

From binge-drinking to school violence, our children are confronting a rapidly changing environment filled with hazards and struggles that are different from those faced by previous generations. This section of *FOCUS* examines the evolving world of children and how parents and the educational system help them adapt to and deal with their increasingly adult-like lives.

Team Effort

Communication is essential to raising today's kids, says Boise State prof.

By Chris Bouneff

When 6-year-old Spencer Velikoff felt that his dad was “yelling” too much at him and his two siblings, he decided to take action.

He wrote his concern as an agenda item for the weekly family meeting, and when the time came he presented a case convincing enough that the family decided the children should devise a solution.

If Dad “yelled” again, he’d receive a verbal warning. And if he ignored the warning, 37-year-old John Velikoff would get the toughest sentence possible — a talking time-out.

That’s right. The kids identified a problem with one of their parents, created the solution and will be responsible for handing down the consequences.



If you listen carefully, you may be able to hear preceding generations of parents groan. Family meetings with agendas? Kids mandating a talking time-out? What is the world coming to?

Modern parenting is the short answer. The role parents play hasn't changed, but the environment in which they parent has, says Rob Turrisi, a Boise State University psychology professor who studies parent-child communication.

In days gone by, the biggest worry for parents was whether their children finished school and got a good job. And the biggest social concern was whether their children gained a better quality of life.

"We didn't sit there and say 30 years ago and 40 years ago that if we didn't talk to our kids, there's a chance they'll get stoned and have sex at 2 in the afternoon when they're 13," Turrisi says. "Now we recognize that if we don't take an active role in their lives, there are dark consequences."

The new parenting landscape is due to a variety of circumstances, but a main culprit is information, Turrisi says. Cable television, commercial marketing aimed at kids, video games and other mass media expose children to more complicated ideas than just a generation ago when a remote control was nice but unnecessary because there were only three networks to surf.

Then there's the growth of multiple-car families and convenience devices such as answering machines and cellular phones that free more time for more activities, from soccer practices to piano classes, that expose kids to more social situations.

Children today are more sophisticated and more knowledgeable than ever — and at a younger age, Turrisi says. In such an environment, parents can't parent through edicts. Rather, they need to build relationships with their children through activities such as weekly family meetings, however silly the idea sounds, so that they can instill the decision-making skills their children will need.

Such an approach is a leap or two away from how Susan Velikoff, 38, grew up. Her distractions lacked the speed and sophistication of today's toys: She relied on her own creativity for fun. And she rarely approached her parents to talk over any issues. "My parents ruled by fear," says Velikoff, a stay-at-home mother. "I was afraid to misbehave."

But she recognized that an old approach wouldn't work with her children, which is

one reason she attended Turrisi's workshop on parenting that he gave a year ago at Trail Wind Elementary School in Boise.

During the two-hour presentation, Turrisi talked about how children develop and techniques parents can use to increase communication with their children and introduce their kids to decision-making skills.

Velikoff and her husband put Turrisi's words into action with their three children, Ian, 8, Spencer, 6, and 3-year-old Hannah. The couple provided more positive feedback and made more positive requests,



Boise State professor Rob Turrisi, right, talks with the Velikoff family about modern parenting.

such as saying how happy they'd be if the children helped pick up their toys or vacuum the carpet. They didn't just say no when correcting the kids, but they also explained their reasons.

The Velikoffs also gave the kids more choices — whether they wanted hot or cold cereal, whether they wanted to finish their homework before or after dinner, whether they wanted to take a shower or bath — simple choices that help build the decision-making skills they'll need later in life.

And the Velikoffs listened more to their children rather than simply lecturing all the time.

The Velikoffs exercised the same authority as parents, but their parenting was less dictatorial. And Susan Velikoff says a year later, she notices a difference in her children, especially in Ian.

He thinks for himself more than a year ago, he's more independent and he's more willing to tell his parents what's on his mind.

"It's helped him," Velikoff says, "and I'll be more confident that when he hits his teen years and peer pressure kicks in that he'll be able to choose the right alternatives and not always run with the crowd."

And that's the ultimate goal of Turrisi's research — to help parents help children of any age make good decisions. If they make good decisions, they'll live healthier lives,

physically and emotionally.

Sounds simple, but Turrisi's approach is novel enough that it attracted the attention of the American Cancer Society and a division of the National Institutes of Health, which recently awarded Turrisi \$1.6 million in grants to study parent-child relationships.

The thinking goes that if parents have good lines of communication with their children, the children are more likely to learn good decision-making skills. They are then less likely to practice the reckless sun worshipping that leads to a higher risk of

skin cancer, which is a major concern for the cancer society. And they are less likely to binge drink or abuse alcohol, a concern for the NIH.

Parents don't have to make major changes to reap results, Turrisi says. Even slight changes in the way parents talk and relate to their kids, regardless of whether they're pre-teens or teens, can alter the future in dramatic ways.

His research on binge drinking, for example, shows that in a random sample of high school seniors, about 1 in 3 is likely to drink and drive at some point.

For kids from families where parents and children don't talk effectively about complex issues such as alcohol use, the odds of a kid drinking and driving increase to nearly 100 percent.

But by building a strong foundation of communication so parents can talk to their children about alcohol use and nearly any other issue, parents can push the odds that their child will drink and drive to 1 in 15 — a huge shift. "If you're not communicating, you're running a terrible risk of the odds," Turrisi says.

Sandra Wood also attended Turrisi's session a year ago. Though she's not quite the convert that Velikoff is, Wood and her husband, Craig, began introducing more choices for their two daughters, 8-year-old Julie and 5-year-old Kellyn.

Wood also followed another nugget of advice from Turrisi — understand how your child makes friends and pay attention to her peer groups. Wood says she saw that her daughter Julie was having trouble making additional friends at school because she felt trapped by her neighborhood friends.

That led Wood to another Turrisi tenet — involve your child in multiple peer groups so she's not trapped in one group of friends when peer pressure turns negative.

Mother and daughter talked about the situation and decided on a course of action that Wood says is working. Julie is more assertive and making more friends, and she's now able to walk away from a friend when the tension between them is too high.

"It's amazing what kids can figure out to do when you give them the skills to do it," Wood says.

This new parenting isn't a perfect process. Even Turrisi, the expert, muddles through his own advice like any other parent. And he also experiments to find what works, such as with the concept of weekly family meetings. The idea came from his wife, Lori, a social worker who read about it in a book.

Making the meetings right for them took some finagling, but after several months of

Sunday meetings with 8-year-old son, Taylor, the Turrisis now have a smooth system. They start each meeting by complimenting each other and then talk about sleepovers, listening, decorating for the

Lori complained that Taylor wasn't listening to her requests, the family works together on consequences. In this case, if Taylor fails to listen to his mother, the family decided that he would go directly to his room and any friends over at the time would be taken home.

The meetings, Turrisi says, are a chance for Taylor to be heard and to feel a part of the family process without Turrisi and his wife abdicating their parental veto.

It's just one example that parenting today is trial and error, but with some effort, parents can still be as effective as preceding generations.

"It doesn't take that much effort to become a mother or a father," Turrisi says, "but it does take effort to become a parent." □

'It doesn't take that much effort to become a mother or father, but it does take effort to become a parent.'

holidays and any other issue that a family member adds to the agenda.

When a problem arises, such as when

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