

Overachieving kids testing edge of reason

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4:00 AM Tuesday Jun 15, 2010

Kids these days. Who do they think they are with their big dreams and grown-up ambitions?

Climbing Everest one minute, circumnavigating the globe the next. It's enough to make any adult feel inadequate, which goes some way to explaining the pessimists who disagreed with the most recent teen missions.

At 16 my world domination plans involved climbing Mt Maunganui in the dark and circumnavigating Auckland in an over-populated hatchback with the sticker "Young and arrogant" on the window. Risky, maybe. Irresponsible, probably.

All of which my parents took in their stride as they tried to impress upon me the values of goal-setting and thinking big. But not so big I'd need a Qantas passenger plane and rescue boats combing the oceans. Not so ambitious I'd be battling nature at her fiercest with nothing but Google, email and flares as my lifeline.

The failed attempt of Californian teen sailor Abby Sunderland to sail around the globe has not surprisingly called into question whether those too young to vote should be attempting such dangerous feats in the first place. The 16-year-old would have been the youngest in the world to achieve her dream had it gone to plan.

But it didn't. She's lucky to be alive after the treacherous high seas of the Indian Ocean destroyed her boat and she was forced to set off her emergency beacons, triggering the large-scale rescue estimated to cost \$247,000.

By setting out on such an adventure, she put others' lives at risk.

Might this have been avoided if she'd waited a few years?

No, say her parents, who sound like reasonable people. They trusted her abilities. Abby had the skills, the smarts. She just didn't have the luck. Who were they to quash their daughter's dreams by putting the kibosh on the trip? Nihilistic idiots, argue the critics, angered by the outcome.

A 16-year-old might have the experience and the skill but that doesn't mean they have the maturity and decision-making ability of someone older.

Hypothetically, would you trust a teen genius who'd been put through medical school to give you a heart transplant? Would you have hopped on her boat? Or Jessica Watson's?

There's no way to definitively answer whether Sunderland had what it takes, unless she makes another attempt, and by the sounds of it, that's on the cards.

I have no doubt she had the skills. Her older brother Zac had made the same trip at 17. Her friend Jessica Watson had done it at 16. She'd proved her ability on the water countless times. But the failed attempt appears to have little to do with skill and everything to do with pride.

If this had been purely a personal goal, she might have been content to follow in another's footsteps, like running a marathon. Plenty of people have done that, not that it diminishes the achievement for any individual who attempts it. If I completed 42km of hard slog, it wouldn't bother me that millions before me had done the same.

Sunderland and her family had bigger ideas. Had she pulled this off, she would even have eclipsed the achievement of Watson, a few months older.

She must have been gagging when the young Watson received the massive accolades and tributes to her spirit of adventure following her controversial round-the-world journey. She'd seen her brother do the same. They got adulation and fame. She would have received even more.

But Sunderland sacrificed safety for pride. She set off in winter, the stormiest time to be on the ocean. If she'd waited until spring, a safer time to sail, say the experts, she would have been too old to see her name in lights.

To achieve her dream, she had to complete her journey less than five months after Watson. Concerns have also been raised as to why she was attempting the goal in a boat designed for speed. Did she want to break another record too?

At least she's got something to aim for when she's older. What great pinnacle of achievement will Watson go for next?

She might be better off climbing Mt Maunganui in the dark. It's risky, not particularly clever or memorable and the view is obscured ... but the rescue is cheaper. And your folks will know where you are.