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THE WAY WE LIVE NOW

Look Who's Parenting

By ANN HULBERT

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When my seventh grader confided that she loves the "Moms have changed" ad for the Nissan Quest minivan, which features sporty 30-somethings ready for fun, I think it was her tactful way of letting me know I'm an old-model mother. She's right that the baby-boomer brand of parent no longer predominates. According to "Generation X Parents: From Grunge to Grown Up," a study recently published by the Boston marketing-strategy firm Reach Advisors, more than half (51 percent, to be exact) of kids under 18 now have mothers and fathers who were born between 1965 and 1979, the cohort once known as "slackers." And if there's one thing these Gen-X parents can't stand, the strategists report, it's the boomer "soccer mom" label and the bossy bustling it connotes. Nissan has gotten the message: "More sunlight for kids. More moonlight for parents," promises another Quest ad (touting the Skyview roof). Sounds lovely -- leisurely, cozy, even sexy -- doesn't it?

To judge by the study, "baby busters" (another tag for the post-boomers) have turned into family boosters who make their elders look not exactly like slackers, but not like patient nurturers either. Reach Advisors' 2003 survey of 3,020 parents (supplemented by their analyses of government data) found that twice as many Gen-X mothers as boomer mothers spent more than 12 hours a day "attending to child-rearing and household responsibilities." Roughly half of Gen-X fathers devoted three to six hours a day to domesticity; only 39 percent of baby-boomer dads could say the same. What's more, boomers were content with their (comparatively meager) quota of kid time -- unlike their successors. Who would have guessed that the supposed cynical drifters of the 1980's would be complaining about

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too little time with the children? (The contrasts between parents, Reach Advisors emphasizes, do not hinge on the age of the kids.)

The strategists call the Gen-X homebody mentality a "backlash." As a source of generational tension, child-rearing has been a hardy American perennial -- and there's certainly lots of fodder for a family feud issuing from marketing analysts, intent on "Capturing the Gen-X Mom" (the topic of a recent toy-industry seminar). You may remember all the hard-bitten qualities that once gave young Gen X'ers a bad name: their disillusioned pragmatism and underachieving fatalism. The tables have turned. Those traits have now metamorphosed into a welcome antidote to the boomers' competitive, perfectionist brand of "hyperparenting."

America's debt-burdened younger parents, Reach Advisors explains, embrace their prospects of downward mobility with equanimity -- even enthusiasm. Unlike their elders, they value family time over money and status. More Gen-X moms with part-time jobs and Gen-X dads with pitch-in attitudes are balking at the baby boomers' Palm Pilot approach to raising resume-enhanced children. The general manager of First Fun, a division of Hasbro toys, recently told The Washington Post that young parents "want smart children, but they think it's more important for them to be emotionally and socially ready" for school than to be on the Harvard-bound fast track.

Take that, pushy boomers! Or how about this invidious diagnosis: an ad agency that handles kids and toys pronounced the "boomer mom . . . more of an authoritarian figure. With Generation X, it's a partnership between mother and child." Who would have predicted that the boomer youths indulgently reared amid postwar prosperity ("Spocked when they should have been spanked," conservatives once scolded) would be pegged as uptight taskmasters?

Actually, boomers might have seen it coming. After all, we dismissed our own child-focused, "permissive" parents as outdated -- and, armed with their brand-new copies of the "Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care" (1946), those parents had judged their elders frosty and old-fashioned. The prospect of a closer intergenerational partnership beckons again and again in this country -- and just as reliably, seems to backfire.

But I wonder whether a gap really is yawning. Even as the market researchers have been segmenting the parent sector, the first baby-boomer grandparents have been busy bonding -- with Gen-X parents, roughly two-thirds of whom are the kids of the early postwar wave of babies. "Are You Turning Into Your Mom? Great News About Generation Overlap," the May issue of Nick Jr. Family Magazine announces. "From pop culture to politics, today's young moms share a common sensibility with their equally hip mothers."

Gen X'ers, growing up amid the family upheaval of the 70's and 80's, may well have missed out on the sheltered childhoods that many boomers enjoyed. But with the arrival of parenthood, it's notable that both cohorts confront similar challenges. More than half of Gen-X and boomer moms are juggling jobs and kids; back in 1950, by contrast, less than a fifth of mothers worked. The proportion of first marriages ending in divorce hovers around 50 percent for both generations -- a figure that dwarfs the breakup rate at midcentury.

And let's not forget that baby boomers themselves bridled at the "soccer mom" label almost as soon as it was minted, almost a decade ago. "I hate to be a whole breed of something," a



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mother told The Times in 1996, "but I admit I have a talented soccer player, so as long as it is Dr. Soccer Mom, because I have a Ph.D., I accept." Boomer parents may be hard-driving, but who says we're humorless about our excesses? Make room for us, Gen X'ers: my bet is that even (or especially) the generation renowned for hogging the spotlight is ripe for basking in the sunlight and moonlight, too.

Ann Hulbert is the author of "Raising America: Experts, Parents and a Century of Advice About Children."



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