

A child by any other name?

Recently a mother brought a landmark legal battle for a parent's 'right to know' if girls under 16 are being advised on obtaining an abortion. She lost. The child's right to confidentiality was ruled paramount.

This case highlights two huge areas of societal confusion. Firstly, when is a child a child and, secondly, what are parents' rights and responsibilities? My 94-year-old mother-in-law told me how, in her youth, a popular 21st birthday present was to have all your natural teeth removed and replaced with dental plates. Saved a lot of bother, I suppose.

Closer to home, a forty-something friend described how, on his 18th birthday, his father handed him a key to the family home - together with a request for £20 a week to cover board and lodgings. Leaving aside the particulars, how refreshingly simple it was in those days. You were a child one day and an adult the next. What has happened to that certainty? Flown with the rest of life's certainties in this socially constructed world.

Let's explore this further. Research with young people indicates that they take for granted the amount of freedom they experience, with little thought of the impact on parents.

A fourteen-year-old is allowed to have an abortion without parental knowledge or consent yet, if she's caught truanting, her parents can be fined up to £2,500 or jailed for up to three months. What is the message? Undertaking potentially life-threatening surgery is OK without parental involvement, but missing lessons is more serious so we'll imprison the parents?

Or could it be that protecting a child is less vital than preventing anti-social behaviour? After all, 40% of street crime and 20% of burglary is caused by 10-16 year old truants. Under-16s cannot legally leave home without parental consent. They can't drive until 17, nor legally drink - and now perhaps smoke - until 18. But abortion? Well, that's a mere bagatelle. Shall we say 13? 14?

I accept that the transition from child to adult is unclear and the artificial demarcations of the past were inadequate, but our confused thinking around this area creates even more problems. We need some consistency. What do we understand by the notion of 'childhood' and what are the implications for society?

And spare a thought for the poor parents, who seem increasingly baffled by the extent of their responsibility: 'excess' discipline is banned but they can be penalised for their children's 'bad' behaviour.

So what is a child? What is a parent? Let's re- negotiate the contract and regain a sensible balance of rights and responsibilities.



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