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A Teacher's Guide to Generation X Parents

by Susan Gregory Thomas

Not long ago, administrators at a small private school in New York City were reorganizing two mixed-grade elementary classrooms. Looking at the third grade, they determined that one girl was particularly well suited to switch from one class to the other: She was adaptable and genial and loved working with teachers and friends. The administrators called the girl's mother, assuming she would be flattered.

Wrong. The mother was distraught: Her daughter had started at the school only last year! She would be leaving friends in the other classroom! She had enrolled her daughter in private school for its stability and intimacy -- not for disruption! The administrators didn't understand what had been happening at home!

The mother, in tears, needed to have a conference -- now. Educators were stunned. Who *was* this mother?

That would be me, and here's why: I am a Generation X parent, a member of a demographic that has been making teachers' and school administrators' jobs a pain in the butt for more than a decade.

The Pendulum Swings

Born between 1965 and 1979, Generation X counts for about 48 million people in the United States, a group that's a sociological sentence fragment compared with its predecessors, the baby boomers (1946–1964), and with Generation Y (1980–2001), which followed it.

But size, as they say, isn't everything -- as parents, I daresay you teachers have known who we are from day one. In preschool, we're the ones anxiously arranging developmentally appropriate playdates for our Siouxsie-and-the-Banshees-T-shirt-clad three-year-olds. In kindergarten, we're frantic that other parents' children are starting to read *cat* and *rat*, while our Ruby and Dylan are still having trouble identifying lowercase letters. We think the gold-star system and its ilk are archaic and punitive, and we want to have a meeting to present our suggestions for alternative achievement systems.

By grade school, we're demanding to know why the math program is not challenging enough for our child. We email our complaints about the seating chart. We openly deride the arts instruction and may rally other parents to the point of a coup d'état. By middle school, our kids have schedules and professional support staffs that resemble those of corporate lawyers. Look out, high school: We're coming.

Why are we so obnoxious, self-righteous, implacable? When I was working on a book about very young children and the marketing industry (*Buy, Buy Baby: How Consumer Culture Manipulates Parents and Harms Young Minds* [2]), I learned more than I'd ever wanted to know about Generation X as parents.

But the most important discovery was relearning a truism from Psychology 101: If you want to know what's unhealed from your own childhood, have children. Key to decoding our parental behavior is understanding that we are, albeit often unconsciously, doing for our children what no one did for us.

For starters, we are ferocious advocates for our kid. "One of the chief things I've noticed is the demand for power from these parents," says Betty Staley, program director of Waldorf high school teacher education at Rudolf Steiner College, in Fair Oaks, California. "They demand to be involved in making decisions for their kid -- even interviewing potential teachers -- regardless of what is good for the group."

A Neglected Generation

A little background here: Generation X, according to a 2004 study conducted by marketing-strategy and research firm Reach Advisors, "went through its all-important formative years as one of the least parented, least nurtured generations in U.S. history." Little wonder: Half of all Gen Xers' parents are divorced. We were the first to be raised in record numbers in day care, and some 40 percent of us were latchkey kids.

We've been taking care of ourselves since we started going to school, and we don't trust authority figures, because they weren't trustworthy when we were growing up. Our parents didn't know what was going on at school, and our teachers didn't know what was going on at home. We're not going to let this happen to our children -- not even for a second. We'll do whatever we have to do to make sure our kids get what they need.

"They'll go over your head if they don't get the results they want from you," says Anita Thomas, who taught science in a public school in Beaufort, South Carolina. That makes sense, says [Lisa Chamberlain](#) [3], author of *Slackonomics: Generation X in the Age of Creative Destruction*. "Anything that smacks of bureaucratic red tape or protocol is an irritant," she explains. "We had to fend for ourselves, which is great if you're an entrepreneur, but not when you're a parent."

This also may explain why Gen X parents are so quick to whip together a Microsoft PowerPoint presentation to show you how to reorganize your classroom, even the entire school. Remember, we're the technology-revolution generation, and we're familiar with making presentations in front of venture capitalists.

That kind of know-it-all-ism makes sense, too. "Boomer parents assumed that since they had turned out fine, their kids would, too," continues Chamberlain. "Gen X doesn't have that assumption -- we've seen what it's like to have the rug pulled out from underneath us."

Indeed, economic collapse has punctuated every milestone of our adult lives. When we graduated from high school in the 1980s, Wall Street fell. When we graduated from college, the first Bush recession made jobs impossibly scarce. When we started having children, the Nasdaq crashed. When we finally bought our own homes, the housing bubble burst.

The Good Fight

We can also be a little snotty. Another common teacher complaint is that Gen X parents rebel against worksheet-based homework, or kvetch that the curriculum isn't challenging, rich, or imaginative enough.

"A lot of Gen Xers have this artisanal affectation, which comes from having sought out the margins of mass culture in independent bookstores, record shops, politics," says [Jeff Gordinier](#) [4], editor at large of *Details* magazine and author of *X Saves the World: How Generation X Got the Shaft but Can Still Keep Everything from Sucking*. "For many Gen Xers, the education that defines us is the one we got for ourselves, outside of school."

As adults, however, we seem to want schools to do everything: provide our children with rigorous academic instruction, socialize them flawlessly, and offer them the rich cultural experiences we value so much. We're angry and disappointed when they fall short of our impossible expectations.

Poignantly, at the heart of all Gen X parental behavior is probably what it is for all neglected children. "Generation X is looking to teachers and schools to heal childhood wounds," observes Waldorf educator Betty Staley. It may not be fair, but it's true. We want you to pay attention to us, to take us seriously -- to give us your time.

In the end, the school administrators kept my daughter in her original classroom. But it wasn't because I'd threatened a tantrum. I had, they said, given them information that helped them make the decision in "her best interest." In other words, we listened to each other.

Solve for X

With all this context, knowing more or less why we act the way we do, here are a few tips on how to cope with our lot:

Listen to Us

As insufferable as we can be at first contact, listen to us first. We may look and act like adults, but there is a part of us that still feels like a neglected kid inside. Paying attention to our concerns may be a little more time consuming, but the effort will pay off. We're loyal allies, and we love to be helpful.

Include Us

Invite us to teach in the classroom for an afternoon. Or assign students free-choice homework one night a week, to be completed with a parent. Many Gen Xers are genuine intellectuals with interesting ideas and hobbies. We'd love to share them!

Put Us to Work

We share your passion for making schools more successful learning environments. Besides letting us help you in class or share a homework assignment with our kids, harness our energy by asking us to help plan a field trip or do background research or otherwise help you prepare a class project.

Give Us Limits

"I let parents know that I'm always willing to listen to their concerns, but that there are certain issues that are negotiable and others that just aren't," says Shelly Wolf Scott, an administrator at Brooklyn's Rivendell School. Parents are not allowed to alter their children's classroom placement, curriculum, or administrative decisions.

They are, however, permitted to offer information about their child that the school might not know and that could assist in making such decisions. "This group of parents seems to respond well to those boundaries," she says.

Work with Us

"Parents don't seem to know how incredibly carefully all teachers and administrators think about their children," says Lynn Levinson, assistant director of Upper School (and a parent of two) at the Maret School, in Washington, DC. "I always reassure them that I *know* how many conversations have revolved around these children and their classmates, so I *know* that it's the right decision, even if I'm not happy with it as a parent."

Susan Gregory Thomas has written for *U.S. News & World Report* and the *Washington Post*.

3 Movies That Shaped Gen-X Attitude

Fast Times at Ridgemont High

Jeff Spicoli may have been stoned, but even Mr. Hand could see he was bright. Where were his parents? Where were *anyone's* parents?

The Breakfast Club

They were a group of troubled teenagers, and their authority figure was a self-absorbed, unprincipled high school principal. And baby boomers thought *they* needed to question authority?

Heathers

Is this a dark comedy about intense hatred of fakery, subverting the system, and, ultimately, doing the right thing? Or is this just life in high school in the 1980s?

Home Visits: Engaging the Family in Their Children's Learning [8]
Starting Over: New School Development Group [9]
Sherman Oaks: The Creation of a School [10]

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