

**Excerpt from W. O. Saunders, "Me and My Flapper Daughters,"
The American Magazine 1927**

Edited for length and clarity.

I am the father of two flappers: trim-legged, scantily dressed, bobbed-haired, hipless, corsetless, amazing young female things, full of pep, full of joy, full of jazz. . . .

I was sure my girls had never experimented with a hip-pocket flask, flirted with other women's husbands, or smoked cigarettes. My wife entertained the same smug delusion, and was saying something like that out loud at the dinner table one day. And then she began to talk about other girls.

"They tell me that that Purvis girl has cigarette parties at her home," remarked my wife. She was saying it for the benefit of Elizabeth, who runs somewhat with the Purvis girl.

Elizabeth was regarding her mother with curious eyes. She made no reply to her mother, but turning to me, right there at the table, she said: "Dad, let's see your cigarettes." Without the slightest suspicion of what was forthcoming, I threw Elizabeth my cigarettes. She withdrew a fag from the package, tapped it on the back of her left hand, inserted it between her lips, reached over and took my lighted cigarette from my mouth, lit her own cigarette and blew airy rings toward the ceiling. My wife nearly fell out of her chair, and I might have fallen out of mine if I hadn't been momentarily stunned.

"Smoking is no longer a novelty with girls, Mother," said Elizabeth. "I have been smoking for two years, myself. That's one thing I learned at college."

There was a long and tense pause until my wife broke the silence.

"Elizabeth!" she exclaimed. And that was all. For once my wife was inarticulate. She looked long and hard at me, as if she expected me to do the talking. I think she wanted me to bawl out our daughter good and proper right there. But I didn't do it. I looked sheepishly, instead, at the burning end of my own cigarette and remembered that I had been smoking the things for a matter of more than thirty years myself. I didn't scold our daughter or betray the emotional turmoil that I was undergoing. . . .

If I understand that daughter of mine, the young folks of this generation have very little faith in, or respect for their elders, because they think we are unsophisticated, unfair, and insincere. They charge us with unfairness and insincerity because we condemn in them frivolous practices and habits that were common to us when we were young.

"I can imagin Mother having been a very shy and perfectly proper little girl when she was a child." confides my daughter, "because Mother was brought up in those stay-at-home days of a quarter-century ago, when they didn't have telephones, radio, movies, automobiles or any place to go except Wednesday-night prayer meetings, Friday-night spelling bees, and

Sunday church services. A fifteen-year-old girl of today has seen more of life and has a better understanding of life than her mother had at twenty-five years of age.

“But I think if had lived in Mother’s day I could have found as much about young folks to criticize as the old folks find to criticize about us. You and Mother didn’t have an automobile to ride around in, and you couldn’t get as far away from home in a dride as we can get today; but you did ride in a buggy with a narrow seat in which both of you could barely squeeze and in which your legs were all mixed up in a narrow boxlike space.

“A young man driving an automobile today has to keep at least one hand on the steering wheel; in those days, he threw the reins of the horse loosely over the dash board of the old buggy and had both arms free.”

....

For thousand of years, human society has proceeded on the basis of a double standard of morals. Men were permitted to do almost everything that a woman was prohibited from doing. Women have always ruled the world; but they have done it by dissembling, by coquetry, by deceit, by trickery, by playing upon the vanity, the egotism, and the other weaknesses of the male.

The modern girl resents this. She is conscious of her powers and of her place in the world. The conditions that made her mother a slave to the home, even so late as a quarter of a century ago, have vanished and woman has found interesting work outside of the home.

Discussion questions:

1. Both parents are shocked when their daughter begins smoking. What, exactly, shocks them about it? What does this suggest about changing gender roles?
2. Elizabeth says that she knows much more than her parents did at her age. Is this true of young people today, too? Do you feel that way?
3. What point does Elizabeth make about cars vs. horse and buggies? In what way does changing transportation and/or technology change the way young people socialize? How do cell phones change how young people socialize today compared to the previous generation. Are the changes substantive? Or just changes in style?
4. What does the author say about the role of women in the past? How has it changed? Are things similar/different today?
5. Later in the article, the author (the father) writes that his daughters “haven’t given thought yet to the fact that some day they, too, will be old fogies in the eyes of a newer and even wiser generation.” Do you think that this “generation gap” is inevitable? Do parents always think their kids are crazy and kids always think that their parents are out of touch?

"Dear Parents..." *An Open Letter from a Flapper*

by Ellen Welles Page, Outlook Magazine, Dec. 6, 1922

Edited for length and clarity

If one judge by appearances, I suppose I am a flapper. I am within the age limit. I wear bobbed hair, the badge of flapperhood. I powder my nose. I wear fringed skirts and bright-colored sweaters, and scarfs, and waists with Peter Pan collars, and low-heeled "finale hopper" shoes. I adore to dance. I spend a large amount of time in automobiles. I attend hops, and proms, and ball-games, and crew races, and other affairs at men's colleges... I don't smoke (I've tried it, and don't like it), or drink, or tell "peppy stories." I don't pet... But then--there are many degrees of flapper. There is the semi-flapper; the flapper; the superflapper. Each of these three main general divisions has its degrees of variation. I might possibly be placed somewhere in the middle of the first class. ...

I want to beg all you parents, and grandparents, and friends, and teachers, and preachers--you who constitute the "older generation"--to overlook our shortcomings, at least for the present, and to appreciate our virtues. I wonder if it ever occurred to any of you that it required brains to become and remain a successful flapper? Indeed it does! It requires an enormous amount of cleverness and energy to keep going at the proper pace. It requires self-knowledge and self-analysis. We must know our capabilities and limitations. We must be constantly on the alert. Attainment of flapperhood is a big and serious undertaking!

"Brains?" you repeat, skeptically. "Then why aren't they used to better advantage?" That is exactly it! And do you know who is largely responsible for all this energy's being spent in the wrong directions? You! You parents, and grandparents, and friends, and teachers, and preachers--all of you! "The war!" you cry. "It is the effect of the war!" And then you blame prohibition. Yes! Yet it is you who set the example there! But this is my point: Instead of helping us work out our problems with constructive, sympathetic thinking and acting, you have muddled them for us more hopelessly with destructive public [criticism].

Think back to the time when you were struggling through the teens. Remember how spontaneous and deep were the joys, how serious and penetrating the sorrows. Most of us, under the present system of modern education, are further advanced and more thoroughly developed mentally, physically, and vocationally than were our parents at our age. We hold the infinite possibilities of the myriads of new inventions within our grasp. We have learned to take for granted conveniences, and many luxuries, which not so many years ago were as yet undreamed of. We are in touch with the whole universe. We have a tremendous problem on our hands. You must help us. Give us confidence--not distrust. Give us practical aid and advice--not criticism. Praise us when praise is merited. Be patient and understanding when we make mistakes.

We are the Younger Generation. The war tore away our spiritual foundations and challenged our faith... The times have made us older and more experienced than you were at our age. It must be so with each succeeding generation if it is to keep pace with the rapidly advancing and mighty tide of civilization. Help us to put our knowledge to the best advantage. Work with us! That is the way! ... Give us a helping hand.

Youth has many disillusionments. Spiritual forces begin to be felt. The emotions are frequently in a state of upheaval, struggling with one another for supremacy. And Youth does not understand. There is no one to turn to--no one but the rest of Youth, which is as perplexed and troubled with its problems as ourselves. Everywhere we read and hear the criticism and distrust of older people toward us. It forms an insurmountable barrier between us. How can we turn to them?

In every person there is a desire, an innate longing, toward some special goal or achievement. Each of us has his place to fill. Each of us has his talent--be it ever so humble. And our hidden longing is usually for that for which nature equipped us. Any one will do best and be happiest doing that which he really likes and for which he is fitted. In this "age of specialists," as it has been called, there is less excuse than ever for persons being shoved into niches in which they do not belong and cannot be made to fit. The lives of such people are great tragedies. That is why it is up to you who have the supervision of us... to guide us sympathetically, and to help us find, encourage, and develop our special abilities and talents. Study us. Make us realize that you respect us as fellow human beings, that you have confidence in us, and, above all, that you expect us to live up to the highest ideals, and to the best that is in us.

It must begin with individuals. Parents, study your children. Talk to them more intimately. Respect their right to a point of view. Be so understanding and sympathetic that they will turn to you naturally and trustfully with their glowing joys or with their heartaches and tragedies. Youth has many of the latter because Youth takes itself so seriously. And so often the wounds go unconfessed, and, instead of gradually healing, become more and more gnawing through suppression until... relief is sought in some way which is not always for the best.

Mothers, become acquainted with your children. Be the understanding, loving, happy comrade of your daughter. Become her ideal. And strive to live up to the ideal you set for the woman who is to become your son's wife... Fathers, find out what is within the minds and hearts and souls of your children. There is a wonderful, an interesting, and a sacred treasure-house there if you will take the time and pain to explore. The key is yours in return for patient understanding, sympathetic encouragement, and kindly wisdom... Make [your daughter] realize the depth of your love and make her feel that you have confidence in her ability to live up to your standards of upright womanhood. Be your son's best pal. Make his interests your interests. Encourage him to formulate a workable philosophy of life. And remember this: A little merited praise means so much! A little encouragement goes such a long way! Oh, parents, parents everywhere, point out to us the ideals of truly glorious and upright living! Believe in us, that we may learn to believe in ourselves, in humanity, in God! Be the living examples of your teachings, that you may inspire us with hope and courage, understanding and truth, love and faith. Remember that we are the parents of the future. Help us to be worthy of the sacred trust that will be ours. Make your lives such an inspiration to us that we in our turn will strive to become an inspiration to our children and to the ages! Is it too much to ask?

Questions

1. List six (6) characteristics of the "flapper" in the 1920s.
2. What or who does the flapper blame (or give credit) for her existence?
3. What effect did "the Great War" have on the flapper and her peers? Describe three effects.
4. According to the Flapper, what should be the characteristics of a good 1920s parent?