

PARENTING FOR MORAL GROWTH

SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT RESOURCES FOR INDEPENDENT SCHOOL PARENTS

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Did You Finish Your Homework? Have You Even Started?

For the duration of that blessed hiatus known as summer vacation, parents haven't had to ask and kids haven't had to answer. But now that fall is here, we exchange the less structured ebb and flow of summer for the routines and due dates of the school year. While families might welcome the return of a predictable schedule during the school day, they dread the increased intensity of the hours between the end of school and bedtime. In addition to squeezing in chores, practices and/or lessons, dinner, and hopefully some down time, kids (and parents) must negotiate the bumpy terrain surrounding homework.

Parents can smooth the homework landscape by backing away and taking a broader view. So counsels Laurie Gerber, parent, educator, and founder of Partners with Parents, Inc., a company that for a decade has provided comprehensive in-home tutoring services for New York City students while offering workshops for their parents. Ms. Gerber's insights result from helping children and their parents succeed in one of the most competitive academic environments imaginable.

She advises that parents begin by assessing their own values relating to education:

- What do you want for your children?
- What do you believe to be the purpose of school?
- What does success in school mean to you?

By starting her workshops with this kind of self-assessment, Ms. Gerber reports that parents are often inspired, noting that "most people's deeply held values are very inspiring and loving."

So why does the nightly homework routine feel more like pitched battle than inspired, loving parenting? Perhaps because what parents may be communicating to their kids about homework doesn't actually align with their values. Says Ms. Gerber, "You could teach your child good reading comprehension skills to ace the test, or you could teach good reading comprehension skills to feel connected to the world and to nourish the need to learn. So context is everything. For

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Don't Sweat the Small Stuff

Expert Tips on Parenting from
Judith Smetana, Ph.D.

Judith Smetana is one of North America's best-known researchers on adolescence and moral growth. In an article for CSEE's upcoming booklet Good Things to Do, she offered six tips for parents. The six have two goals: one, to diminish the number of conflicts that arise between teens and their parents, and the other to help young people develop morally. What does Smetana suggest?

- **Set high standards; expect them to be met**

The parents who have the most success raising morally sound children—kids willing to act and interact with empathy and concern—are those who have high expectations for their children, who expect these expectations to be lived up to, and who support kids in their struggles to live up to the expectations set.

- **Be “responsive”**

Listen, try to understand. Show care and concern, in good times and in bad. This does not mean we should give in to demands, but it does mean that we should listen, support, and even disagree. Make sure kids can count on us to be there when they need us.

- **Do NOT withdraw love or support**

When times are tough and kids are pushing us away, that is when they need us most. Regardless of how much we feel like withdrawing, avoiding the temptation to do so will help young people grow.

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“Homework” continued

parents it's all about, ‘What am I modeling? What's my child going to hear me saying?’ Study strategies are just that, study strategies. They work the same for grade grubbing as they do for getting the most out of the course work.”

Having assessed the lay of the land from the vantage point of personal values and philosophy, parents can then step in closer to survey their specific expectations regarding homework.

- Are you looking for particular grades – on a test, in a marking period, for the year?
- Are you looking for improvement, hard work and effort, or a sense of mastery of a particular subject?
- What are the quantitative and qualitative results for which you are holding your child to account?

Make sure you clearly communicate your expectations. Then work with your child to, as Ms. Gerber characterizes it, “define your child's current relationship with academics.” Spend time with your child understanding his or her view of personal strengths and weakness. Determine what level of effort is acceptable, if your child thinks improvement is possible, how happy he or she is with present performance. A non-threatening approach to initiating this conversation might be for a parent to begin by sharing some personal stories dealing with school experiences. Says Gerber, “Kids want to know their parents; and they want to be known by them. Parents can share what they value, explain that their values might not be the same as those of others, and perhaps even

share the experiences that helped form those values. Everybody has had an experience of something they struggled with, and eventually succeeded, or didn't. We need to learn to ask our children open-ended questions and then remain

quiet! It may seem like an obvious suggestion, but listen to your child. Design situations where you are together, your child has the opportunity to talk, and you have the opportunity to listen. This way you can begin to separate out what

are your issues and what are your child's issues. We find out that kids want to succeed, despite the fact that parents sometimes believe their child doesn't want to succeed or doesn't care or is lazy. After all, the point of growing up is for the child to learn how to succeed on his or her own terms.

“Succeeding ‘for Mom’ or ‘for Dad’ is the booby prize, not the real prize. If we parents carefully consult our inner, deepest knowing, we want our kids to figure out how they can make themselves happy...having nothing to do with us.”

What you don't do with regard to your child's academic life is also critical. Gerber suggests a list for parents of what **not** to do:

- Do your child's homework or give answers
- Criticize harshly or without explanation
- Conversely, give inauthentic praise
- Talk to your child's teacher without first warning your child

In fact, as difficult as it might be if we believe that a teacher isn't understanding or relating well to our child, a parent

“For parents it's all about, ‘What am I modeling?’”

- **Give freedom—but carefully**

Especially in early adolescence, too much freedom to make decisions alone without adult help can have a negative effect on a teen's well-being. However, when we give our kids support and offer options, but then let them make a certain number of decisions, we help them develop responsible autonomy.

- **Keep track**

Parents need to know about their children's whereabouts and activities. They should know whom their kids are with and when they will return home. It is easier to participate in this "give and take" when a firm foundation of trust and support has been established, but keeping track of our kids is both a parental right and a parental duty.

- **Don't shy away from disagreements**

As unpleasant as disagreements can be, the disagreements we have with children teach them valuable lessons: they learn moral reasoning when we offer our reasoned opinions, and the skills of interaction when we argue our points with respect and concern.

- **Don't sweat the small stuff**

Conflicts do arise; conflicts will arise. Remember that very few conflicts are over "moral" issues like fairness, justice, or human welfare. Be responsive to teens' needs for increasing autonomy and gradually increased control over their own lives, be prepared to give in on the smaller issues, but stand firm on the important ones, and remind them of your reasons for doing so.

Good Things to Do: Expert Suggestions for Fostering Goodness in Kids will be published in January, 2009. For more information, visit www.csee.org/posts/12

should resist the impulse to intervene on the child's behalf. Dealing with a teacher our child finds difficult can be a chance to practice invaluable life skills. And a parent can help by modeling an appropriate approach to the situation. Counsels Gerber, "The first choice is to have a child be curious about a teacher's perspective. Of course we want our children to learn how to understand and work with other people. We can help by suggesting, 'Every teacher likes a different thing...find out what this teacher likes. Some teachers really like classroom participation. Some really don't like it if you don't use punctuation when you write. Some don't want you to whisper in the back of the classroom.' Parents should encourage their children to understand their teachers as human beings. Do not disagree with the teacher in your conversations with your child in a way that is apt to set up an adversarial relationship. Adopt an attitude of curiosity and stay respectful. Try saying something such as, 'Hum...I wonder why your teacher is doing this. It's so odd. I wonder why she is singling you out. That's so strange. I'm sure that's not what she learned in education school.' Rather than a parent talking to a teacher as the first course of action, I would prefer to send my child in, having role-played at home a conversation with the teacher. Kids should be helped to solve their own problems and figure out how to improve a situation."

In fact, the goal in supporting your child's success with homework is the same as the global goal of parenting: to increase your child's ability to function independently. Ms. Gerber suggests that with regard to homework and academics, your relationship with your child might

progress through the following four stages:

1. Begin to move your child away from seeing you as the one responsible for academic success. (In this scenario, you're the boss; your child is off the hook.)
2. Become someone whose primary role is to check in on your child's progress. (Your child is on the hook, but you're playing an active part.)
3. Progress to the role of co-researcher who provides help and a second set of eyes when needed. (Your child remains primarily responsible, using you mainly as a resource.)
4. Evolve into a real audience for your child's academic expression, only occasionally critiquing or coaching. (Your child enjoys independent academic accomplishment, while you observe with pride and pleasure!)

Ms. Gerber points out that much can be gained by adopting these practices when your child is in early elementary school. "If you start when your child is young, then obviously kids are much more open and at ease talking about their thoughts, feelings, and relationships with teachers. You want to set a precedent of allowing for a rich environment for family time, such as family dinners. It takes time...just as everybody says. If you have taken time and demonstrated that you care and have been available, then that goes a long way when something starts to go wrong. You are in a position to get the real scoop from your kids. Count yourself ahead of the game if you have reflected upon and communicated your educational values to your family." ■

Laurie Gerber is the founder of Partners with Parents, Inc. For more information about this organization, visit www.partnerswithparents.com

What Do We Know About the Importance of Good Models? Lots.

By David Streight

Here are a few facts about modeling and moral development:

- We know that the way we act and the kinds of models we offer our children constitute one of the five well-researched practices proven to maximize the chances of our kids growing up with good consciences and finely developed moral reasoning skills.
- We know that the right kind of modeling can influence how much empathy our children end up feeling, and showing, in later life.
- We know that the chances of our children growing up to be altruistic—to be willing to act for the benefit of others, even when there are no tangible rewards involved—are better depending on the kinds of models our children grow up with.
- We know that good models make lifelong impressions on children, regarding how to act in the difficult situations that face us in life.
- We know that models come in many forms. Parents are the most important, but all is not lost if parents are not always able to “come through” as they should.

Here are a few concrete suggestions offered by researchers and moral growth experts who focus on what we can do to raise good kids:

- Model through our own actions. (Our children watch us. When in new situations, they

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Pop Quiz Time: ? College Decisions

Pop quiz time: *Everyone who's heard of Mark Breimhorst, raise your hand.*

If you are the parent of a high school junior or senior who will soon be taking the SAT and applying to college, you should know about Mark Breimhorst, because he single-handedly reconfigured a major part of the college admissions landscape when he sued the Educational Testing Service to stop “flagging” scores earned by disabled students allowed to take untimed SAT's. Actually, he accomplished this feat using no hands, because he doesn't have any. Mark Breimhorst was born without hands. Hard to imagine a more compelling reason to be allowed extra test-taking time.

No ethical dilemma arises when an otherwise deserving applicant is allowed to compensate for a disability beyond his or her control. A student at Stanford in 2003 when his suit resulted in the College Board agreeing to remove the “flag” indicating an untimed SAT, GMAT, or GRE score, Breimhorst had demonstrated that he could succeed in a demanding academic environment. And he didn't want a potentially negative distinguishing mark by his score when he faced the increasingly competitive graduate school admissions process.

So why does this case and the resulting change in College Board policy matter to you? Because parents who are willing to

“therapist shop” can secure a diagnosis entitling their non-disabled children to extra time on the SAT. While a truly disabled student allowed more time to take the SAT amounts to a morally defensible leveling of the playing field, an otherwise able student allowed more time translates into a potentially significant advantage in the intense competition for limited slots at highly selective colleges. Especially when admissions officers will encounter no telltale “flag” alerting them that the applicant was in fact “accommodated” due to a “disability”.

Talk about ethical dilemmas!

The more parents peer into the dark corners of the college admissions process, the more they may agonize over how to help their kids avoid being placed at a competitive disadvantage by those who resort to a dirty laundry list of unscrupulous strategies. We might decry the rampant commercialism, the marketing of prestige as opposed to educational value, and the emphasis on tactics, spin, and packaging that dominate the college admissions process. But we become convinced that we must “play the game” for the sake of our children. We fear that unless our children attend the “right” schools, they will

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call upon what they have witnessed to know how to react.)

- Model through our own words. (Our children are listening to us. The way we speak, what we speak about, and the opinions we express influence their values.)
- Bring in other models. (Our children learn about us from the people we bring home. They learn about life from the models we bring into our homes.)
- Comment on actions we like. (We do express opinions on what we like and don't like. We should include why we like certain actions that people perform. Doing so helps build moral reasoning.)
- Comment on actions we do not like (and why, for the same reasons as above.)
- Build stronger relationships. (The stronger our relationships with our children, the more influential they are in our children's development.)

A final note.

Don't worry excessively over the bad models out there, of which we all know there are plenty. Research on the influence of models on children's moral development suggests that children are more likely to follow the example of people they admire and look up to than models of cruelty or unkindness. Not that the latter should be either tolerated or allowed, but when kids come into contact with them, we have an opportunity to talk through moral issues: What is it about that person that appeals to kids? Do kids you know want to be more like the person? What would happen if people in your family and a large number of people at your school behaved like the person?

David Streight is a nationally certified school psychologist, and executive director of CSEE

“Pop Quiz” continued

never realize their true potential. To be a model of ethical behavior for our sons and daughters when others are playing all the angles – this is asking too much.

That is, unless parents listen to a powerful voice suggesting that you can help your child succeed while standing firmly on the moral high ground. Lloyd Thacker, founder and executive director of The Education Conservancy, and editor of *College UnRanked: Ending the College Admissions Frenzy* (Harvard University Press, 2005) recognizes that the moral stakes are high for college counselors, admissions officers, parents, and, most importantly, for high school students. In Thacker's view, the stakes are so high that he quit his job as an independent school college counselor to start a nonprofit organization. The Education Conservancy is committed to helping colleges align admission practices with sound educational principles. In the world of college admissions, as exposed by the essays in *College UnRanked*, troubling trends threaten the ability of competitive colleges to uphold basic educational values. The focus on rankings, coupled with the adoption of intensive marketing strategies by those who control admissions to “select” colleges, has now begun to corrupt our secondary schools. Increasingly, high school seniors are denied what Thacker calls the rights of “studenthood.” And we adults risk sending the wrong messages about ethical behavior.

In a recent interview Lloyd Thacker emphasized that parents should reflect carefully on their impulse to protect their kids, asking, “Do kids go to

college to be protected?” He cautions that when parents resort to compromised tactics, such as hiring consultants to help “reshape” their child's college essay, they run more serious risks than failing to help their child gain admission to a top university. With the authority of a former college counselor who has witnessed the unintended consequences of parental zeal, he warns, “First, ‘packaging’ your kid jeopardizes the desired outcome of the application process because admissions officers at the most highly selective colleges have in common the search for authenticity, and they can smell ‘packaged goods’ a long way off. Second, you jeopardize those skills in your kid that not only result in success in school but also in success in life. You jeopardize your kid's confidence, because in effect you are saying, ‘You're not good enough to do this on your own, so we have to hire someone to do it for you.’ You jeopardize your kid's imagination, curiosity, creativity, risk-taking... and you turn education into a transaction. This is a huge risk.”

In his frequent presentations to parents of high school students, Thacker suggests ways they can:

- reflect on their own college experiences as a way of clarifying the true goals of education
- heighten their awareness of current practices in college admissions that encourage unethical behavior

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“Pop Quiz” continued

- preserve their children’s rights of “studenthood”
- resist the impulse to be complicit in questionable approaches to college admissions; instead model a caring, ethical response to the pressure, real and perceived, to get into the “right” school.

“The college admissions process can provide a great training ground for defining values with respect to education,” Thacker suggests. “But we have turned kids into customers and education into a product. Adults have communicated to kids that getting in at all costs is what’s important, and kids, wanting to please, have responded, but not by being engaged in real learning. Part of my mission is to invite parents to reflect back on their own education for the understanding necessary to help guide their kids through the admissions process. Fundamentally, education hasn’t changed. Why are they sending their kids to school? Is it to get an education or to get a pedigree? They should ask themselves some very simple questions, such as, ‘What was it that made college valuable for me?’ Parents who may have attended a highly ranked school realize that they could have ended up going to another school and had an equally rewarding experience. I stress that by thinking about what made their own college experiences valuable, parents will discover how to resist the influence of commercialism in college admissions. They can be reminded that we shouldn’t judge an educational experience in the same way that we might judge other products marketed to us, such as, say,

“We have turned kids into customers and education into a product.”

toothpaste. Parents need to be asking, ‘What makes choosing a college completely different from choosing a consumer product?’”

Authored by an impressive roster of educational professionals – deans of admission, preparatory school college counselors, college presidents – the essays in *College UnRanked* detail the complex considerations at play in attracting and selecting applicants. Colleges have gone to extraordinary lengths simply to boost the number of applications they attract, or have promoted early decisions not to ease pressure on prospective

enrollees but to increase the percentage of admitted students who attend, all in an effort to manage their image by improving their ranking. Thacker points to negative trends that are rewarded by current college admissions practices, such as encouraging college presidents to behave more like CEO’s by evaluating and compensating them based on how they are able to move their school up in the rankings, or supporting a billion dollar test prep industry on the basis that such services can increase college options for those who can afford them. He observes that “colleges have been guilty of ‘rank steering,’ or driving under the influence” by which Thacker means that colleges have used their resources to improve their rank according to such media sources as *U.S. News & World Report*, rather than by directing time, energy and money toward improving the quality of the educational experiences they offer.

Parents should reject inaccuracies

perpetuated by commercially influenced college admissions practices. Thacker ticks off his list of the top three most damaging myths:

- selectivity matters most...the rank of a college will determine the quality of the education to be gained there
- where you go to college will determine the quality of the rest of your life, including who you will marry and how much money you will make
- education can be treated as a product rather than as an ongoing process

In our saner moments, we parents can help our kids grasp the essential irrationality of such beliefs. But according to Thacker we must also vigorously defend our kids’ right to demonstrate what he calls “studenthood,” noting that the variable that most contributes to real learning is the student him or herself, and the attitudes he or she brings to an educational experience. Those qualities that define and give meaning to being a student – curiosity,

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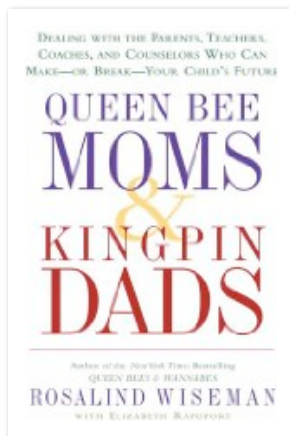
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Book Review:
Rosalind Wiseman's

Queen Bee Moms & Kingpin Dads

Many readers know Rosalind Wiseman's earlier best-selling title, *Queen Bees & Wannabees: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends and Other Realities of Adolescence* (Three Rivers Press, 2003), which examined patterns of aggressive teen girl behavior and offered practical responses for young women and the adults supporting them. In *Queen Bee Moms & Kingpin Dads: Dealing with the Difficult Parents in Your Child's Life* (Three Rivers Press, 2006) written with Elizabeth Rapoport, readers learn that one of those "difficult" parents might be living under their own roof. The focus shifts from mean girl games to the (sometimes) more sophisticated machinations of adults. Categories such as "queen bee," "sidekick," and "torn bystander," used to describe the denizens of "Girl World," are applied with powerful effect to the adults who populate the territory of PTA meetings, soccer sidelines, boy scout camp-outs, and neighborhood sleep-overs. In the first part of the book we are introduced to "tennis skirt" and "hovercraft" moms as well as "lock-her-in-a-closet" and "throbbing vein" dads. Wiseman and Rapoport inject plenty of wit and humor, but also offer a

sobering chapter entitled, "Turning the Lens on Ourselves." They introduce potentially touchy topics such as race, religion, and socio-economic status in order to examine effects on parental types. Fortified by our new appreciation of interactional styles – our own and those of other adults in our children's lives – the second half of the book applies this knowledge to the perennial problems of parenting. Wiseman and Rapoport systematically cover ways to deal with



grown up queen bees and kingpins when "your child didn't make the guest list," "you're dealing with an evil tyrant masquerading as a helpful parent leader," or "you don't trust the parent of your child's friend."

In the opening pages the authors reveal a key assumption that underlies much of their advice to

parents. They contend that a parent's most important role is "to raise responsible, ethical kids who are well equipped to deal with failures and disappointments." One way or another, most of the 324 pages of *Queen Bee Moms & Kingpin Dads* help parents analyze their involvement in the lives of their children to determine what implicit messages are

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"Pop Quiz" continued

imagination, effort, compassion and a sense of wonder – must be preserved and celebrated rather than discounted in favor of frenzied resume padding or cynical gamesmanship.

Finally, parents must decide if their message to their children will be one of anxiety or of hope. Thacker again sounds like the sage college counselor that he formerly was: "Don't do for your kids what they can do for themselves. Let them know in as many ways as you can that this is their educational journey, and that college is just one step in that journey. Resist the impulse to chat with other parents about where *we're* applying. Spend time around the dinner table with your kids sharing your own passions and finding out what is most engaging to them. Don't talk about filling out college applications, don't talk about preparing for SAT's, talk about ideas. Most importantly, trust your kid. Model that you believe in your kid. This isn't easy because parents are targets of fierce marketing. But try to think critically. Remember that all high-powered schools are under the same pressures to construct a freshman class based on a number of criteria besides pure merit. So don't subject your kid's identity or your own identity as a good parent to the vagaries of what can become a highly political selection process. Remember what makes learning important."

In many ways, Lloyd Thacker can be seen as a moral exemplar. He has been compelled to risk his career to help repair what is broken in the system of college admissions. For students and parents who heed his advice, applying to college can become less a stressful trial to be endured, and more an opportunity for authentic growth to be embraced. ■

actually conveyed by their approach to problem-solving. Parents are challenged to pay closer attention to what they unconsciously model when they intercede with other adults – teachers, coaches, parents of peers – on behalf of their children. Furthermore, they are cautioned that they might be teaching their children that both parent and child can behave with disregard for basic fairness and compassion because no one will take a stand to hold individuals accountable for their actions.

Parents often misconstrue the challenges faced by their children as threats. They naturally want to shield their kids or take charge in order to ensure a child’s success in school and life. Educators will quickly recognize many of the parental tactics highlighted by Wiseman and Rapoport. So, it turns

out, do their teenage children. Wiseman relates what happened when she delivered the following speech to a large group of high school students, telling them:

I don’t know your particular school, so I won’t assume I know what’s going on in your lives. Instead, I’m going to share with you what I see all around the country. That social pecking orders create cultures in schools – even the ‘best’ schools – where no one is safe. Where some students are above the law. I’m not blaming people for the power and privilege that they may have in their school community, but if they’re being cruel or bullying to other people, they must be held to the same rules of accountability as everyone else. And the same should go for their parents – they shouldn’t try to get their kids off the hook when they break the rules.

Wiseman goes on to describe her young audience’s response:

The room erupted in spontaneous applause. I was amazed. I realized the kids were sending me a powerful message: They understood how the pecking order of the school was impacting them and their parents, and they wanted to change it. They wanted the school to hold the parents accountable – especially when those parents threatened and bullied the school for trying to hold their kids accountable for breaking rules.

Wiseman concludes that both kids and parents ultimately know the score. Bullying, intimidating and manipulating others serve no one’s long-term best interest and shouldn’t be tolerated. While sometimes effective when exerting power over an individual, a group or an institution, such behavior creates a culture inimical to the kind of moral growth we all want for our kids and for ourselves, in our homes and in our communities. ■