

8th July, 2008

SOMETHING TO DIE FOR

DEAR DIARY, if I saw my son with a bandana tied around his face in a balaclava type manner, I'd punish him in a way that he'd never forget. There's no good reason to dress like that; we're not in the Wild, Wild West. If I saw my son, posing with a gun or a knife in a photo or on a website, again, I'd punish him in a way that he'd never do that again. And guess what DEAR DIARY; Social Services would come for my black arse if I man-handled him and grabbed him by the lapels and shook him all over the house until he was sick. But you see, I don't care because I'd sooner use a firm hand than have him walking the streets like a menace to society. I'd prefer that he's dealt with in my house than have him learn a lesson in a police station or have him abuse an innocent boy leaving blood on his hands and blood on my conscience and destroyed families.

I'm the product of strict parents and there was no question about "what might your dad say". There was no *might*, I knew if I got into trouble what my dad would do AND say. My dad said what he had to say once and if I didn't get it the first time, he'd tell me in another language – PAIN! Having said that, I'm glad my parents were strict because I knew exactly where I was at. The boundaries were firmly in place and didn't move.

So this is my question: can a boy successfully be in a gang if he has to adhere to strict family rules? I'm not talking about impossible to manage boys who beat up their mum and tell their dad to f*** off. I'm talking about families where the parents' job is to be a guardian – fully in charge where parents or a parent runs the house with understanding, love and authority.

What happened to the days when children thought it was normal to be disciplined and didn't feel hard done by? When my son was grounded for a month, his friends thought he was being treated unfairly. I told him behave and you won't get locked in!

Did respect for adults go when teachers were no longer allowed to rap your knuckles with a ruler? Did it all go wrong when parents used to come up to the school and pin a teacher up against the playground fence for telling off little Mark for smearing sh*t all over the toilet wall? Did it go wrong when kids were given the right to say to their mum and dad "if you touch me, I'll call the police or **Childline**"? Because something's gone wrong where children

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think that adults are merely an intrusion in their lives stopping them from doing whatever they want. Well if no one's in charge, then kids will be free to roam the streets until well after midnight, they'll think nothing of stabbing and shooting each other. They can go around thinking it's fine to bunk off school, have sex all over the place with anyone who's asking, they're free to take drugs and get drunk - singing "I'll bring arms-house to your mum's house"!

Would a boy who has a healthy fear of his parents kill? If he knows he'd get severely punished for getting into serious trouble would he want to bring that trouble to his parents' door? Would a boy with something to live for kill? Would a boy who has a clean heart leave his house with a 12 inch jagged edged knife? Would a boy who has a curfew and knows that if he's 20 minutes late home, he can't go out for the rest of the week kill? Would a boy who fears his father more than the police kill? Would a boy whose parents listen to him kill? Would a boy who is taught to be tolerant and compassionate kill? Would a boy who learns to communicate verbally kill? Would a boy with an afterschool activity kill? Would the captain of the football team kill? Would the boy who's been doing Taekwondo since he was 10 kill? Well would he?

Murder is such a violent act that some men come home from war, traumatised and broken, so how can these young boys become attracted to spilling another's blood? How can someone think that it's OK to take another human being's life? What makes a boy in his teens lose the ability to connect with his conscience?

Another thing, why are boys fighting for the council's forecourt or the name the local authority named an area. A boy wants to "murk" someone because he comes from Ellmore Estate and he had the audacity to walk a quarter of a mile onto Ramsden Estate! WHY? Most of these boys are intelligent and if they really thought about the fight they're fighting, they'd realise that there's more to life than protecting your estate and some mates that you might never see again when you all grow up and start grown men's lives.

It's more than likely that a boy or a girl who belongs in a gang will never read this. It's more than likely that a boy or a girl who carries a knife will never understand that being absorbed in violence is a complete waste of life. I know a boy or a girl whose parents don't know where they are right now couldn't care less about what I think. But someone cares. Actually, loads of people care. A lot of parents care. There are some brilliant and supportive teachers who care. A lot of our youth workers and youth mentors care. There

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are loads of people out there right now making a difference and doing a good job. There are still loads of parents out there who bring up their children to have manners, respect and boundaries like my parents did. I took my manners, respect and boundaries to school, not the other way around and there are still a lot of children like that out there. But it looks like the feral youth are getting the front page and getting off on it.

This paragraph is directed to the children who are ancestors of slaves. We are here because our fore parents thought it was better to live than to jump off the slave ship into the suicidal sea. We are here because our slave ancestors thought it would be better to live in chains than to die. They thought being whipped and tortured, torn apart from their families, forced to have sex with the slave master, made to work a plantation from dawn 'til dusk, made be subservient and have their name, character and traditions beaten out of them was better than death. Can you imagine if you were to meet these same ancestral men and women and told them that you were murdering your own black brother and sister for a piece of council forecourt, a postcode and "respect" how they would feel. You're willing to die for what? Slaves didn't have iPods, computers, Xboxes and Wii's, mobile phones, MSN, expensive clothes, jewellery, free bus rides, summer holidays and money for nothing – they were treated worse than the slave master's mule. Slaves didn't have the one thing that's a birth-right - their FREEDOM and they still **PLACED VALUE ON LIFE**.

I'm tired of living in a place where a child thinks nothing of committing murder because "Boy A" looked at him funny! "Boy A" was someone's foetus in the womb. Someone's expectant belly. "Boy A" was a baby, surviving on breast milk, unable to hold his wobbly little head up. "Boy A" once wore a tiny little vest and a nappy. "Boy A" was a little toddler making everyone say ooh and aah at his little chubby cheeks. "Boy A" was a lovely boy in nursery, he was a bright boy in reception, he was good at maths and football in primary school. He was funny and made loads of friends in his first year in secondary school. He was captain of the rugby team and was brilliant at languages. At 14 he was popular with his family because he started washing people's cars and earning a little pocket money. "Boy A" never gave his mum and dad any trouble. At 15 he fell in love for the first time, at 16 he decided he wanted to be an architect and was ready to do his A levels. At 17, "Boy A" was stabbed to death by a 15 year old boy who took a knife not a football to the park. "Boy A's" blood spilled out all over the grass and the pathway. He didn't make it to the hospital alive. By the time "Boy A's" mum and dad saw him again, he was a life-less corpse covered by a sheet in the same hospital where he drew his first breath just 17 years ago. "Boy A" is

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somebody's child. Brother. Best friend. Cousin. Grandson. "Boy A" will forever be in a coffin with the rest of the dead bodies in the cemetery with not enough years separating his birth from his death. Murdered by a boy who thinks that it's "standard" to settle an argument with a knife.

As it stands on the eighth day of July 2008, 19 teenagers have been murdered this year.

Our young men and women need something to live for, not something to die for.

August Mayfield

The Guardian's former prison columnist, Erwin James speaks to young offenders who have used knives.