

A Citizens Rite of Passage.

For the majority of children over human history there has always been a rite of passage that took them from childhood into adulthood. It might not always have been pleasant and was never easy but it conveyed great symbolism and conferred distinct benefits and responsibilities.

In our modern society all this has changed. We have rapidly become a child centric society whereby children are treated almost as adults. So rapid has this change been that a legitimate complaint from today's parents is that whilst they spent their childhood Saturdays watching their father's play sport they now spend their adult Saturdays watching their children play sport and have missed out. This focus on children and their wishes has not benefited our children. They are less fit and less healthy than their parents (indeed it is predicted that many will die before their parents) because we have failed to exercise the discipline required to train them in eating and exercising wisely. They have levels of comfort and expectation that are totally at odds with the majority of the worlds population and often at odds with what they are likely to achieve in their own future.

What children (teenagers in reality) need is a 'rite of passage' that prepares them for adulthood. A traditionalist cry has often been 'bring back National Service' which may have its merits (as anybody watching 'Bad Lads Army' on ITV can appreciate) but it wouldn't suite a large percentage of teenagers (those 'Bad Lads' with their energy and excess aggression are the ones who would benefit best but many quieter types, for example, would not).

What society should do is provide them with a worth while gap year between college and work or university (and yes they should stay on to do 'A' levels or some vocational training/apprenticeship). At the age of 18 they are ready for this sort of challenge and many do something already. This year should be spent doing a 'service' either in the UK or abroad.

What form this service would take should be up to the individual. There should be a list of options provided and suitability assessments and guidance given. Options would include:

- working in hospitals or care homes in the UK
- teaching in schools in the third world
- working on community projects in the third world
- a military 'National Service' option

Children would be coached and trained for this service while at school. From an early age they need to eat well and keep fit. This would become part of the school day. Free (healthy!) breakfast and lunch should be provided to all school children who wanted it. There is no point in trying to put the genie back in the bottle and trying to force this one back on the parents. They are (both) now expected to work longer hours and it isn't practical, so why not give them a helping hand. They would also have to keep fit. An hour of mandatory exercise a day would be a good aim. This is all as important as learning to read and financially the costs would negligible when considered against the benefits that would be gained from a healthier population.

As the children got older they would be get more training and development appropriate to the options they were aiming for. Basically in the same manner that children chose, and do, Duke of Edinburgh awards. With everyone doing the same major elements as 'D of E', Service, Skills, Interests and Expeditions. The final culmination of all this would be their period of full time service at 18.

Teenagers that have taken an academic programme and have done 'A' levels might end up as teaching assistants in a foreign school. Those who have learned a trade might be helping build and

maintain community buildings. Some with an eye on a military life would be trained and spend time helping humanitarian and/or low conflict peace-keeping (in keeping with there level of military training). They all would achieve something personally and would be helping people in far less fortunate positions than themselves. They would all get a realistic perspective on life.

There would be costs to this but the UK currently pays out billions supporting youth under employment anyway. The down stream benefits of having healthier and better adjusted citizens would easily pay for it many fold.

The final year 'rite of passage' would be voluntary. Every expectation would be made that it would be done and the training given in school would be as mandatory as any other type of school work but ultimately the choice would be up to the teenager intending to become an adult. The only way to fail would be through an individual refusing to participate. If they did fail, of course, they wouldn't get the right to vote. Nor perhaps should they get state aid to go to university or perhaps privileges that carry with them adult responsibilities like, for example, having a firearm license.

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