



PARENTING FOR MORAL GROWTH

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

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Finding Your Inner Adult

Dan Heischman knows a great deal about young people, having spent most of his working life in a school setting, as a teacher, an administrator, and a chaplain. In those capacities, he often met with students and their parents when issues arose regarding academic struggles or adolescent lapses in judgment. In those often emotionally charged meetings, parents frequently focused on improving their son's grade in physics, or on making sure that their daughter's one-day suspension would not appear on her permanent record. In other words, anxious parents sought his assurance that whatever the issue of the moment, it would not interfere with the looming goal of acceptance into a

competitive college and more distant prospect of career opportunity.

As it turned out, Heischman's students wanted something more. Seeking to understand them more deeply, he found that these young people yearned to discover "an inner core or compass." Even those students who distinguished themselves in the most demanding schools and looked forward to the brightest futures still longed for a sense of belonging "within a larger, more transcendent framework." These academic, athletic, and community service all-stars, whose resumes were so full, paradoxically felt an emptiness when they

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Being a Moral Mentor: Notes from Richard Weissbourd

Don't worry that children never listen to you; worry that they are always watching you. -Robert Fulghum

Those who negotiate the often tricky terrain of parenthood can no more avoid periods of anxiety than can trekkers crossing the Kalahari avoid sand. As for travelers in unfamiliar or even hostile territory, the challenge for parents is not to banish worry. Moderated anxiety can be adaptive. Instead, the challenge is to identify what makes the most sense to worry about.

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The 3 P's: Perspective Taking, Play, and Posing Questions

Two six-year olds are playing side by side in a sandbox, cheerfully digging and mounding the sand. Lilly digs with her hands. Sam digs with a green plastic shovel. Lilly pauses, noticing that Sam's excavation is proceeding more quickly than hers. She snatches the shovel out of his hand and enthusiastically continues to dig. Startled, Sam squawks, "She stole my shovel," and appears ready to retaliate by depositing his next pile of sand on Lilly's head.

Adults monitoring this scene might be surprised by Lilly's brazen, apparently selfish act. Lilly's parents would likely intervene, admonishing, "Lilly, we don't take other children's toys; it's not nice." They might feel embarrassed by their daughter's disregard for Sam's rights and feelings. After prying Sam's shovel from Lilly's hand, and leading her in bewilderment away from the sandbox to the swings, they might fret about her "immaturity." Their concern could be heightened as they recall that just last week, their friend's barely three-year son generously and spontaneously offered some of his M & M's to Lilly during an outing.

But researchers who investigate the development of skills such as empathy and sharing might see Lilly's behavior very differently, not to mention that of the three-year old paragon. His behavior almost certainly would have been self-interested if he had only one piece of candy, rather than a whole bag. Self-deprivation did not curb his

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"Heischman" continued

reflected on the moral and spiritual dimensions of their lives.

Based on his experience, Heischman has concluded that ours is "a culture of young people with highly undeveloped internal cores." In *Good Influence: Teaching the Wisdom of Adulthood* (Morehouse Publishing, 2009), he argues with

conviction and eloquence that responding to this essential need depends on "parents, teachers and mentors developing an adequate sense of ourselves as adults."

In chapters titled "Landing the Helicopter" and "Is Fifty the New Thirty?" Heischman describes two troubling realities. First, parents obsessively monitor their kids' lives, swooping in to instantly address perceived problems. Second, our culture offers little guidance in what it means to be an adult, beyond a vague sense of increased burdens and limited possibilities. Middle-aged parents and teachers dress and behave similarly to individuals in their twenties, perhaps because of negative stereotypes about aging or in an effort to relate to their children and their students. Both trends short-change young people.

Heischman argues that kids need the opportunity and the time to wrestle independently with personal challenges. When parents are immediately available to intervene on behalf of their kids, they promote a parent/child dynamic Heischman describes as "fusion." He advocates that adults not be fused with, but

rather influential to young people. Being influential requires separateness as well as togetherness, and a willingness to sit quietly while

kids struggle with problems rather than actively solving those problems for them. And challenging as it might be to buck the trend of grasping at eternal youth, Heischman reminds us that human development is

fostered by encountering differences. Kids need to be able to distinguish a genuinely adult world, old-fashioned as its denizens might seem, from the world of childhood or adolescence.

Echoing the insight of fellow educator Richard Weissbourd, (see interview in this issue), Heischman offers this definition of adulthood: "Adults are the ones who are being watched." As he noted in a recent conversation, "It's terrifying stuff when you think about how much you're watched as well as the kind of scrutiny you're under with young people. One of the things I've discovered in working with faculty across the country, and I think it's probably true about parents, is that they tend to underestimate the influence they have." Therefore, Heischman invites us to embrace adulthood, noting that "nothing is more important for a young person than to be taken seriously by an adult who remains an adult."

In his final chapter, "Knowing Them Before They Know Themselves," Heischman contends that young people are waiting for wise adults to notice things about them "that they

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"Our culture offers little guidance in what it means to be an adult,"

3 P's continued

generosity. Remember, in the sandbox there was only one shovel! And while Lilly is old enough to realize that others have their own feelings, she was simply not able to consider Sam's distress about being deprived of his shovel while she was focused on how much fun she would have digging with it. In fact, her limited perspective taking skills were consistent with those of most 1st or 2nd graders. And her surprise at Sam's and her parents' negative responses was genuine.

Perspective taking – the ability to take another person's view into consideration even when it conflicts with one's own – develops gradually. According to Selman (DeVries, Hildebrandt, & Zan, 2000; Selman, 1980), up to the age of 5 or 6, children do not consistently recognize that others have feelings or ideas different from their own. Not until they are in the upper elementary grades do many kids develop the capacity to put aside their own views sufficiently to fully imagine and identify with the differing outlook of another. The ability to coordinate multiple perspectives does not develop until adolescence and adulthood.

Still, while respecting the reality of this developmental progression, parents can nurture essential social skills. And getting back to Lilly's parent's concern about her perceived immaturity, research suggests a strong link between perspective taking competency and social maturity (Schultz & Selman, 1990; Yeates, Schultz, & Selman, 1991). Parents can model perspective taking for their kids: "I think if I were Sam I'd be pretty upset that you took my shovel when I was using it," or "I think Harry might have been scared of

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have not yet come to understand about themselves." This will be nearly impossible if parents' expectations cloud their view of their children.

Heischman relates a poignant moment of revelation for a father whose daughter was pursuing a degree in art rather than following the career path he and his wife had anticipated for her. Meeting his daughter for lunch after she had been away at college, during which time she had drastically changed her hair style and color, her dad recalled being stunned by his sense of seeing her, rather than what he had wanted her to be, for the first time. When asked about the benefit of parents seeking a teacher's perspective to better understand their child, Heischman comments that a sign of a "fused" parent is that he or she will "see teachers as in competition with them or will view adult influence from the outside as a

threat." Parents need to be able to admit when their own "stuff" gets in the way.

Finally, while reflecting on strategies introduced in his book, Heischman offers this interpretation of those unsettling, strained moments when being "the adult" makes us feel curmudgeonly or as if we are out of synch with those around us: "This is telling you something about what your values are and what you ought to stand up for." With *Good Influence*, he provides a powerful argument for recognizing the value of authentic adulthood so that we might better support our children's moral and spiritual growth. ■

Dan Heischman is director of the National Association of Episcopal Schools

Treat Your Children Well (Especially Daughters?)

Recent research points out the curious—perhaps even disconcerting—relationship between the way we parent pre-schoolers and their social and sexual histories after they reach puberty. The current case entails girls and their mothers, though plenty of evidence points to the importance of fathers, also.

In essence, what we now know is that there is a connection between "maternal harshness" when children are in their "fours" and daughters' delinquency and sexual risk taking when they become adolescents. The results appear in a report of a study in the most recent issue of *Developmental Psychology*, a key publication of the

American Psychological Association. Harsh treatment of pre-school daughters sees a direct correlation in the amount of girls' later involvement with the use of alcohol, tobacco and drugs, theft, property damage, and other indicators of delinquent behavior.

In addition to the direct link between the harsh treatment of preschool girls and their later delinquent behaviors is the surprising fact that harsh treatment is directly linked to the age at which daughters reach puberty, a finding previously established by the National Institute on Child Health

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3 P's continued

the dog in the park, because he doesn't have his own dog at home like you do."

And parents can provide plenty of opportunity for play that involves dressing up or using puppets to pretend to be different characters. When children engage in dramatic make believe, they naturally imagine conflicts and resolutions, experimenting with a variety of perspectives and corresponding emotions.

Some simple steps to encourage healthy make-believe and dramatic play include:

- Limit passive television or video time
- Provide dress up clothes, hats, and other props
- Place a mirror at a child's level in the play area
- Be willing to take a part in a make believe narrative while allowing the child to generate the "script"
- Tolerate a reasonable amount of conflict between children engaged in dramatic play; avoid imposing adult rules

Finally, parents can work at strategically assisting children to develop sensitivity to and understanding of others. They can gauge a child's level of functioning and find opportunities in conversations about story books or real-life events to pose open-ended questions. Pondering such questions together will provide a scaffold to more complex considerations (Vygotsky, 1933). Avoid questions

that lead a child to respond only with "yes" or "no," a recitation of facts, or a statement of preference. Frame open-ended questions to encourage multi-word responses that have more than one correct answer. Such questions invite conversation, require reflection, and ask children to test theories, explore emotions, and evaluate reasoning (Kostelnik, Whiren, Soderman, & Gregory, 2009).

- Instead of "Did you like the story?" try "What did you think was the most exciting part of the story? Why?"
- Instead of "Do you think your friend is sad?" try "How do you think your friend felt when he dropped his ice cream on the ground?" "What do you think you could say to him that might help him feel better?"
- Instead of "How was the field trip?" try "What was the most surprising thing that happened on your field trip today?" "What do you think your teacher/the bus driver/your friend thought was the most surprising thing?"

In the sandbox, in the classroom, at home and in the work place, considering the perspectives of others helps create a healthy moral climate. ■

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Daughters continued

and Human Development, as well as in a comprehensive review of literature by B.J. Ellis (2004). Girls treated harshly as pre-schoolers reach puberty at an earlier age than their peers who had experienced more parental gentleness. Early puberty has been found in research on problematic father-daughter relationships, also. A third finding of this relatively large study (over 500 girls) was that the age at which girls reach puberty is directly linked to the amount of sexual risk taking they later engage in. Thus, one thing leads to another, which opens the door to another...

What is maternal harshness? The definition for this report included positive answers mothers offered when questioned about parenting practices: if they expected their children to obey without asking questions, to be quiet and respectful whenever adults were around, if they regarded respect for authority as the most important thing a child can learn, whether they spanked whenever the child did something wrong, and so forth. The more positive answers, the earlier average age for onset of puberty.

It thus behooves us not just to "teach our children well," but also to treat our children well: high standards and expectations, but also all the love, nurturance, and support they need to reach these standards. ■

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Weissbourd, continued from page 1

Our first installment of a conversation with Richard Weissbourd, Harvard lecturer and author of *The Parents We Mean To Be: How Well-Intentioned Adults Undermine Children's Moral and Emotional Development* (see PMG Fall 2009), focused on his observation that many parents who have come of age in American culture in the late 20th century desperately want their children to grow up to be a happy high-achievers. But if we are losing sleep over our child's grade on last week's math quiz (or how that grade might have affected our child's self-esteem) we may be missing the larger parenting point. Weissbourd argues persuasively that our more fundamental concern should be to help our children grow up to be good people – good parents, spouses, and friends – who have the ability and desire to think and act in ways that contribute to the welfare of others.

And while their moral development is influenced by what our children do or don't hear us say, the clearest message is often communicated by what they see us do. Kids might not appear to be listening, but they definitely will be watching - carefully. Weissbourd cautions that parents might be surprised by how kids interpret the behavior of adults, and how quickly they detect hypocrisy. Hidden or mixed messages often arise around competition, whether the prize is the Little League Championship or the fat college acceptance letter. Despite parents "making a huge fuss about not caring where their kids go to college," they simultaneously "are trying to shoehorn their children into a small number of prestigious schools." Kids accurately see this as contradictory and disingenuous. Or parents might talk up the virtue of playing sports for fun or friendship, protesting that performing well or winning is beside the point, then "pace

on the sidelines, yell out instructions, talk anxiously to coaches, or press children to practice."

Acting in ways that are confusing or hypocritical undermines our parental role as moral mentors. Weissbourd urges us to examine carefully our attitudes about competition or achievement, determining when our actions reflect "reflexes we have, such as wanting our kids to be happy, or to achieve; we should then ask ourselves, in fact, what is most important for our kids?" He counsels us to talk with other parents about our goals, noting that "in our growing toward being better moral mentors, we need a culture where parents can be in conversation and give each other feedback." While trying to boost our children's chances for success can tap into our personal competitive tendencies, the experience of parenting can also foster a sense of collaboration. As one parent told Weissbourd, "I started to feel this tie to anyone who has been a parent... You start to see every kid as your kid...there's this universal experience and language."

And Weissbourd cautions against underestimating the capacity of our kids to engage with us in honest, authentic conversations about issues such as the pressure to achieve. He advises that "particularly as kids become juniors and seniors in high school, we can talk with them about power and recognition and status, and the benefits those things have brought to our lives as well as what they haven't brought." Willingness to initiate this kind of discussion also preempts kids from interpreting adult silence or nervousness as evidence that a topic is simply too big or overwhelming to tackle. Resolving moral dilemmas is thorny business, for adults and kids.

Children can benefit from, and be intensely interested in, a parent sharing how he or she grappled with a difficult situation.

To be an effective moral mentor for our kids we must earn their respect and trust, in part by explaining how we have sought to make decisions that are fair, and admitting and analyzing when we've made mistakes. When talking in this way to their children, parents should consider a child's developmental readiness to take on certain topics. They should also take care not to treat a child as a surrogate adult confidante.

Ultimately, the process of moral development is ongoing for all human beings. Weissbourd points to research questioning the notion of moral maturity as rigid and static. In fact, he points out that adults can "undergo entire self-reorganizations," sometimes in response to the ways in which their development is shaped by parenthood. Weissbourd advises us to devote time and energy to introspection, to work to manage our own potentially destructive moods, such as depression or anxiety, and to try to understand "how our own unfolding story as adults is interwoven with the story of our own developing children." ■

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