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SUNDAY MAIL 14-3-1999

Confused parents can't win

CHILDHOOD is so precious and ever so short. And it seems to be getting even shorter. Those of us who are parents can barely credit that our children, who now know so much and even presume to tell us how to run our lives, were only yesterday squalling babes in nappies.

Surely it was only last night that they were giving us character readings and listing examples of our abysmal ignorance over the dinner table. And it must have been but this morning that they started to become all lumpy and were shoehorned into their school formal gowns.

Then they were gone, giving real meaning to the trendy jargon of the empty nest syndrome. But the parting was a bittersweet sorrow, made bearable by the memories and mementoes of childhood.

However, for many, the parting is sharp and savage, leaving nothing but confusion, anger and distress in its wake.

For them, childhood becomes a grotesque caricature of adulthood, a ridiculous game with sometimes fatal consequences in which they are spectators in the far, high stands.

A reader - a dad - wrote the other day with a story that is becoming distressingly commonplace. He could be any one of a dozen parents who have called and written in recent times.

His story began: "My 15-year-old daughter disappeared from school almost two weeks ago amid allegations of depression, telling untruths and drug taking..."

He called the police who visited various places in his home town.

Then he received a call from a woman who told him his daughter had been staying with her but left a couple of days before the police arrived.

Why hadn't she told someone? It

seems she just listened to the kid, swallowed her story without question and gave her shelter without considering the parents' feelings.

Not unnaturally, dad was a little peeved and wanted someone punished.

Then he was told that a child can relocate from the home at the age of 16 but if kids are aged, say, 15 and leave home, police have no power to force them to return home unless they face some moral or physical danger.

And if the sheltering adult is party to the immorality, it's hardly likely he or she will give the cops too much help.

The bottom line is that our reader's daughter is being harboured by adults somewhere between Brisbane and Melbourne. Just where nobody seems to know.

Why, you are doubtlessly wondering, did the girl leave home?

There are two sides to every story but this is dad's: "My daughter stated to friends that she intended to run away away because I refused her permission to obtain a tattoo, I refused her permission to have her nose pierced and I refused her permission to hang out with a 16-year-old youth who has an extensive criminal history."

They seem petty restrictions to most of us but they obviously were too much for this kid to bear.

Sadly, the involvement of another adult is a common thread in most of the runaway reports I have received.

Our dad obviously thinks the law is an ass, but the underlying truth is that his daughter might look grown up, might feel grown up, but she doesn't know any better.

You can't say that about the adults who are giving her shelter.

• Terry Sweetman's column appears in The Courier-Mail on Tuesday and Friday.
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