poverty
- ✓ Socio-emotional problems
- ✓ Engage in sex at younger ages
- ✓ More likely to be idle (neither in school or employed)
- ✓ Low educational attainment
- ✓ Lower occupational status & income
- ✓ Have premarital births
- ✓ More troubled marriages of their own

So, what are the benefits for children with married parents? *Charting Parenthood: A Statistical Portrait of Fathers and Mothers in America* by Child Trends states,

“Marriage is one of the most beneficial resources for adults and children alike. . .”

Children tend to have:

- ✓ Fewer behavior problems
- ✓ Better emotional well-being
- ✓ Better academic outcomes, on average

The benefits of marriage for adults also help shape a positive environment for their children, such as:

- ✓ Married men and women have higher levels of wealth than those who are separated, divorced, widowed, or never married.
- ✓ Married people, men in particular, engage in healthier behaviors than those who divorce.
- ✓ Fathers tend to be more attached to their children and engage in more activities with them.

However, marriage is less beneficial when marked by high parental conflict. Fathers' attachments to their children are often contingent upon marriage.

I realize there are exceptions, where single, even divorced, parents do a great job raising their kids. They have done the personal growth work to get along with each other and give their children priority within their blended and extended family. There are many factors that influence our nation's direction. What factors can you think of? In the next article, our nation's social health in the 21st century will offer a number of factors that directly impact today's trends in charting parenthood.

Sharon L. Benedict, MS, ACC, is a certified life wellness coach-consultant, specializing in life skills, wellness, and creative arts development for individuals, businesses and organizations (www.harvestenterprises-sra.com). She welcomes your questions and comments and can be contacted at seekreachachieve@gvtc.com.

From the Heart...

... Life Skills for Today

By Sharon L. Benedict MS, ACC



Parenting—our nation's social health

(published in Boerne Star, Friday, September 17, 2010)

What factors can you think of that are impacting parenting trends and our nation's social health? As reported by the Institute for Innovation in Social Policy, *Index of Social Health* (ISH) (<http://iisp.vassar.edu/ish.html>), these factors are based on sixteen social indicators from access to affordable housing, child abuse, child poverty, income inequality, teenage drug abuse/suicide, to unemployment.

In the latest ISH report (2008), this is the seventh year in a row which the Index was at the lowest score since 1998. Overall, between 1970 and 2008, the Index declined from 66.2 to 55.5, a drop of 16 percent! One ray of hope is that between 2004 and 2006 Teenage drug abuse and Unemployment improved somewhat. Yet, note that child abuse continues to consistently worsen.

Index of Social Health (Institute for Innovation in Social Policy, 2008)	
Progress	Lack of Progress
<p>Six indicators have improved since 1970:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Infant mortality ○ Teenage drug abuse ○ High school dropouts ○ Poverty, ages 65 and over ○ Homicides ○ Alcohol-related traffic fatalities 	<p>Ten indicators have worsened since 1970:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Child poverty ○ Child abuse (most consistent worsening) ○ Teenage suicide ○ Average weekly wages ○ Health insurance coverage ○ Unemployment ○ Out-of-pocket health costs, ages 65 and over ○ Food stamp coverage ○ Access to affordable housing ○ Income inequality

As you can see, six indicators improved—Infant mortality, Teenage drug abuse, High school dropouts, Poverty/ages 65 and over, Homicides, and Alcohol-related traffic fatalities.

Yet, ten actually worsened—Child abuse, Child poverty, Teenage suicide, Average weekly wages, Health insurance coverage, Unemployment, Out-of-pocket

health costs, ages 65 and over, Food stamp coverage, Access to affordable housing, and Income inequality. As you read each indicator, where do you see these factors surface in your own neighborhood and community? How has your own family been affected by those indicators that continue to worsen? Have you seen any rays hope with those that have improved over the years?

Take some time over the weekend to do your own research and share your thoughts with your family and children. If you have teen kids, ask them what they are seeing at their school and with their friends. You will undoubtedly hear some surprising responses from them...some good news, some not so good. You may want to consider talking with their teachers to gain insight from their perspective as well. Keep the channels of communication open with your kids and find ways to team together to insure these indicators improve in your own family and neighborhood.

Since one of my passions and life's work as a creative arts coach is with the Arts, in the next article we will take a look at how art, culture and our nation's social health intersect.

Sharon L. Benedict, MS, ACC, is a certified life wellness coach-consultant, specializing in life skills, wellness, and creative arts development for individuals, businesses and organizations (www.harvestenterprises-sra.com). She welcomes your questions and comments and can be contacted at seekreachachieve@gvtc.com.

From the Heart. . .

. . . Life Skills for Today

By Sharon L. Benedict MS, ACC








Parenting—art, culture, and our nation’s social health

(published in Boerne Star, Friday, September 24, 2010)

As a lifeskills and creative arts coach, I personally see how the arts impact families, culture, and our nation’s social health. When considering the social health trends covered in the previous article, how do you see the arts as a way of improving our families’ and nation’s social health?

“Thinking about a specific arts event that was special to you— how did it make you feel? Do any of these statements come to mind?:

-  *It made me have hope for the future.*
-  *It made me look at my life in a different way.*
-  *It made me forget about all my worries.*
-  *It opened my mind and my heart.*
-  *It made me feel young again.*

Americans are informed, transformed, delighted, and diverted by their participation in the arts. They treasure their experiences, reflect back on them in their daily lives, and are often changed by them in deep and significant way.” In addition, according to The Dana Foundation, www.dana.org, there is significant evidence that arts and arts

training, in its many forms including music, improve child development and cognitive function in children.¹

In talking to people across the country, the Institute for Innovation in Social Policy found that “arts and culture represent a vital component of social wellbeing. They create critical social bonds, webs of affiliation that strengthen the nation, deepen our tolerance, and grace our lives in unique ways.” The most recent report, *Arts, Culture, and the Social Health of the Nation 2005* (supported by the Rockefeller Foundation and the Nathan Cummings Foundation, http://iisp.vassar.edu/arts_culture.html), was designed to monitor the artistic and cultural experiences of Americans, young & old. Based on the Institute’s National Social Survey, it probes new issues and looks at changes in arts participation since the Institute’s previous report in 2002.

This project represents an attempt to systematically monitor the nation’s engagement with the arts. In so doing they hope to provide critical information on a topic that is vital to the social health of our families and the nation. “The current report shows that Americans deeply value the arts, both in their own lives and in the lives of their children. Yet participation levels have declined slightly since the last survey, both for adults and for children. Differences in participation by income level remain a serious problem.”

Children participate extensively in the arts. They listen to music at home, do creative work of their own, read books, go to the movies, attend live performances, and go to art shows and museums. Nevertheless, overall participation has declined since 2002 in all six of the arts activities monitored. Barriers to participation include costs,

¹ Ben Mauk. *Music Training Changes Brain Networks*. (Brain in the News). May 11, 2009. <http://www.dana.org/news/braininthenews/detail.aspx?id=21764>).

location, and information, as well as personal issues such as a lack of time, not having someone to go with, and physical or health problems. Parents also see the need for hours and locations to be more convenient, costs to be cheaper, and for children to have more free time. For lower income families, these barriers are even more significant.

Do you now have a clearer picture of our nation's trends in social health—plus how the arts, culture, & society are mutually impacted by these social health trends previously covered? Here is your opportunity for your children's wellbeing to engage them in a variety of art experiences that will build social bonds, encourage your child's innate creative abilities, and strengthen our nation. Yes, every child has within them the creative gene of the body, mind, and soul. Your children's creativity is demonstrated first by their God-given curiosity the day they are born. When curiosity is wholesomely nurtured, their creativity blossoms in ways that will surprise you.

Every aspect of life has a creative purpose and creativity attached to it. Whether your child becomes a professional visual artist, performer, writer, an architect, interior designer, scientist, mathematics professor, office manager, or construction worker, the creative exposure and encouragement when young will touch their occupations and personal lives throughout the years.

Check out your community's arts and arts education programs through your schools and recreation opportunities. For those who live in the Texas Hill Country, you will find many chances to experience the joy of the arts right in your backyard. By all means get connected with the Hill Country Council for the Arts (www.HCCArts.org).

The HCCArts supports a variety of arts events, activities, programs, and projects in partnership with the many vibrant organizations within the hill country. Their primary mission is to become the central online resource for all the arts in the Texas Hill Country, and support the missions of their partner organizations. I encourage you to become a member and an active partner in their awesome vision on behalf of your children, family, community, and our nation's social health.

Sharon L. Benedict, MS, ACC, is a certified life wellness coach-consultant, specializing in life skills, wellness, and creative arts development for individuals, businesses and organizations (www.harvestenterprises-sra.com). She welcomes your questions and comments and can be contacted at seekreachachieve@gvtc.com.