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parenting * ideas 

Healthy rites of passage

• POSITIVE PARENTING

by Dr. Arne Rubinstein

Rites of passage have always been a significant part of community life, until now. Each stage of a person's life was marked and celebrated including the significant step of moving into adulthood.

The shift from childhood to adulthood has always been marked by a rite of passage, which represents entry to the adult world and the rights that go with it. This new set of rights is also accompanied by a responsibility to serve and contribute to the community.

The loss of healthy rites of passage

For many young people Schoolies Week, the annual Year 12 endless party, is the only rite of passage they have. The loss of meaningful rites of passage is having disastrous consequences on young people.

Too often we see young men in their twenties and beyond acting like boys in constant need of acknowledgement from their peers, dodging responsibility and still seeking approval from their mother. Many young women are stuck in perpetual adolescence, more worried about how they look than how they can contribute to their communities.

Adults have a role to play

It's the role of adults to recognise and bring out children's strengths and natural gifts so they can contribute fully to their communities as adults. One of the most significant roles of the elderly is to care for and pass on wisdom to the young. Not surprisingly in the past it has been the elders who were responsible for overseeing rites of passage and their timely delivery.

Rites of passage are not supposed to be done in isolation. As a child becomes a young adult parents also need to take a step and move to the next stage in their lives. Each new stage of development for a child or young person represents a new beginning for parents as well.

Unfortunately, elderhood is not highly coveted or respected in these modern times and there is a global marketing campaign telling us that youth is the desirable and only really acceptable life stage. When adulthood is not fully appreciated or understood, then it's little wonder that many young people are hanging on to their adolescence well into their twenties. Some never make the leap into adulthood.

5 features of healthy rites of passage

There are five distinct parts to healthy rites of passage activities. These rites features are common in all rites of passage activities created by First Nations people across the globe.

1. An event: Usually there is a gathering of significant adults in a young person's life to mark their coming of age
2. Story: Rather than telling young people how to live their life adults tell them stories of their lives, their challenges and their joys.
3. Challenge: In the absence of overcoming an adult-initiated challenge that signifying the moving away from adulthood teenagers will often create their own high risk-taking challenges. The challenges adults provide can be physical (difficult hike), intellectual (speak to a group) or spiritual (spend time on their own).
4. Vision for the future: It's important to provide young people with the opportunity to voice their vision for their future life.
5. Honouring: A valued adult, often a parent, should acknowledge the gifts, talents and special genius of the young person in front of others

Families and communities can rediscover the notion of rites of passage and begin to invent their own pathways to adulthood, complete with markers and appropriate recognition.

Parents and schools can put their own celebrations in place that mark significant ages, and the all-important transition to adulthood. These celebrations should include a bringing together of significant adults and a passing on of wisdom and stories from past generations to a young person. These rites of passage can be creative, must be inclusive and need to be appropriate to each family or community situation.

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Dr. Arne Rubinstein is an internationally recognised expert on Rites of Passage and adolescent development. He is the author of the best-seller 'The Making of Men' and has won multiple awards for his work including being nominated for Australian of the Year 2008 for his work with youth. Dr Arne is the proud father of two wonderful young men and a mentor to many others.