

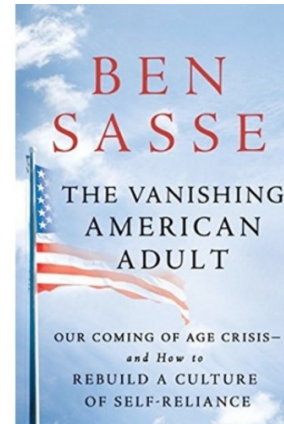


Written by [John Larabell](#) on September 18, 2017

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Where Have All the Grown-ups Gone?

The Vanishing American Adult: Our Coming of Age Crisis and How to Rebuild a Culture of Self-reliance, by Ben Sasse, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2017, 306 pages, hardcover.



While growing up, I often heard the older generations complain about “kids these days.” Now as I enter my late 30s, I find myself doing the same thing. Only this time, it seems like more than just a criticism of different tastes in music, clothing, and hairstyles. Something seems really wrong with the young generation of Americans, the “millennials” and those currently in high school or college. I hear people my age and older complain about the young people’s lack of work ethic, their sense of entitlement, their almost nonexistent critical thinking skills, and their very superficial values. Case in point about the apparent lack of work ethic: I work a part-time job on Saturdays at a small health-food store in town. This summer, two employees, one 19 and one 18, were complaining about working full time over the summer doing fairly easy physical labor, and remarking on how tired they were and how they didn’t have any free time. Both are healthy, athletic, and good students, and come from middle-class/upper middle-class families and have parents with good jobs and strong work ethics. When I asked how they could be tired at their age, they said I sounded like their parents.

Now don’t get me wrong; these are both good kids and I like them both. But seriously, most people my age and older can remember working as many hours as we could (overtime was great) at that age, to make as much money as possible, especially as college students.

The above example illustrates part of a larger problem: The younger generation in America seems to have a hard time “growing up,” even though they are legally adults and should be “grown-ups.” This does not bode well for the future of the country, and I’ve heard many people wonder out loud what can



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be done about this.

In order to combat any problem, one first needs to identify the roots of the problem, and then figure out what can be done about it. U.S. Senator Ben Sasse (R-Neb.) attempts to do just that in his book *The Vanishing American Adult: Our Coming of Age Crisis and How to Rebuild a Culture of Self-reliance*.

As Senator Sasse notes in the book's introduction, entitled "My Kid 'Needs' Air Conditioning":

The idea for this book came when I began serving as president of a liberal arts college in my home state of Nebraska eight years ago. Early in my tenure at Midland University, a group of students in the athletic department was tasked with setting up a twenty-foot Christmas tree in the lobby of our basketball arena. These were hearty and healthy kids, 18- and 19-year-olds. They got the tree up, took out some decorations, dressed the tree, and began to leave, concluding that the job was done. That was when one of the university's vice presidents happened by and noticed something odd. The Christmas tree was decorated only on the bottom seven or eight feet, on the branches the kids could easily reach.

Why, she asked, was the work only half done?

The head of the sorority replied, "We couldn't figure out how to get the ornaments on the top."

"Was there not a ladder in the gym?" the vice president queried. "Was maintenance unwilling to bring one?"

She was met with shrugs. No one had bothered to look or thought to ask.

This day's failure wasn't at all about lacking brains; it was about will. It was about ownership. It was about not having much experience or interest in seeing tasks through to completion....

Over my initial handful of months at the helm of Midland, I was noticing that students' limited experience with hard work seemed to make them bizarrely fuzzy-headed when actual, real-world problems needed to be solved. They were regularly and troublingly flat-footed about situations in which smart, lively 18- to 22-year-olds should have had no difficulty leaning in and righting the world. But it turned out that this passivity wasn't at all unique to Midland. As I've become more alert to this problem, I see the story repeated time and again, not only with college-age students but with pre- and post-college-age people as well.

Sasse also recalls how a friend of his was actually getting scared for his two adolescent kids, noting that their screen time on YouTube, social media, and Netflix seemed to imbue them "with a zombie-like passivity" and a "decline of agency, of initiative, of liveliness."

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In the pages of *The Vanishing American Adult*, Sasse lays out a blueprint for "toughening up" today's millennials and teenagers. He feels that America's affluence and emergence as an industrial society has caused the younger generations to grow up too soft. One thing that has led to the decline of the social development of millennials, according to Sasse, is the insistence on age segregation in our society, especially in the public school system. Historically, children and young adults did not spend essentially all of their time with peers their own age, but lived among people of several generations. This helped them mature faster, observe adult life firsthand from an early age, and also internalize the reality of aging, decline, and death. Sasse recommends children and teenagers spend time with adults of older generations, and teenagers spend time with younger children (if they don't have younger siblings) to



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learn parenting skills.

Sasse also greatly emphasizes the value of work to build character and toughness. Not just work, but difficult, sometimes unpleasant work, and work that requires self-motivation and problem solving. In fact, Sasse and his wife, Melissa, sent their 14-year-old daughter, Corrie, a few hours from home to work on a cattle ranch for a month (the Sasses homeschool their three children) during calving season to “build some character by an unrelenting encounter with daily necessity.” At 14 years old, Corrie was on the ranch helping with breeding, birthing, and feeding, as well as driving four-wheelers, an old manual-transmission pickup truck, and a tractor. Throughout her time on the ranch, Corrie regularly texted her parents to keep them informed of what she was doing, and Sasse included a number of these texts in the book; readers can detect a sense of excitement and accomplishment in young Corrie’s words:

- Got an orphaned heifer to take her whole bottle. (Also got tons of nose slime & snot on my jeans.)
- Am not going to call now. I need to get some sleep before checking cows — and feed the fats ... By the way, Dad, the ‘fats’ are cows soon to be slaughtered.
- It’s been 2weeks since I learned the manual tractor & today I drove 1979 stick F-150. Can’t wait to show u when u visit.
- My day: Learned to coil barbwire; backed trailer w/ 4wheeler; & dropped 2 cows for slaughter.

Contrast this with an anecdote Sasse mentions from his days as president at Midland College:

During the five years I was president, we conducted surveys annually about the highs and lows of students’ university experience. The survey takeaway that repeatedly woke me in the middle of the night was the aching sense not just that the students lacked a work ethic, but more fundamentally that they lacked an experiential understanding of the difference between production and consumption. Dispiritingly, students overwhelmingly highlighted their desire for *freedom from* responsibilities. The activities they most enjoyed, they reported, were sleeping in, skipping class, and partying. A few mentioned canceled classes as the best part of their four years. I too love a good Midwestern blizzard, but I loved them in college *so that* we could explore the beauty, or ski, or snowmobile — rather than merely be free from class. Almost nowhere did the student surveys reveal that they had the eyes to see *freedom to* categories — to read, to learn, to be coached, to be mentored in an internship.

Senator Sasse says that Americans, starting with the baby boomers, have become too affluent, and millennials seemingly make consumption a way of life. In addition to hard work, he advocates consuming less, and having a better understanding of *wants* as opposed to *needs*.

In chapter eight, “Build a Bookshelf,” Sasse encourages parents to select a reading list for their children, i.e., create a list of books to help develop them into good thinkers and adult citizens able to stand on their own two feet. He extols the virtues of a type of “Great Books” collection, including some of the classics from Greek and Roman civilization as well as modern classic works, both famous and infamous. As Sasse noted, “Melissa and I thus resolved to want to show our kids sixty books that we judged important. We set out to build our own short ‘family canon.’” Sasse remarked that while he is not done building his family canon yet, he has selected books to fill nine (of an eventual 12) categories, which are God, Greek Roots, Homesick Souls (or, Fundamental Anthropology), Shakespeare, The



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American Idea, Markets, Tyrants, The Nature of Things (or, a Humanistic Perspective on Science), and American Fiction.

With degrees from Harvard and Oxford, and a Ph.D. in history from Yale, Sasse is an excellent writer and has a very good knowledge of history. The book is very professionally written, is very readable, and has a good structure and flow of ideas.

While Senator Sasse has earned a cumulative score on *The New American's* Freedom Index (a congressional scorecard based on adherence to the Constitution) of 77 percent, which, for the Senate, is quite high, he votes with "establishment" Republicans on issues such as "free trade" and foreign policy. That being said, with degrees from Harvard, Oxford, and Yale, Sasse should be applauded for being as conservative as he is.

One point of contention for constitutionalists would be the fact that Sasse claims that globalization is inevitable and even a good thing, favoring "free trade" agreements and an interventionist foreign policy. Sasse also seems to promote the "accidental" view of history, explaining that America's shift toward mass public schooling was just a natural result of an industrial society attempting to train new workers and integrate new immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This may be true to an extent, but Sasse does not mention the fact that there was a deliberate attempt to "dumb down" the American population to enable them to better fit into a socialist society, something we have documented extensively over the years at *The New American*.

But those negatives just mentioned are a small portion of the book, and certainly don't detract from the book's central message of pointing out the immaturity of the younger generation of Americans and offering suggestions to correct that problem. The book is written from a fairly conservative, and Christian, perspective. Senator Sasse's *The Vanishing American Adult* is a great tool for any parent looking to understand issues plaguing America's youth and how to remedy some of those issues.

Photo of Senator Ben Sasse: AP Images



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