

KIDS WANT YOUR TIME

by Brian Burgess, Forefront Families LLC

During the sixteen years I was Principal of alternative schools in New Zealand and the USA I regularly asked my students to project ahead to being parents (some already were!). I would ask what they would do differently than their parents had done. They inevitably would say that they would spend more time with their children even if it meant having a lesser job. They wanted a demonstrative love and affection shown them. Many of these young people turned to their friends, became gang members, became attention-seekers, or became pregnant on purpose, because all they wanted was a little affection, and someone who would spend time listening, someone who would try to understand them.

Julie lived in an affluent suburb. This sixteen-year-old girl was referred to my school because her principal could no longer deal with her behavior. She was referred mainly for fighting other students, but she was an attention-seeker. She argued with teachers, displayed sure signs of Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), and was a constant distraction in class. The expected 'honeymoon period' was over in two days and she began to act out. We had to set very firm guidelines for her by clearly stating the boundaries. Eventually we had to change Julie's seating arrangement.

One day, in a group discussion, Julie told the student body and faculty that she could not remember when her father last showed her any sign of affection. When she was a little girl she could remember a few occasions when her father would take her on his knee and cuddle her. In her memory, that was a long time ago. Imagine our surprise when she announced that dad was going to buy her a car. After supplying her with our phone numbers so she could call us before she hit the road (being on the road at the same time would have been like playing Russian roulette), we listened to her story. She was so badly behaved at home that her mother wanted her out. Either Julie was to go or her mother would. There was no love lost between them. Mom had tried everything that was in her mind to do, but there was still no change in Julie's behavior.

Dad worked very long hours in his business, and sometimes labored seven days a week. We deduced that he spent this much time away from home to avoid the turmoil of an out-of-control daughter and a wife he argued with over their troublesome girl. He decided to offer Julie an incentive to do well at school. He was prepared to give an expensive gift when all she wanted was some of her father's time. She told us so.

The problem stemmed from years of affection neglect and lack of attention to a child's needs. This was not going to be solved by her father dangling a vehicle in front of her nose. The excitement of being offered a car diminished

within a few weeks because Julie was a young person who demanded immediate gratification. Her educational and family problems had not been solved.

Too many parents fall into the trap of offering material bribes. I have no problem with realistic incentives, but these should never replace parents daring to invest the things that are free. Their love and time. I have had parents say, "But my time isn't free." If business takes precedence over raising a family and investing your life in the most precious commodity you will ever have in your hands, then your priorities are way up the creek.

If you have any comments or questions on this subject, please do not hesitate to contact us at sally@forefrontfamilies.org. We invite you to also check out our website at www.forefrontfamilies.org and our blog site at www.forefrontfamilies.blogspot.com for further assistance.