Mangoes can’t buy you love: letter from Orenburg
Elena Strelnikova, 21st February 2011

External factors like the Internet, post-Soviet economic upheaval and the availability of exotic fruit have given young Russians a different system of values and approach to life. Mother of three Elena Strelnikova gives a wry overview of parenting in provincial Russia.

Not too long ago, we found ourselves at a birthday party, hearing a 16-year old boy wish the birthday girl — who was 11 — success in her school studies. This sort of thing is not unusual at Russian parties, even when said by a young person (and especially when the parents are there). What was surprising was what he said next: “Remember, Marina, that your studies are very important, because your whole future depends on them”. All the parental chins dropped at the perspicacity of the words and we looked at the mother as if to say “how long did it take you to teach him that, then?” She was adamant that she had had nothing to do with what he said and looked lovingly at her son, as if thinking “heavens, what a clever boy — the work Granny and I put in has obviously paid off!”

The next year, this marvellous child worked hard with all sorts of tutors and on foundation courses for university entrants. He managed (not without help from mum) to get on to the course of his dreams as a paying student at the prestigious Orenburg architectural institute, which had been his first choice. He was genuinely outraged by the behaviour of lecturers who in his opinion had unjustly marked his fellow student down on artistic merit during the entrance exams. He even thought of putting in an appeal on behalf of his friend. With tears in her eyes, the mother warned him “Don't even think of it!”; he calmed down, but doubts about the fairness of life had wormed their way into his young mind.

After that, it was downhill. 6 months in, he chucked in the towel at the institute, without even taking the first year exams. Studying was too hard, it seems, and he wanted to spend more time with his friends. Also the meticulous work of an architect would have required him to master a considerable number of subsidiary subjects. If he had shared his doubts with his parents, he might have found a way out of the blind alley of ignorance. But he didn't. Instead, the young man has now learnt to drive (having been driven around for some time by his girlfriend in her car) and is now working as an assistant in a warehouse, while doing a part-time course to be a manager. He appears quite happy with his life, though he knows very well that architects are few and far between and managers everywhere.

In Russian, the English word “manager” actually covers all kinds of jobs, from shop assistant to official. You simply add “advertising” or “sales” or “HR” as a prefix. It sounds good, but I feel compelled to quote poet Samuel Marshak [10], who said “knowing a foreign language is good, but don't neglect your own!”. If you don't get on to the course you want, then you become a manager.
At a family discussion the other day, our eldest daughter asked what she should do at university. When we asked her what she wanted to do, she said she didn't mind as long as the pay was good. She's been attending a journalism course, but she doesn't want to be a journalist because you have to think out of the box and, besides, there's a lot of running about. A designer has to spend 4 years in art school, so that's boring. When we suggested the law, she said she didn't know much about history. We pointed out that she didn't know anything about it at all.

“I'm pretty good at maths”, she announced. Really, we thought? So the endless arguments with the teacher hadn't in any way affected her mastery of the subject? “And physics”. At this point we were completely lost for words, as we had never even guessed at any hidden talent in this department. Our independently-minded daughter then declared, bold as brass, that she would like to study economics. Our comments that economists are two a penny failed to convince her, but she did agree that there was still time to look at the various institutes and choose the most suitable and promising.

Among those signed on at the Orenburg job centre, the biggest group is young girls with higher education. The skills needed locally are mostly male: locksmith, welder, electrician etc. School leavers today genuinely envy school leavers in Soviet times, when the issue of getting a job was much less fraught. Every student knew where they would be going to work when they got their diploma. They knew the salary would be more or less OK and that they would have somewhere to live, even if only temporarily. Today, all that has changed. As my friend says, “No one will give you anything unless you grab it from them”.

Yet despite all these difficulties, statistics show that only 6% of older pupils in the provinces fail to take education seriously. The majority, i.e. up to 70%, are planning to carry on into higher education, not necessarily full-time or for free and not necessarily in a prestigious college. The main thing is to get the diploma. A few choose a career in the military, engineering or education. Only one of my friends has a child who has wanted to be a doctor since he was 5. He is not robust (we even call him the accident-prone boy), but he wants to ensure that in the future no one in his family will be ill. Most of his family members are connected with the medical profession in one way or another, so he has first-hand knowledge of how difficult, dangerous and, alas, badly paid the work is. The whole family supports his choice: “there should be at least one doctor in the family!”

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Today's Russian children grow up more quickly. They want to earn money almost as soon as they leave school, so they can hardly be called lazy or unwilling to stand on their own two feet. Most of them are determined not to depend on money from their parents. My friend's daughter failed to get on to a full-time course (before that her mother had been urging her to study anywhere, even at a technical college), but she didn't lose heart. She taught herself to use a camera and now her main work is weddings and portraits. Full-time students at the journalism faculty start earning bits of money in the first year and are very proud of it. Unfortunately the earning is often not connected with their studies and what's worse – when they've graduated, many of them don't want to work as journalists. The main argument being that the pay is so bad. And the constant search for a steady job.
The Orenburg oblast has only 2 million people and just over 30 districts. In the regional capital there are 500,000 people and 5 TV and radio companies. But 20 students a year graduating from 2 journalism faculties is too much for our oblast, though our graduates get good jobs in Moscow, St Petersburg, Sochi, Samara and Bashkiriya.

Our middle daughter is 9. When she is asked what she might want to do, she regularly answers “Be a journalist, like mummy”. She writes poetry and articles. She and her friend have set up a magazine and are convinced that what they are doing is useful and interesting to people of their age. This generation takes its own independent steps much more surely than we did. I would really like her to study at Moscow State University. But will she want to? My niece refused a similar, very attractive, offer from her parents and is now top of the class in the local department of foreign languages. Which leads me on to the thought that there is a shortage of English and German teachers in the oblast: even in the big cities there are vacancies.

And one more thing…will she want to come back to Orenburg, when she's been living in Moscow? Just as people who leave their villages for the big city are unlikely to want to go back home. Novotroitsk is a small town whose main enterprise is the steel works “Ural Steel”. The Moscow Steel and Alloys Institute has a special programme which by 2017 will have trained 1500 young specialists for the Novotroitsk metalworks. This year there were almost 500 graduates from the town, but only 13 came back to work there. There are huge environmental problems, the pay is bad, the infrastructure under-developed and there are other problems too, all of which means that young people look for a better place under the sun.

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In preparation for this article, I had very intense discussions with the next generation about what constitutes success. “A good profession”, “recognition”, “a happy family”, “lots of travel” and “good luck” were some of the conclusions. The introduction of the unified state exam [11] has to a certain extent put paid to the idea that you don't have to work too hard because getting into higher education is all about money and your parents pulling strings. Now it's exam marks that matter and preparations start as early as class 7 [aged 13]. If you pass, you get in. But you still have to be lucky as well! And young people add that life will be better if you're rich (though no one is thinking of stealing, thank heavens), if you're comfortably off and you live better than your parents.

Most of the Orenburg young consider that you shouldn't start a family too soon. Better to live together if you really want to. Recently a young colleague of mine got married. She's only 21, so I asked her why. “My granny absolutely insisted” was her response. “She said it wasn't right to live together without the stamp in our passports”.

Our kitchen discussions about the youth of today continue. My oldest friend maintains that they don't know what true friendship really is. The internet has introduced the idea of virtual friendship: you lose interest, drop someone and then go on to find a new friend. Her husband adds that the rhythm of their lives is quite different – you have to manage to do everything, be everywhere. “What about love?”, I ask. The general feeling is that love doesn't change or die – it’s about hormones, not computers. My eldest daughter says defiantly that she doesn't love her young man. But she feels comfortable with him and he buys her mango. At the same time this
materialistic young woman manages, as if by chance, to keep her young man firmly and squarely in her field of vision.

On New Year's Eve our middle daughter got a call from Grandfather Frost [Father Christmas]. He wished her a Happy New Year and said he'd left a present on the windowsill. “Did you see him, mum?” I answered absolutely sincerely that I hadn't. “But how did he get past you? You never miss a thing…how did he do it? Ye-e-s, I've got it! The little ventilation window was open and he snuck in and out without anyone seeing him!” Thank heavens the good Lord put it into my head to ventilate the room! The 2000 generation are pragmatists. They have to know the whys and wherefores.

At the end of perestroika I was due to leave to school. The physics teacher looked at us and sighed deeply. “You are the lost generation. You, your brothers, sisters and children. Let's hope your grandchildren are luckier”. 20 years down the line I can say that we were the not the lost generation, as we had a good grounding. Our brothers and sisters – perhaps. They watched the priorities changing so fast that if you blinked, you missed it. The children of the 90s are still having a bad time, but children born in the 21st century might perhaps be seeing the beginning of better, more successful life.

My colleague's son is in class 2 [aged 8]. He was asked to write a composition on “When I become president”. He's already writing a book, a sort of crime fantasy. One of the family friends said with a smile “Be careful what you write. You'll become president and the tabloids will dig up all sorts of unnecessary information!” The child's response to this was interesting “Is he doubting me, mummy?”

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