

# No such thing as a free lunch

Teenagers with a lot of attitude and not quite as much cash are going for broke in **Sonia Neale's** household

**W**hen Jerry Maguire screamed, "Show me the money!" down the phone, chances are he was demanding his pocket money from his mother. Money (even \$20 a week) is power, and power corrupts. And my 13-year-old son is not incorruptible. He is what is known in the business as a double-dipper, which is not just about getting caught dunking your cheese cracker in the guacamole for the second time, it's also about children's ability to maximise their pocket money by scamming unsuspecting parents. It's also about my working daughter's ability to complain bitterly about the fact that her traumatising mother makes her pay a certain percentage of her wages to help pay her way around my house.

First of all, the ever so clever SmartRider double-dips both his mother and father for his allowance on at least two separate occasions each week. Divide and conquer, and he's laughing all the way to the bank. But as we parents are bonded and united by poverty, we have quickly wised up to our budding Gordon Gekko.

Greed is good – but not good enough. My children are born con artists, grifters and swindlers and it's our job as custodians of their consciences to bash their developing brains with liberal servings of decency and honesty. How else are they going to learn not to scam money for bus fares and lunches, then walk to school, go without nutritional sustenance at noon and pocket the difference? Despite our efforts, they seem to have more cash than they can possibly carry. Some kids seem to spend a good part of their lives indulging in a wee bit of five-finger discounting at the local shops, goaded into action by peer pressure or, worse still, of their own volition.

When I was 10, I nicked some chocolate, and the shop owner gave me a very funny look on my way out. A week later she turned up on our doorstep and I nearly passed out. Although I didn't know her, she knew my mum and her visit wasn't about me at all. I still suffer post-traumatic stress disorder due to my guilty conscience, though. These days, if your kids get caught pilfering from the aisles, it's not just internal shame that can punish them over a lifetime – their security tape could end up on *The World's Stupidest Shoplifters*.

Most adults have at some stage justified to themselves their fetish for office stationery when they've caused a few pens to go missing. It's only when you come home with a computer or a photocopier tucked under your jumper, or a fax machine hidden in your handbag, that a 12-step group might be a good idea.

A child's sense of entitlement



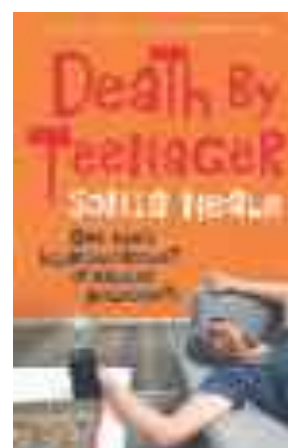
also seems to stretch to the loose change down the sides of couches, at the bottoms of washing machines and on their father's bedside table. One of my children, who shall remain nameless, amasses this treasure trove, asks me what I want from the shops – bread, milk or Valium – pays for it with illicit bounty, gets a receipt and demands reimbursement. Correct me if I am wrong, but, in the language of *The Sopranos*, isn't that called "laundering"? At least he's washing something, I sigh. Rather like the time I found \$20, at a time when this represented half my weekly pay packet, on the carpet of a well-known banking institution and, with racing pulse and high anxiety, snatched and ran faster than an ATM can swallow a stolen credit card.

Money talks. In fact, in our house it screams loudly. This is especially so down the end where the SmartRider lives. It might not come as a surprise to learn he wants to be an accountant.

Now, what's Tony Soprano's

number again? Perhaps I could pass it onto my daughter seeing as the SmartRider is not the only scam artist in our family.

My 18-year-old daughter tells me I am defrauding and deceiving her every time I ask for minimal board money. Apparently all her friend's parents pay for everything and I am tighter than Mel Gibson's cheque book because I won't pay her bills so she can save up for a holiday in Bali with her boyfriend. She not only thinks she shouldn't pay board, she actually thinks we should be paying her for the privilege of living rent-free at home. Then she tells me I'm the delusional one. I tell her there's no such thing as a free lunch. Or a free life. I also think she should pay a tariff for the headspace she is taking up in my poor brain, then I could afford long holidays in exotic locations. No wonder kids are called KIPPERS (Kids In Parents' Pocket Eroding Retirement Savings) – after 18 years their outlook on life starts to smell pretty bad. But are they any



Teaching your children some of life's lessons can come at cost, as Sonia Neale discusses in her latest book. Illustration top: Michael Mucci

different from us ageing baby boomers?

Back in the days when the Wiggles were still in nappies, TAA and Ansett ruled the airlines and *Number 96* and *The Box* ruled the airwaves and a block of land anywhere in Australia cost about the same as a Cold Play concert ticket does today, I was also paying my mother \$30 a week board. And, funnily enough, I bitterly resented her money-grubbing fingers in my hard-earned pay packet as well.

The cost of living has changed considerably, but mother-daughter relationships have not. The fact that my mother used to cook my dinner, clean my bathroom, wash and iron my clothes and lend me her car, as well as working full-time, was completely lost on me. She was the number one rip-off merchant as far as I was concerned, and I couldn't wait for the day that I could afford to move out of home. That would show her!

As my mother before me experienced, trying to educate stay-at-home adult children on the real cost of living is like trying to push a banana through a brick wall. Physically impossible and a lengthy, messy, tedious job. The mother-daughter Cold War power struggle becomes as hot as a tropical heatwave when the queen bee in the hive demands some money, honey! It's not that I want my daughter to buzz off in the near future, but \$30 a week wouldn't pay the rent on a broom closet these days. For the equivalent of 10 cans of Red Bull or three packs of cigarettes, she gets – aside from room service – free wireless internet, all food and fridge items, access to my bathroom products, and all the motherly help and advice she could ever want, including a shoulder to cry on.

Cost of raising a child to adulthood? Much more than \$30 a week.

Cost of trying to get a regular weekly payment from your freeloading daughter? Your sanity.

Cost of remaining friends with your adult children after they leave home? Priceless.

There are some things that money can't buy, and for everything else, there's the Government-funded baby bonus, a means-tested family allowance, and the gratification of knowing that one day your children will have whinging, whining and demanding children of their own.

■ *Death By Teenager. One Mum's Hilarious Account of Raising Adolescents.* By Sonia Neale. ABC Books. 206pp. \$24.95.

■ Sonia Neale is a respected writer and the author of *The Bad Mother's Revenge*. She is a weekly broadcaster with ABC Local Radio in WA where her pieces on parenting and married life engender lively listener feedback.

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