



Children Directing Planes at JFK: Why it is a Big Deal

By now we've all heard about the air-traffic controller who allowed his kids direct airplanes at John F. Kennedy Airport last month. Yes, that's "kids" — plural. It is now being reported that after the controller, identified as 49-year-old Glenn Duffy, let his 8 or 9-year old son take the reins, he followed suit with his daughter the next day.



Duffy and his supervisor have been suspended pending a review of the incidents, but some would go even further. For example, ABC reports that aviation attorney Mary Schiavo said, "Given the child was involved with actual air traffic was a fireable offense ... not only a cavalier attitude but a shirking of his responsibilities." Retired air traffic controller Bob Richards echoed the latter part of that comment, calling Duffy's decision "bad judgment." Yet, what concerns me more than the incidents themselves is the judgment of most citizen respondents.

Many believe that commentators such as me are over-reacting. In fact, I was listening to a radio talk-show host yesterday, and at one point he mentioned that every caller on his board thought the matter was much ado about nothing. The general position of such people is this: "Come on, he let each of the children direct *one* plane, and he was standing over their shoulders at all times. No harm, no foul."

With all due respect to those of you who disagree with me, I must say that there are some factors you're failing to consider. So hear me out.

First there is a relatively minor point. A father who has a young child with him is by definition babysitting, and this is necessarily a distraction. If you think I'm nitpicking and that this isn't exactly the most taxing example of multi-tasking, consider [this](#) research into the true consequences of multi-tasking. In a nutshell, the researchers have affirmed what is simply common sense: No matter how good a multi-tasker you fancy yourself, your performance always declines when you divide up your attention.

Always.

Is this a surprise? Even computers slow down when they must run numerous programs simultaneously.

In fact, the researchers learned something surprising: People who pride themselves on their ability to multitask are actually *worse* at the skill than those who don't. What explains this self-delusion? Well, aside from the infamous human ego, researchers say that because the brain is so bombarded with stimuli when multitasking, it lends the illusion that we're absorbing a lot of information. In reality, however, less is retained than during single-minded application.



Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on March 4, 2010

Yet, however distracted Mr. Duffy was from his duty, there is a bigger factor. It's not so much what he did on February 17 and 18, but that his actions were examples of laxity. They cast doubt on his sense of discipline and duty. Is it realistic to think that those incidents were the only times he was lax? Moreover, the fact that he was allowed to give a child the reins two days in a row makes me wonder if the control room had a general climate of laxity.

Regardless, that's precisely what will result if these things aren't nipped in the bud. Remember that people are creatures of habit; they respond not so much in accordance with knowledge as with training. If laxity is tolerated, it tends to become habitual. And once it characterizes a workplace, the result is a very undisciplined environment — one in which mistakes are far more likely.

As for Mr. Duffy, he seems like he's chick-pecked (when the offspring rule the roost). Let the boy play air traffic controller; then, when his sister wants to play, too, he brings her the next day. Of course, it's cute to let children play daddy-duty — that is, until something goes wrong. I knew a couple who allowed their 12-year-old son to park their car at their home. He hit the gas instead of the break, panicked, and demolished their garage.

But whatever the state of Mr. Duffy's parenting, his professionalism was certainly lacking. The question is, however, will we care? If we want to have standards, we have to have standards about enforcing standards. Unless we're vigilant, things will, as they naturally do, tend toward disorder.

Then again, we could just issue a collective ho-hum. But then we shouldn't wonder why banks are failing, politicians are bankrupting us and the economy is on the wane. A civilization can have a climate of laxity, too.



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