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Ruben Navarrette Jr. / Syndicated columnist

Sometimes a little hardship just what your child needs

DALLAS — A good parent can always detect a bad influence.

In the 1940s, my Mexican immigrant grandfather managed to keep his son — my father — away from those kids with switchblades and leather jackets who cut classes and stole hubcaps.

Now, as I get ready to become a parent, what scares me is the thought that my children might one day hang out with kids who have BMWs and \$1,000 handbags, who run up their parents' credit cards and still demand more.

There is reason to worry, according to a recent cover story in *Newsweek*. A lot of parents can't say no to their children's demands to buy them more of this and newer and more expensive versions of that. Parents are even flocking to daylong seminars where experts tell them how to stand up to their kids, how to say no to their demands and how to hold firm.

How pathetic. I can't imagine my grandpa ever needing a seminar to remind him who was the parent and who was the kid. A spanking, a scolding or even a disapproving glance did the trick.

The parents of today seem to be out of ideas about how to deal with what the article calls pint-sized "wanting machines." They don't want conflict or to disappoint their children. So they give in.

According to market research done by a company called Packaged Facts, families with kids ages 3 to 12 spend \$53.8 billion annually on entertainment, personal-care items such as makeup, and reading materials for their children. And when the kids get older, they take their parents' credit cards or their own disposable income and buy even more goodies. Last year, according to a firm called Teenage Research Unlimited, 12- to 19-year-olds forked out \$175 billion.

You name it, today's kids are buying it, wearing it or playing with it: from designer labels to high-priced shoes to the latest electronic gadgets.

Surprise: The problem is less with the kids than with the folks raising them. Parents want so badly to be their kids' best friends that they never get around to being parents. And part of being a parent is setting limits to consumption and teaching children the value of a dollar. The mistake that so many parents make today is not that they're too strict, but rather too lenient. It's not that they demand too much from their kids but that they expect too little.

Too many parents are failing to strike a balance between providing for their children and teaching them self-reliance, responsibility and a work ethic. The result is a whole generation that, experts fear,

has been conditioned to see expensive things and a comfortable life as entitlements — to their detriment.

Not long ago, after a speech to a local business group, an Anglo gentleman stood and asked me what our society should do about poor black and Hispanic kids who come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Nothing, I told him. Leave them alone. Whatever you do, I said, don't try to rope them into some government welfare program. The disadvantaged kids — at least some of them — will find a way out of their circumstance, I said. Chances are they'll do what poor people and immigrants have done for generations. They'll study hard, work long hours and push themselves forward.

If you really want to worry about someone, I said, worry about the kid living comfortably in the suburbs. The spoiled child who had every toy and modern convenience growing up, who never bothers to get a summer job or do chores around the house, and who still gets a new car at 16. Worry about the kid whose parents are too busy providing for him to spend time with him, and who try to make up for their absence by giving him money and buying him things. What does society have to offer to the kid who has everything?

It's funny. Sixty years ago, my grandparents worked in the fields from dawn to dusk to make sure their kids didn't go hungry. And now, surrounded by modern conveniences, what concerns me is how to raise my children so that they will be *hungry* for success.

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