For the past two years, Kourtnie, my now 16-year-old daughter, has been begging me to enroll her in the Florida Virtual School Program.

I repeatedly responded with a decisive no.

Until now.

I didn't want to encourage quitting something just because she began to wilt through a tough time. And there has been no shortage of tough times during the past two years.

I recalled my own middle and high school years and reflected on the bad days, or bad time periods. I never looked forward to all of the different personalities, peer pressure, struggling with my identity and trying to fit in.

At my age now, however, I acknowledge all of the cliches about "building character" and "creating stepping stones."

My resolute opposition to taking her out of an educational and social environment we endured remained firmly in place.

Interestingly enough, however, I found myself in the midst of certain conversations with parents, teachers and school administrators who hold strong opinions regarding the virtual program and what occurs in the schools.

One teacher I respect tremendously said, "Knowing what I know today, I wouldn't hesitate for one second to enroll my child in the program."

A parent of a teenage girl in the program told me, "The only thing I would do differently is do it sooner."

The general consensus: While we haven't lost the entire generation, the changing times have resulted in the troubled crowd holding greater influence over the kids trying to do well. Disrespect and bullying grow more prevalent, and social media only exacerbates the issue.

The unanimity among the group continued. School and friendships built character in our time and we survived it, but today's toxic atmosphere strips kids, especially the girls, of their self-esteem and confidence.

Some parents chalk it up to, "Well, we survived it. Suck it up, soldier, and carry on." But my informal panel insisted it's not the same as it used to be and it's progressively growing worse.

Children, who essentially behave like entitled adults, lack respect for their peers. Their parents don't care to delve into the problem because in some cases, their children are so far gone they're overwhelmed by the effort to get them back on track and it would be too much work and consume a great deal of time.

Too often, the parents who need to intervene are the parents who seldom do the right thing.
Teaching our kids to find their voice and stand up for themselves has evolved into blatant disregard for other kids as well as adults and a lack of respect so disheartening, it left me questioning my decisive "no."

I asked myself, "What if it isn't about allowing her to quit? What if it is about giving her the ability to flourish and excel without all of the outside influences that strip her of everything she needs to succeed in the 'real world.'"

So I relented.

I know. I’ve heard it all. She will miss out on a social life and events. If she doesn't know how to deal with it now, how will she deal with it as an adult?

But my focus is to make sure she thrives in an emotionally and physically healthy environment.

She still has her friends, when she chooses. She still has access to school and school-related events. She will have access to other kids, who have decided to make the change for the same reasons. She will have access to her teachers, and the option to slow down when she needs more time or move ahead when she better understands other areas.

And we can always go back. We agreed to give it a try and put forth equal effort to make it succeed. I'd rather she try something new and fail, than do nothing and leave her to combat unavoidable circumstances when she has more important things to focus on.

Heather Tempesta is a single mother of three who lives in Brandon.

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