

About Eddie

Eddie is having a very different childhood than my three grown children. Although much of this is a matter of circumstance, a lot of it is quite intentional. As most of you know, none of my three grown children are married. There are no grandchildren and it looks like there will not be any. Only one of them has a career worth talking about. Each of the three of them has broken off communication with me for long periods of time. I have always wanted grandchildren. I believe that a solid family life is the surest foundation for a satisfying existence. Now, as my peers are enjoying grandchildren and even grandchildren, this conviction is more solid than ever.

Eddie and I just click, vastly more than I did with any of my other children. He looks like me. People we meet immediately assume he's my grandchild, but after Eddie assures them "No, he's my Papa" they look from face-to-face and say, "Yes!"

He acts like me. He is fascinated by the books we have bought him on machines, dinosaurs, trees and flowers. He has a theory for everything he observes. He has gotten into the idea that you prove theories by experiments. Last week we did an experiment to check the theory that freshwater freezes more quickly than ice water. Right now we are running an experiment on the theory that coins do not rust in water. He listens as I explain things like photosynthesis and combustion. More than that, he relates to me what he has learned on topics like this from his babysitter, Anna, and from kindergarten. He has yet to learn that modesty and flexibility are virtues in a scientist, but it will come.

Though it is not a vast feat, he is more athletic than I was at his age. Oksana had the wisdom to build a Swedish wall, climbing ropes and swings into the common area upstairs. Eddie loves it. Anna the babysitter comes three days a week, usually with her daughter Sophia. She often takes the kids for walks of 5 miles or so, something that one simply could not do in Bethesda. There were no sidewalks and not much place to go.

This has been a cold rainy summer. Eddie and I get to the river beach 1/2 mile from our house when we can, but we have not made it more than a half dozen times. Bicycles are another matter. We bought two bicycles, a 12 inch model and a 16 inch, so the kids could ride together. They both still have training wheels. In the past two weeks Eddie and I have made several outings of five or six miles apiece, something that we simply could not have done any place I lived in the United States. There were too many hills, too many cars and too few sidewalks and not much of any place to go. Yesterday we went to Sky Mall, a huge affair on the main drag that fortunately has a wide bike path, and bought some groceries.

Oksana and I both observe Eddie's diet, she more stringently than I. He eats quite a bit, but mostly quite healthy stuff like fruit. We seldom eat out, and even more seldom eat fast food. It is probably no coincidence that Eddie has broken the Seibert/Brown family curse of oversized thighs. He's a well-formed kid.

Eddie loves to cook. This morning he made pancakes for the two of us, as he has been doing for the best part of a year now. Yesterday morning he cooked an omelette. One of those things that makes a parent think: he simply showed up at my bedroom door and asked me if I wanted to share the omelette he had made. That was the first I had heard of it. I might have wanted him to ask permission, but I think that is taking the initiative is the greater virtue. I thanked him profusely and enjoyed the omelette. It was good.

Other dishes are collaborative efforts. He likes to make sour milk biscuits. He still needs daddy to cut the shortening into the flour, but he can do everything else himself. We have a lot of apple trees on our property, also a cherry plum and some raspberries, with young peach, pear, and apricot trees coming along. Eddie gathers apples, washes them and pares them. I make the pie crusts and roll them out, and Oksana assembles the pies. Two weeks back we had an apple pie every day. Eddie does a fairly good job of cleaning up. He complains every now and again that it's not his job, but he is usually a pretty good trooper. He understands that if he wants pie, it is a good idea to help.

We didn't tell Eddie about the coming baby until Oksana was five months along. I don't think we ever did directly tell him; we just started talking about it as a reality and it seems that when we did, he already knew. In the last month we have been busy dusting off the baby buggy, the bassinet, the sling and the other paraphernalia that goes with babies that we brought down from the attic. Eddie assures us that he will be extremely helpful when she comes. I expect that he will. It will take a little bit of training, a little bit of channeling, and a little bit of curbing his initiative and enthusiasm, but he is going to be a definite asset.

The structure of Eddie's life lends itself to self-assurance and self-sufficiency, and he has responded well. We don't have a car, so we go every place by bus and Metro. Instead of being cargo strapped in a car seat, he is an active agent. Eddie knows all of the bus drivers on our local route. They let him sit up in front, and in defiance of the posted rules, converse with him as they drive. Eddie knows quite a few of the passengers and engages in conversations with them as well.

When he isn't talking, Eddie fairly often sings. Even though he knows quite a few English nursery rhymes, American popular music and foreign songs such as Alouette, on the bus he confines himself to Ukrainian folksongs. The passengers love it. They sometimes give him candy and money. I tried to discourage it, unsuccessfully, and then finally gave in. They enjoy it and he enjoys it. The only stipulation now is that he show the candy to his mother before he eats it.

I had grand plans to homeschool Eddie. In fact, I wrote a book about it three years ago. I don't think we will do that for the first couple of grades. Eddie is a very social kid. He really enjoys being around the other children in kindergarten, and he has emerged as something of a leader. Leadership skills, of course, will develop best among children who are looking for a leader. The second consideration is the Ukrainian language. Oksana started talking to Eddie and Ukrainian about six months ago. He understands it pretty well, but still doesn't often speak Ukrainian. Ukrainians have become much more sensitive about the language issue since the start of the war with Russia three years ago. Eddie will need to learn to handle Ukrainian like a native speaker, and this is the time of life to do so. While most Kievians speak Russian at home, they all learn Ukrainian in school. Eddie should do the same.

Eddie loves to be read to. This week's favorite book is a collection of stories by Beatrix Potter, the best-known of which is Peter Cottontail. Past favorites have been Kipling's Jungle Book and Just so Stories, a big Russian book for kids on the technology of warfare, a Russian language book on dinosaurs, and the collected A. A. Milne stories and poems. Despite having learned his ABCs into languages a couple of years ago, he still doesn't seem to have much interest in reading by himself. It's the same for numbers. He can figure out practical things, like how to pay the bus driver and what change to expect, but only up to about 10. I rather expect that there will be a blossoming, in which he masters the stuff quickly, but now is not the time.

I reflect a great deal on the difference between Eddie and my grown children. I think I have a fairly clear recollection of what the others will like at the age of five, and Eddie is unlike them. There are numerous factors to consider, and I am sure that all of them contribute in some measure to the differences. It is worth enumerating them:

1. I was working. I did not have as much time to spend with the children as I spend with Eddie. Nonetheless, I generally cooked and we ate at home as a family almost every night. I was available evenings to be with the kids, though they were more inclined to watch television with their mother than to talk to me. Oksana and I do not have television. Eddie has to talk to us.
2. I was free to read to the children and help them with their homework. Somehow, and I do not remember exactly how, between the schools not assigning much homework, the children not being terribly interested in what was assigned, and a lack of support from my former wife, I did not spend a whole lot of time helping them. I offered. The offer was not accepted, probably not wanted, and I didn't push it. When they got to high school they got tutors, over my by then rather weak objection that I certainly had the knowledge to give them whatever help was necessary. They did not want to work with their father.

3. I went out with the children fairly frequently on weekends. I especially remember walking along the C&O canal to look at the wildlife, and renting boats at Fletcher's boathouse. We frequently went bicycling on my bicycle for two. What we did not do was to bicycle on individual machines. None of the kids were enthusiastic about biking. They did not enjoy the wilderness at our doorstep with anybody except me; their amusements seem to be mainly indoors. My son and I did go bicycling in the Canadian Maritime provinces three summers in a row, my older daughter accompanying us the last of them. The kids did the minimum, but did not push themselves.
4. Impossible to quantify, but impossible also to overlook, the children of my former family inherited a Japanese temperament from their mother. They were never like me in the way Eddie is. I have always had a great admiration for the Japanese national character. They value intelligence and hard work. It is, however, blended with a strain of passivity, and in the United States a political liberalism that seems to be at odds with their own self-interest as a highly productive people. My grown children call themselves "mixers." Mixers are not uncommon. Tiger Mom Amy Chua, Mark Zuckerberg's kids, John Derbyshire's and many others are among them. Wracking my brains, however, I cannot think of a mixer who has become a notable success. I would have liked to think that they would be endowed with the best characteristics of each parent, but I do not see it play out that way. In any case, Eddie and I are soulmates. We understand each other, deeply and intuitively.

That's Eddie in a nutshell. He's a normal boy with normal interests and enthusiasms. Our challenge is to keep them alive, and to raise him to pass on our culture. Perhaps the biggest challenge is to figure out what "our culture" means as we attempt to do that. It is enough of a problem in Ukraine. It would seem to be impossible in the United States or Western Europe.