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2 0 0 9 F A L L E D I T I O N

PARENTING FOR MORAL GROWTH

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

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Beyond Happiness: A Conversation with Richard Weissbourd

Try to picture the following *New Yorker* cartoon, the detailed pen and ink work of Edward Koren. If you could see his rendering of two mothers with small children standing outside an elementary school, you might recognize the women’s beady eyes and beak-like noses, signature features of Koren’s caricatures. Gesturing to her small daughter beside her, one mother exclaims to the other, “Can you believe this is happening to *me*? Her scores are very low in self-esteem.”

The picture and caption, worth many thousands of words in parenting

guides, captures two fundamental truths about the challenges faced by parents, especially in the United States, and especially in the past thirty years:

First, parents want desperately for their kids to be happy and have high self-esteem.

Second, parents often judge their child-rearing success or failure on the basis of their kids’ happiness and academic achievement.

This intense parental focus on kids being happy and high-achieving has

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Giving and Getting

By Jennifer Farrington, President and CEO of Chicago Children’s Museum

The upcoming holiday season brings many joyous traditions, among them the custom of giving gifts. Yet, gift-giving also poses real concerns for parents: How can I keep the focus on what’s really important? How much is too much? How do I maintain a healthy balance between making my children’s dreams come true and spoiling them?

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Richard Weissbourd's
Ten Tips
for Raising Kids
Who Care

1. Instead of telling your child, “The most important thing is that you are happy,” tell your child, “The most important thing is that you are kind and that you are responsible for others.”
2. Help your children appreciate others – don’t let them treat store clerks or waitresses, for example, as invisible, or let them write off friends who might occasionally be annoying or ignore neighbors who could use their help.
3. Expect your child to appreciate **you**, not by making yourself the focus, but by expecting your child to show a modicum of interest in major events in your life and gratitude for your generosity. Your child’s relationship with you will be the primary model for his/her other relationships.
4. Rather than focusing directly and narrowly on developing your child’s self-esteem, support your child’s developing maturity – including your child’s ability to manage destructive feelings, to empathize with those who are different from him/her, and to balance personal needs with those of others. Maturity is an important basis for both morality and well-being.

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“Weissbourd” continued

tended to crowd out corresponding concern over whether or not young people are prepared to take responsibility for the welfare of others. The question emerges, are parents raising kids to be happy and successful at the expense of developing their capacities to be ethical and good?

Harvard Graduate School of Education lecturer Richard Weissbourd argues compellingly that this is precisely the case in *The Parents We Mean To Be: How Well-Intentioned Adults Undermine Children’s Moral and Emotional Development* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009). Furthermore, he highlights the ways in which elevating a child’s happiness above other parenting goals not only can interfere with moral development, but paradoxically can contribute to the child’s unhappiness. He reminds us of John Stuart Mills’ insight: “Only those are happy who have their minds fixed on some other subject than their own happiness.”

And parents do have their minds fixed. In the hundreds of conversations and surveys that helped shape his book, Dr. Weissbourd uncovered that most children appear to be getting the message from their parents that it’s more important that they are happy than that they are good. He observes that our culture’s relatively recent emphasis on psychotherapy may have contributed to shifts in parental attitudes. “There’s been more psychological talk in our country in

“... are parents raising kids to be happy and successful at the expense of developing their capacities to be ethical and good?”

the last thirty years than in any country ever. Part of that talk is about every form of dysfunction, anxiety, or angst that people suffer, which has made us very aware of ways in which we felt we’ve been neglected or cheated by our own parents. This is one factor that has led to our being even more committed to our children’s happiness or to removing their sources of dysfunction, anxiety or angst.”

In addition to parents dedicating themselves to clearing every potential bump on their children’s road to happiness, Dr. Weissbourd views the “self-esteem” movement as having perpetuated the belief among parents that if kids “feel good about themselves, then they’re also going to be better people.” Dr. Weissbourd challenges that assumption forcefully in his book, noting that research demonstrates that “self-esteem doesn’t necessarily lead to caring and responsibility. In fact, gang leaders and bullies, research shows, can have high self esteem.”

He also argues that the hard work of parenting lies not in establishing what he calls “moral literacy,” or in listing values to be embraced, but in fostering moral motivation. While he is quick to point out the importance of adults elevating moral standards and talking with kids about right and wrong, he warns that the “values of the week” approach might actually undermine genuine moral growth: “Because

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Weissbourd "Ten" continued

5. While helping children understand and articulate their feelings is important, be wary of too frequently pointing out children's feelings, or emphasizing quickly passing feelings. Doing so can cause children to dramatize their feelings or make their own feelings too precious.
6. Praise specific accomplishments and occasionally tell children how great they are. But avoid constant praising, because it can make children feel constantly judged, or patronized, or that their essential value is on the line in everything they do.
7. Make achievement one theme in the larger composition of a life. Sort out your feelings about achievement and status so that you don't send mixed messages or appear hypocritical to your children, thereby undermining your authority.
8. Help your child register kindness and unkindness, justice and injustice in the world. Listen carefully, without quickly judging, to your child's moral questions and dilemmas. Express your own values, and connect them to your child's experiences and interpretations.
9. Don't seek to be your child's friend. You can be very close to your child in many ways, but it's vital that your child experience you as an authority and idealize you at certain developmental stages and that you are able to let your child separate. Children come to appreciate others as independent and distinct when we appreciate them as distinct.
10. Invite people you are close to and respect to give you feedback about your parenting.

"Weissbourd" continued

most kids do have a basic sense of right and wrong as early as five or six years old, the risk is that they will feel patronized by this kind of conversation about values. That's the worry. I've talked to a lot of teenagers who just roll their eyes when they have come from a class based around values. They know, for instance, that it's important to be honest. What such classes aren't dealing with are the very challenging realities that sometimes make it hard to be honest, for adults and for kids. I think that we adults can undermine our credibility by just lecturing about values rather than by really engaging in the complexity of kids' lives and the difficult struggles they have around being caring or honest in certain situations. By engaging in this way we can help kids think through how to realize and live their values in a variety of situations. It's a complex choreography of leading and listening. The idea that we can just transfer our values to our kids or deposit our values in our kids is wrong, both in the sense that that's not how kids deeply internalize values, and in the sense that we adults have a lot of work to do ourselves around realizing and living our values. That's life-long work."

Dr. Weissbourd also stresses the importance of parents really knowing and valuing the many facets of their child. This deep

appreciation of a child's uniqueness, on the part of parents and teachers, supports moral development because it supports the strength and maturity of the self. "That strength or courage is what enables both parents and kids to endure being stigmatized, or being isolated from friends in the service of doing something that's right. The strength and maturity of the self really grows when a parent knows and appreciates who a child is. It doesn't grow through meaningless praise, but grows through a child feeling known and valued. It grows when who a child essentially is and that child's many strengths are really valued. Being appreciated by a parent is a child's basis for appreciating other people. We develop our capacity to appreciate others by being known and valued ourselves. As a parent, you're modeling that and you're developing your kid's ability to do that. Being known and appreciated is one of the cornerstones of morality." ■

(This is the first of a two part article based on a recent interview CSEE held with Dr. Weissbourd. Look for his thoughts on the achievement "craze," sending mixed messages, and how to be a moral mentor in the next edition of PMG.)

Julie Stevens is a parent, former school psychologist, and a member of the CSEE Moral Development Team.

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Giving and Getting: Continued from Page 1

The rampant consumerism of the December holidays – not to mention year-round birthday parties – can be overwhelming. But before you pull the plug on all gift giving, it's important to recognize what children can learn from giving and receiving.

What does a child learn by giving?

Leslie Mitchell Bond, mother of three and a child development consultant at the Erikson Institute, says that gift-giving can help children develop empathy by imagining someone else's desires and needs. "Explain that you're going to the store to pick out a gift for Johnny's special day, keeping the emphasis on what Johnny will like."

Focus on the process of giving, rather than the gift itself. Involving children in shopping, gift-wrapping and card-making can make parting with the present easier. Encourage your child to imagine how the recipient will feel at the moment he or she is handed this wonderful package, asking questions such as, "Do you think Mimi will be surprised? What will she think it is?" A highlight of many birthday parties, the act of unwrapping gifts is especially meaningful to children who are truly invested in the gift-giving process, something host parents might bear in mind when deciding whether to include this activity.

What do children learn from receiving?

As gift recipients, children have an opportunity to practice invaluable social skills: appropriately thanking the giver, expressing sincere appreciation (whatever the gift), and suppressing the urge to convey any displeasure. Preparation is key in matters of diplomacy, so practice before the big event. Kids delight in role-playing a birthday party, with empty cups, pretend food and, of course, gifts.

Take turns wrapping a book in a tea towel and presenting it to each other, responding enthusiastically to the gesture, "A gift? For me? How thoughtful!"

Over time children begin to recognize gifts as symbols of love, caring, or friendship. This is especially true of handmade gifts or gifts that hold special significance, such as a hardbound copy of your favorite childhood book. However, adults need to keep in mind that young children may be years away from fully appreciating how much effort (or money) a gift cost adults. By modeling your own gratitude, you can raise your child's awareness of the message a gift sends about how special they are. Consider how your child will respond to hearing you say, "A hand-painted jacket! It's so beautiful. Aunt Deena, you must have been up all night!"

Thank you notes also offer an opportunity for children to express their appreciation and to hone their writing skills. Even young children can draw a picture to add to the note a parent has written, and, when they are able, they can add their signature. Older children might write a simple acknowledgment, with the emphasis on simple. A line or two will suffice as long as it communicates the message. Providing small cards, rather than large pieces of blank paper, will make the task less daunting. Here are some helpful strategies for managing the gift giving process year-round:

Thanks, I made it myself!

Encourage your child to make presents for friends and family members. Children are naturally inventive and take great pride in their work. All they need are the right tools to create some wonderfully imaginative items. They also benefit from working on projects as a family, when

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When Internet Use Brings Worries

CSEE Executive Director David Streight frequently fields questions about privacy and computer use after his presentations to parents. As our children get older we need to give them increasing freedom over their private lives—including over their computer lives—but when parents' concerns are elevated, he suggests the following:

Express Concern

When you are concerned about your child's behaviors express that concern. It is important to tell children that we are worried about the amount of time they are spending; because of the distraction from academics, because of the relationships involved, because of the dangers we hear about. Whatever the reason, verbalize it. Be prepared for responses, though: "Don't worry about it. It's not a problem. I've got it under control." We still have a right to worry. If so, expressing concern is the right thing to do, as it is an expression of love, when given the right way.

Monitor (openly), Where Possible

If a child's actions give reason for more than just general concern, attempt to monitor your child's computer use. This is easier, more appropriate, and

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Giving and Getting continued

caregivers have an opportunity to model not only the act of giving, but the enthusiasm and generosity that go into homemade gifts. Be sure to include your children in holiday baking or craft projects. Very young children can help mix and knead; older ones are great at reading out the recipe instructions or measuring ingredients. Children of all ages will delight in creating gift tags, wrappings and cards.

Simplify, simplify, simplify!

Children, especially very young ones, are often more thrilled with the box and wrappings than the gift itself, leaving parents to wonder, "Why did I spend a lot of money on that fancy electronic toy?" Next time, follow your child's lead for a simple, inexpensive, and sure-to-please gift. Considering a princess dress or Harry Potter costume? Instead, get several large remnants of tulle or sequined fabric—perfect for capes and togas, not to mention baby wraps and picnic blankets. Does your nephew go ga-ga every time you get out the Scotch tape? Don't be shy about presenting him with several rolls of inexpensive transparent tape for his next birthday. Some adults may raise eyebrows, but they're sure to be won over when they see the delight on your nephew's face.

Older children appreciate art and office supplies (inexpensive notepads, envelopes, hole punch, pencils—try the mechanical ones, tape, and stapler), gifts that promote open-ended artistic expression, role-play, and literacy skills. Presented in a plastic shoebox, they'll provide hours of engaged play and learning. Craft or model kits also make great gifts for older children. A tip on kits: If any of these projects require adult help, include a coupon redeemable for your services. Children will remember your special time together long after the gift has been discarded.

Celebrate the child

Regard gift-giving as an opportunity to engage your child's skills and interests. For instance, start or contribute to a collection. As early as age three, many children demonstrate a genuine, if not obsessive, interest in collecting. A special stone, accompanied by a book on stones and a partitioned box, may be all it takes to jump-start what will develop into an extensive rock collection. An inexpensive snow globe presented every year on Hanukkah can become one of the holiday's most anticipated and treasured holiday traditions. Coupons for one-on-one time together—skating with Dad or extra time at the park with Mom—are appreciated by children as young as five, but don't delay the gratification too long. If you have a skating date, go tomorrow. And absolutely no cancellations!

Set limits

Lynn Marlott, educator and mother of three, suggests setting a limit on all birthday gifts before the invitations ever arrive. Whether a hard-cover book, wooden puzzle or other gift of your child's choosing, stay within the set price range. Monetary limits are sometimes more difficult for parents than children. Children generally are unconcerned—even unaware-of the difference between an expensive and modest gift. Informing your child of the intended purchase prior to shopping can help thwart any lobbying for extravagant gifts.

Setting clear guidelines for extended family and friends helps in managing the types of gifts your child receives. A subtle hint may be sufficient to get your point across: "Mom, Jane has a ton of Barbie clothes." Or you might need to state your case in stronger terms: "John's dad and I don't allow toy guns. Please respect our decision." This can be tricky when dealing with acquaintances or

Internet Worries continued

more successful with younger kids than with older kids, of course. If done in the right way, attempts to monitor—always letting the child know what we want them to do and why—are an additional way of showing our concern, our love. Be prepared for resistance, which almost always will happen. And if resistance appears to be doing more harm to the relationship than good for the situation, monitoring may not be worth it.

Work with the School Counselor

Your child's school counselor has better insights than anyone into the specific culture of the school, the school's internet use policies and practices, and where levels of concern ought to be. Be in touch with the counselor about your worries. He or she will be able to help dissipate concerns or encourage you to hold on to them, depending on the situation and his or her knowledge of your child. Moreover, concerted efforts between home and school are typically more effective.

Seek Professional Help

Finally, if internet use and the connections or relationships developed through them feel dangerous or become seriously deleterious to parent-child relationships, seek help from a licensed professional to work with you on these issues. ■

classmates, but after the party and a gracious "thank-you," never hesitate to take away an inappropriate gift. Managing the sheer quantity of holiday gifts can be especially challenging for large families, but with a little ingenuity—such as drawing names or limiting the size of parties—this can be accomplished. ■

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