

The Quest for Maturity and Sobriety: How to Change America's Messed Up Kids

by [Mike Absatz](#)

I believe there is a crisis among many of America's children. They live in a state of prolonged immaturity and self-aborption. Many of them are ignored, neglected, abused, and manipulated into becoming addicts. Some often seem like shallow, dependent, whiny, self-righteous folks who believe they are entitled to whatever they want. We have severe problems with hyperactivity, drug abuse, smoking, bullying, violence, sexual abuse, internet porn, depression, and other self-sabotaging behaviors.

Some people believe this problem is due to poor parenting. Many American parents seem immature, and are choosing not to be involved with their own children. Some say that "parents want to have children, but just don't want to raise them." Over 40 percent of children under age 15 live without a father present.

Others blame violent and sexist media messages. David Walsh's "Selling Out America's Children" describes America as a "culture of disrespect." Many American children and adolescents spend up to 50 hours of their week plugged into videogames, television, ipods or computers. Being cool is connected to putting others down.

From birth, children get the message that happiness and fulfillment must come from the outside, not the inside. Ann Wilson Schaefer wrote an amazing book called "When Society Becomes an Addict" about 25 years ago. It is a classic about how the American culture teaches children and adults that they must acquire, do, have, control, own, receive -- in order to feel okay about who they are.

Being raised from the outside in, instead of from the inside out, many American children lose their sense of personal authenticity. William Pollack, in "Real Boys," and Mary Pipher in "Reviving Ophelia," claim that boys and girls give up big parts of themselves in order to conform to cultural norms and expectations. Socialization messages for boys focus on toughness, bravado, and not showing emotion (except anger). For girls, the message is about appearance. Thinness and beauty are more important than authenticity, intelligence, and personal depth of being. This process robs kids of their inner beauty -- as they seek to gain acceptance from peers by wearing the right stuff, and doing the "in" activities.

Drinking and using drugs are part of the youth party scene. Substances like sugar, nicotine and caffeine run kids' lives, as well as those of adults. Shallow sexual encounters influence longterm attitudes toward sexuality.

What can we do to change things? In order to attain a level of maturity, and the ability to function well in a complex world, *children need SIX main things*, and many American kids are not getting them.

First, all kids need to be loved and accepted for who they are on the inside.

Second, kids should be discovering their gifts and talents, so they know what makes them individually unique and special. Then they need to maximize those talents, watch them grow.

Third, every child needs to begin to understand the complexity of the external world -- relationships, corporations, families, religious belief systems, politics, government, how schools function. They need to learn about marginalization -- racism, sexism, able-ism, age-ism, heterosexism. Then, they need to commit to work on their own prejudices and biases, as well as develop an understanding of oppression. Addictive behaviors of all kinds, including process addictions, such as gambling, must be examined with the help of mature adults.

Fourth, children need to gain an awareness of their own inner world. This means self-awareness, understanding one's own strengths and limitations, learning about healthy sexual expression, and coping with losses and disappointments. Intimacy and communication skills need to be taught. The effects of substances on their bodies, minds, and emotions (sugar, alcohol, nicotine, caffeine, marijuana, etc.) and substance abuse must be taught to each child.

Fifth, we need to help young people fit into the structure of the world in some meaningful way. This process of integration means using one's gifts and talents to make a living, as well some contribution to society. A strong work ethic must be a major part of the fabric of adulthood.

And sixth, there needs to be an emphasis on compassion, empathy and giving back to society. This is a spiritual component.

How can this be done? There need to be **mature adults in the community** who are willing to **teach and support** children in their quest for maturity. This can be **family** (nuclear and extended), **mentors, teachers, counselors, spiritual and community leaders.** We must begin to understand societal addiction and the toll it is taking on our children and take action. Reverence for life and each other must replace the current emphasis on violence and selfishness.

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