

The Economy in Perspective

Once upon a time, a husband and wife lived alone in the country, far from the nearest town. Maynard and Philippa were a well-intentioned couple, serious and analytical. Before long, they learned that they were to be parents. The news excited them, but it also caused anxiety, for they knew how demanding parenthood would be.

Maynard and Philippa had not gotten on very well with their own parents, and did not find it easy to turn to them for advice. Being practical people, they reasoned that their own common sense would see them through. Sure enough, labor and delivery went smoothly, and they became the proud parents of a baby boy. They named him Econome, in honor of their own efficient manner of living.

As it turned out, young Econome was a precocious child; he was inventive, assertive, and highly mobile at just one year. Proud of him as they were, Maynard and Philippa worried. Their child had enormous potential, and they felt a heavy obligation to see that he constantly fulfilled it. Knowing that young people could get into plenty of trouble if left to their own devices, they were determined to find a parenting style that would keep Econome challenged, yet safe.

Sitting at the kitchen table one night, they reflected on their own childhood experiences. Maynard recalled feeling moody much of the time, alternating between shyness and aggression. Philippa complained that she never could understand her parents, nor they her. Both remembered feeling physically awkward, and having trouble learning to tell right from wrong.

After some discussion, Maynard suggested a plan. Both he and Philippa wanted Econome to have self-reliance and a strong sense of values. If accelerations and decelerations in his growth rate would cause mood swings and low self-esteem, why not find a way to moderate the extreme fluctuations in his growth cycle? The solution, he said, was simple. They would monitor Econome's height and weight. When he appeared to be growing too fast, they would simply keep him in smaller clothes, and when his growth stalled, they would put him in looser ones.

The couple assumed that their child would achieve the average of their own heights, 5 feet 11 inches. By their calculations, they should regulate his growth to an average of 2.4 inches every year for the next 20 years. They would know when to alter his clothes by being attentive to behavioral abnormalities, spotting them

just before they became entrenched. They would get the hang of the correct sizing by experiment and rigorous record-keeping.

Maynard and Philippa put their plan into effect the next day. For years, Maynard predicted Econome's growth, and Philippa made clothing designed to restrict or encourage it according to the size of the gaps between his actual and ideal height and weight. They even learned how to fine-tune the sizing with elastic waists, pleats, and movable buttons. But Econome still had mood swings. When his clothing was restrictive, he became depressed; when it was loose, he lost his inhibitions. There were other difficulties as well. Econome was wearing skintight clothes when baggies were fashionable. He felt that his parents didn't understand him and would not let him be himself. He became prone to temperamental outbursts and unpredictable behavior.

This only caused Maynard and Philippa to become still more obsessed with managing Econome's development. They planned his wardrobe months in advance. They were deeply upset when the boy received a gift of baggy sweatpants from a relative for his eleventh birthday. He was already too tall for his age! When they took them away, Econome said they always stopped him from having fun whenever he began to feel good about himself. Family life was not going well at all.

Then one day these three had a surprise visit from Maynard's cousin Buck. After staying with them only a few days, Buck saw that something was terribly wrong. By questioning Maynard and Philippa about their clothing mania, he learned that they were trying to moderate their son's growth swings only in order to instill sound values. Buck told them that their intentions were laudable, but growth swings in a healthy child were natural. He said it was fine to keep an eye on Econome's height and weight, but to appreciate that those features could simply not be predicted or molded as precisely as they might wish. The best way to forge a good character for Econome was to work directly on his moral development. He urged them to be clear with their son about their expectations for him, and to set a good example through their own behavior. Growth is growth and values are values, he said.

From that day, these conscientious parents followed Buck's advice, raising a well-adjusted son who made them proud and was known as a man of constant purpose, sound judgment, and excellent taste in clothing.