

Parenting for Moral Growth

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THE COUNCIL FOR SPIRITUAL AND ETHICAL EDUCATION

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

“Boy Crazy”

BY MICHAEL SCHULMAN PH.D.

“I hate her. I hope she dies!” This was a 12-year-old girl, in counseling, hissing about her mother. “My mother thinks I’m bad. I’m not bad.”

Earlier in the week another 12-year-old had expressed similar sentiments in almost the same words. These were bright, pretty, strong-willed girls, both of whom, a year earlier, had talked about how great their moms were, how much they admired them. But now it seemed that everything they did displeased their mothers and they were living under a barrage of criticism, punishments, and restrictions. They felt misunderstood and unloved. They were very hurt and very angry.

A year earlier both girls had seemed to be happy, energetic children, but now both were surly around the house, and their school grades were down considerably. And one was neglecting her hygiene.

What happened? What had changed? To the mothers, the explanation was clear. Both moms described their daughters as boy crazy. Their girls had become “obsessed” with boys, and these mothers were not happy about it. The sweet daughters who used to tell them everything had turned into “hot” pre-teens, sexualized and secretive. The mothers reported finding passionate written exchanges between their daughters and boys, and they learned of unauthorized meetings in school and after school. Their daughters now insisted on wearing tight, revealing clothes, and were overheard sharing bawdy jokes with girlfriends.

Both mothers got worrisome reports from the school. Not only had the girls’ grades declined, but they were frequently inattentive and sometimes rude. Their teachers felt that the boys they were interested in were not good for them. They were a grade or more ahead of the girls, and were considered “bad boys”—boys who got into trouble. The girls had been seen holding hands with their boy-friends and kissing them hello, but the mothers did not know if any further physical intimacies had taken place. These mothers described their daughters in pretty much the same way: “She thinks she’s a grown woman, but she’s only 12-years-old,” one said. And both were fiercely determined to prevent their daughters from becoming sexually active.

Unfortunately, their tactics were only alienating their children, diminishing their influence rather than enhancing it. The girls were suddenly experiencing the thrills

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Over the Back Fence with Parents An Interview with Wendy Mogel

BY JULIE STEVENS

Dr. Wendy Mogel has a knack for making sense of complex issues that affect children, parents, and school communities. Her insights into the critical challenges of parenting reveal the scope, the precision, and the expertise of a gifted clinical psychologist and parent educator. When she describes the kind of childhood that contributes to the development of both resilience and exuberance one recognizes advice that is wise, true, and timeless. Hers is the calming, practical, matter-of-fact voice of experience that parents of another era might have been lucky enough to hear over their back fence from a neighborhood sage.

And clearly parents today could use some support in ratcheting their anxiety down a notch or two. Dr. Mogel describes the tendency of parents to go to extremes in their attempts to create a perfect life for their children: “These are loving, devoted, intelligent, well-intentioned parents who are experienced in their jobs but intimidated by their children and intimidated by the unsettled world in which

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they are raising them. They make a leap from the planet melting to their children having no secure future unless they push them and protect them. And they want the children to develop every imaginable skill, just in case. Even parents of very young children look at their lives as a snapshot rather than as a movie. Parents look at their eight-year-old and imagine that any little rough patch predicts her entire future.”

In their responses to a perceived scarcity of resources and a false, inflated sense of danger, Dr. Mogel believes parents miss what actually threatens their child’s healthy development: “The real danger is that these kids won’t learn how to tolerate boredom or a low mood or to solve their own problems. They’re supervised and protected from the time they wake up until they go to sleep. I want them to have more privacy, more risk, more chance to make “cheap” mistakes while they’re young.”

For parents who are force-fed a daily media diet of plagues, pestilence, and predators, Dr. Mogel’s recommendation of less organized activity requires bucking the popular trend of crafting a childhood that is padded, pampered, and thoroughly coated in sunscreen. “If parents just do what everybody else is doing, their children will be overprotected, overscheduled, and over-indulged. Parents need to make a very conscious effort

to give kids some time that’s not carpentered and planned. They need less scheduled activity, more downtime and more ordinary household responsibility like chores. These were givens when we grew up, but they have been sadly squeezed out of the lives of many of our children.

Referring to one’s own favorite memories of childhood appears both to reinforce Dr. Mogel’s advice and to help parents reconnect with what is most essential and enduring about our

early ventures into the larger world. She describes an activity she leads for parents in her classes: “I ask the participants to recall the experiences they had with their own families that they remember most fondly and then every person shares their memories. Most of the parents

remember time spent in nature and many describe spending time with their fathers. Frequently the fond memories are of dangerous activities, being a bit unsupervised, being in nature, having an adventure at the beach. Not one person has ever mentioned an amusement park. At the end of the class I say, ‘Go home tonight and tell your kids the story you told here and tell them some of the other stories you’ve heard. Then ask them if they would like to do any of these things themselves.’ It’s a radical leap for parents of kids who aren’t even allowed to cross the street without a parent’s watchful eye to consider putting their kids in the situations they so enjoyed when they were young. The parents say, ‘But, but, it’s a different world today.’ Well, yeah, a little, maybe. But not as different as TV newscasters would like you to think.”

Dr. Mogel notes that the only way to have the courage to give kids more freedom is through the support of other like-minded parents. Parents have a steady stream of guidance when children are very young through “Mommy and Me” groups, but this becomes less the case as our kids enter and progress through school. She describes the difference between parents of younger children versus those with older elementary or middle school aged kids: “It’s so much fun to teach parenting classes to parents of younger kids. The moms come into my office like butterflies, they wear bright colors, they’re happy to see each other, they’re delightful and delighted but the moms of the eleven to fourteen year-olds? They are grim: worried, battered down, lonely. I always suggest that parents create a back fence by turning to parents who have kids who are a little bit older. Ask them when they let their kids cross the street alone or hang out at the mall. Ask them how they handled the backtalk and eye rolling.”

Schools can play a vital role in partnering with parents and over the problem of anxious, entitled students and anxious, entitled parents. Dr. Mogel notes some promising practices. “Many schools are evaluating the consequences of the trend toward more and more challenging academics in younger and younger grades, which then leads to the need for hours of private tutoring for kids outside of school. More time out of the sun, not a carefree moment. It’s really a virus, the competition and the anxiety. One of the things I talk to school faculty about frequently is keeping their sense of humor and not getting defensive when parents are terribly worried or terribly angry about a situation with their child that seems like a huge emergency.

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“Parents look at their eight-year-old and imagine that any little rough patch predicts her entire future.”

Reflect on experiences you cherish from your own childhood

What family activities from your own childhood meant the most to you and have left a positive mark on your adult experience? Consider how much time you had as a child to daydream and reflect. Look at pictures of yourself as a child and remember what interests and curiosities shaped your development.

Carefully consider how outside activities affect your child's life

Envision how limiting outside or extra-curricular activities would change the way your family operates. Often more is not better. Resist the competitive tendency to engage kids in more and more sports, lessons, and clubs. Consider how and if outside activities in which your child currently participates align with your family's values.

Respect your child's need for self-directed, unstructured play

David Elkind in *The Hurried Child* warns against turning childhood into a corporate training ground. He counsels the play is "nature's way of dealing with stress for children as well as adults." Visit the American Academy of Pediatrics website (www.aap.org) and read about a new report: "The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds."

Be a guardian of your child's family time, quiet time, and downtime

Jane M. Healy in *Endangered Minds* notes that a developing brain "needs time and quiet space in which to develop the ability to manage itself." The real work of listening closely to kids and developing strong relationship happens in downtime. Plus, your child will learn how to deal with boredom, often by falling back on his or her own creativity.

Work with your child's school to establish reasonable homework policies

Increasingly schools with traditions of academic rigor are evaluating the wisdom of heavy homework loads. Some have eliminated or significantly limited homework in elementary grades. Middle and high schools are focusing on coordinating assignments to avoid overwhelming students.

Model a balanced approach to work and play in your own life

Take the safety message from the flight attendant to heart and "first put on your own oxygen mask" before attempting to help those traveling with you. Think about the aspects of parenting that give you the most joy and reprioritize accordingly.

WENDY MOGEL (CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2)

In my new book I talk about trying to move the triangular relationship from the parent and child against the school to the parent and school 'against' the child in a loving but very firm way. Parent-school covenants are a positive trend in this direction."

Dr. Mogel emphasizes that parents can benefit by looking carefully at their own lives and the example they are setting. As they raise their children, they can ask themselves, "Is this the kind of childhood that I want my grandchildren to have?"

Dr. Wendy Mogel is the author of Blessings of a Skinned Knee: Using Jewish Teachings to Raise Self-Reliant Children. Her new book, due out in 2008, The Blessing of a B Minus, deals with what parents can learn from teenagers. Mogel is the mother of two daughters.

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of romance and sexual arousal, and they were learning to flirt and charm, and discovering their powers as attractive females. The genie of sexual awakening was out of the bottle for these girls and no matter how hard these mothers struggled to drive it back, it was out for good. The girls didn't choose to have their hormones raging when they were only 12, but that was a fact that could not be undone. It was a very exciting time for them—joyful, confusing, and scary—and though they would have liked to talk to their mothers about what they were going through, they couldn't. Their mothers were too judgmental, too condemning—“too hysterical,” as one girl put it.

Conflict between parents and young daughters over awakening sexuality is an old story (keep in mind that “Romeo and Juliet” was written over 400 years ago). Is 12 too young for a girl to be swept away by romance and passion? It's a silly question, really. The development of sexuality, like all developmental traits, varies greatly from person to person, and is probably distributed “normally” in the population (meaning that if the average age of sexual awakening is, say, 14, most people fall at or near the average; but some will develop their sexuality at a considerably younger or older age). If these two girls happened to fall in the lower age range, it wasn't their fault. It's just how their bodies and brains were naturally developing. To most of us adults, 12 certainly seems young for sexual interest. But girls appear to be getting their periods at a younger age than previous generations—and it may be that they are also developing sexual and romantic longings at an earlier age.

Is 12 too young to be expressing sexuality? Well, that depends on one's culture. In some cultures, parents of a 12-year-old girl would already be seeking a suitable marriage partner for her. In other cultures, parents of a sexualized 12-year-old caught holding hands and kissing would have the legal right to kill her. Ours is a very sexualized culture, with much more open discussions and displays of sex than just a generation ago. Our sense of sexual morality has changed as well. Nowadays, in large segments of our culture, women who display their bodies or are open about their sexual experiences are not automatically considered “bad” or immoral. Indeed, judgments about a woman's character are now more often based on other criteria, such as how kind she is or how fully she lives up to her principles (just like judgments of the characters of men).

Parents may want to shield their children from the sexuality all around them, but they aren't likely to succeed.

Their children are growing up in a sexual culture where things that were considered private, or even perverted, not too long ago (perhaps as recently as when the parents were themselves adolescents), are now seen by many as normal or even healthy. The sexual culture of children today is not the same as the one their parents grew up in, just as the one the parents grew up in was not the same as the one their parents grew up in.

These mothers were sure that the problems their daughters were having in school and at home came from their focus on boys—but perhaps not. Their behavior problems may instead have come about because of all the criticism they were receiving, or from their belief that their parents no longer loved them and thought of them as bad, or from their unhappiness at having to hide their most important thoughts and actions from parents and teachers, or from their desire to get back at their parents for all the hurt they were experiencing—or for all of the above.

For these girls, spending time with a boy they like was the most exciting part of their day (even a chance encounter in the school hallway was thrilling). To say the least, their parents were not sharing their excitement. But that's where the solution to the family crisis lies. These mothers won't be able to crush their daughters' burgeoning sexuality—not with these spirited girls, and not in our culture. All they can realistically hope for is to be allowed to guide their daughters through the perils that come with entering the “boy crazy” phase of their lives. It is a confusing time, and most girls will need their mother's guidance, whether that phase starts when the girls are 16 or 14 or 12. But their daughters won't let them in or listen to their advice if they feel that their mothers find abhorrent what they find so sweet. In short, these mothers need to find a way to put themselves in their daughters' place; they need to show their daughters some empathy.

One of these mothers admitted that her own mother, a very religious woman, had thrown her out of the house when she went through her own boy crazy phase (she

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A Call for Character Education

BY SUSAN BAUSKA

When all is said and done, it is probably one's character even more than one's intelligence that will determine ultimate satisfaction in life. Yet, we in independent schools can tend to neglect attention to character development of our students as we work feverishly to prepare them to compete at high levels on standardized tests and next-level institutional acceptance. Thomas Lickona and Matthew Davidson, in their character education resource/research compendium *Smart and Good High Schools*, argue that it is useless to be good without being smart, and dangerous to be smart without being good (think Hitler, for example). To that end, Lickona and Davidson offer as metaphor the image of the yin-yang ball—the idea that moral character (excellence in relationships and citizenship) and performance character (excellence in achievement) must be consciously taught as interdependent concepts, else our society as we know it perishes.

Three years ago, I was asked to join a nationwide group of educators assembled through the Council for Spiritual and Ethical Education. We have come together several times to spend long weekends working privately with some of the best thinkers in the field of moral development in schools. Our task: to synthesize current best practices in character education and to go out into the independent school network teaching what we've learned and helping other schools—as well as our own—improve current practices.

Perhaps the most common argument we hear against formal character education programs is that schools like Annie Wright don't have the time to take the time to accommodate formal character education. A response to that is that we can't afford *not* to take the time. The character of our children should be the essence out of which we nurture their scholarship, athletic talent and artistic ability. Paying attention to how our children develop moral agency should be a central concern for both schools and parents.

The moral development of children involves issues beyond social conventions, rules and authority. Moral issues involve right and wrong and stand independent of culture or situation. In even our youngest children, we see surprisingly sophisticated thinking about right and wrong. Social conventions (such as saying "please," and dressing appropriately), however, are often specific to a given culture.

Conventions and rules (as opposed to moral issues) often play out in parent-child relationships, especially as children approach 13, and they tend to intensify at around age 15 with the mother/daughter dyad as the most conflictive relationship, followed by mother/son. Yet, conflict in the context of warm, supportive family and school relationships are a normal part of adolescent development, especially when those conflicts center around everyday, mundane issues such as what Dr. Judith Smetana, editor of the *Handbook of Moral Development*, calls "garbage, dishes and galoshes."

- Why does conflict increase as kids become teenagers? Most of the reasons seem patently obvious: The biological changes of puberty—there are evolutionary reasons why children need to use conflict as a means to separate from the family.
- Changes in expectancies: parents often lag behind reality in terms of what they should logically expect in the behavior of their adolescent children, expecting or perhaps wanting them to act younger than their developmental age.
- Parents of adolescents experience our own developmental issues such as middle age, occupational changes and realization of limited possibilities just at the time our children are trying to find and define themselves.

Adolescents tend to view conflicts with adults as issues of personal jurisdiction (choices of friends, choices of activities, personal privacy, body control), and the boundary of what is seen as personal or beyond the scope of adult interference has to expand during the teen years.

Autonomy proceeds from the bottom up—kids are pushing for more control over their own decisions and it is the job of teachers and parents to apply the brakes judiciously. It is in the grey area of what kids see as beyond appropriate adult regulation and what parents and teachers see as their responsibilities where most conflict exists—not in the area of morality. When adults can understand the distinction between social conventions and morality, as well as what should be left to the "personal" domain, we can (hopefully) choose our battles with our teens prudently as we understand that kids are not oppositional *just* to be oppositional. Normal, healthy conflict actually can lead to appropriate changes in parental authority and in the child's development of autonomy.

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admitted to her mother that she had had sex with a boy); their relationship never recovered. “But I was much older,” she explained. Still, she realized as she recalled the pain of what happened between her and her mother that she did not want to recreate that unhappiness in her relationship with her daughter. She did not want to lose her daughter.

Her own mother’s concerns were religion-based. I stressed that it was important that she understand the sources of her own concerns. There are many reasons why a parent would want her daughter to put off sexual involvements. Aside from religion, there are concerns about pregnancy, disease, reputation (the child’s and the parent’s), and emotional vulnerability. Sometimes parents simply find it hard to adjust to their child growing up “too fast.” And some simply don’t like it when somebody else—the boyfriend—becomes so important in their child’s life.

It is important for a parent to know her own reasons because, unlike some cultures, our children insist on explanations for the demands and restrictions we place upon them. They feel respected when we reason with them. They tend not to accept “Because I’m your mother and I told you so.” Most do not simply follow orders. So when parents want their daughters not to have a boyfriend, not to hold hands, not to kiss, not to engage in other intimacies, they need to open a dialogue with them. Just stating one’s disapproval does not constitute a dialogue. Saying, “You’re too young,” may be the opening line of a dialogue, but much more needs to follow.

A dialogue means listening to each other respectfully and exchanging reasons. It will be easier to enter a dialogue and keep it going if parents remember that their goals are to have their daughter accept their guidance (which they are more likely to do than accept an order) and to be there for her even if she sometimes makes some dumb choices (which sometimes she will). Sooner or later that 12-year-old will enter relationships with boys. If all she’s heard is no, she won’t be inclined to turn to her mother for advice on how to build a good relationship.

Many 12-year-olds do not view their “boy crazy” behaviors as bad or bad for them. If a mother thinks her child is too young to be engaging in such behaviors, she’ll have a better chance of getting her point across with good reasons than with condemnations and punishments. When a young girl gets punished and vilified for doing what she does not consider immoral, she is likely to start lying about what she does. The lies, of course, lead to anger and accu-

sations on both sides. The estrangement that follows leaves both parent and child unhappy. No child wants to feel hated for her mother. No mother wants to be hated by her daughter.

Boy crazy is often a difficult period for parents and daughters. Parents who rely on empathic listening and reasoned, respectful dialogue (rather than power tactics, which are usually futile) have a better shot at finding a mutually acceptable understanding with their daughter and coming through this period with their relationship intact.

*Michael Schulman, Ph.D., is the author of **Bringing Up a Moral Child: A New Approach for Teaching Your Child to Be Kind, Just and Responsible** (1994) and **The Passionate Mind: Bringing Up an Intelligent and Creative Child** (1991), which was a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. Readers are referred to his earlier articles in the February and March 2006 issues of **CSEE Connections**.*

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So, what does this mean in practical terms for us as parents of adolescents and emerging adolescents?

- Be prepared to negotiate when social conventions outside the home are at variance with the values and practices of the family—this can often be a very tough call.
- Know that there are better and worse ways to respond to misbehavior. Work always to be respectful of your child.
- Deal with today’s problem and not past failings.
- Forgive and forget when a conflict is over. Know that your kid most likely gets beyond the effects of conflict far sooner than you will.
- Try to use logical consequences connected meaningfully to the transgression.
- Collaborate with your child in establishing those logical consequences.
- Concentrate on the behavior (good or bad), not on

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Why That South Park Guy is on to Something

A Review of *The Price of Privilege* by Madeline Levine, Ph.D.
New York: HarperCollins, 2006

BY JULIE STEVENS

Parents who choose to send their children to independent schools have made a conscious decision about how to apportion their personal resources. Their choice reflects deeply held values and desires. Clearly, independent school parents have made education a family priority. Further, they see a particular kind of education as vitally important in preparing their children to enjoy a successful life.

Together with the board, administrators and staff members of independent schools, as well as with the students themselves, parents create learning communities that offer tremendous abundance. Our homes and schools offer a superfluity of resources, activities, experiences and opportunities. That certain aspects of growing up in such an environment might potentially interfere with healthy development and ultimately leave our children ill prepared to live happily is the sobering but vital message of Madeline Levine's *The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage are Creating a Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids*.

An experienced clinical psychologist who has worked for 25 years in an affluent community where well-educated, involved parents can provide every imaginable advantage for their children, Levine's insights are disturbing. She describes a caseload of adolescents who, despite their awareness of their fortunate circumstances, are anxious, angry, empty, and devoid of genuine enthusiasm.

Levine makes clear early on that "money is not the culprit...it does not foster depression, anxiety, disorders, or substance abuse," ills that she sees as rising to the level of epidemic among her privileged clients. Rather, she observes parents and children alike suffering in what she calls a "culture of affluence." Levine points out how rampant materialism, driven by ever present media and advertising, shrinks the length of the logical leap between imagining that the right hair color or the expensive brand of jeans will make us sexy to believing that drugs and sex will alleviate all our emotional distress. Levine notes that parents who push themselves to provide a privileged lifestyle for their children must often manage professional lives that are incredibly stressful and demanding. The pursuit of material advantage sometimes leaves parents too exhausted and emotionally depleted to energetically address the myriad challenges of

parenting. Further, Levine reveals the insidious cultural link between materialism and competition. The twin imperatives to "earn the most" and to "be the best" lead to a preference for external over internal motivation and for performance over learning. The pressure to achieve the highest GPA or get into the most prestigious college, when not leavened with an appreciation for integrity as well as for achievement, leads to kids cheating to gain advantage over their best friends. Levine tells the story of 300 SAT scores being invalidated because a few students cheated, noting that in such a climate the "pressure to excel was so intense that moral issues were swept away..." The antidote Levine recommends for the cultural forces that confuse and sicken our children? Young people need to see adults model prosocial behavior and make moral choices. Adults and youth together must practice generosity and altruism within their families, their schools and their communities.

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Levine bases her alarm at the growing incidence of depression, detachment and compromised sense of self among young people in privileged circumstances on mostly anecdotal evidence. However, her compelling analysis of the destructive cultural forces and related unhealthy parenting practices that Levine sees as placing her adolescent patients at risk is embedded in a well-documented view of psychological development. She outlines the ways in which young children gain the self-efficacy and sense of agency vital to long-term mental health, stressing that "outstanding children are those who have developed a 'self' that is authentic, capable, loving, creative, in control of itself, and moral." Levine acknowledges the daunting task of nurturing this authentic self, as opposed to the "socially facile, highly competitive, performance-oriented, unblemished 'self' that is promoted by omnipresent adults." Levine offers practical insight into how parents help their children develop a healthy sense of self. She distinguishes, for instance, between "good warmth", which is rooted in a child believing that she is deeply understood and accepted,

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and “bad warmth”, which appears as desirable parental involvement, but which actually crosses the line into psychological control. Levine explains that psychological control is “characterized by two elements: it intrudes into the psychological world of the child and it attempts to manipulate the child’s thoughts and feelings by invoking guilt, shame and anxiety.” She offers valuable guidance aimed at helping parents identify and avoid relying on psychological control, focusing instead on behavioral control, by being an authority, making appropriate demands, and setting limits.

She urges parents not only to provide experiences that foster self-management skills but also to model self-management for their children, including and especially when what parents must struggle to manage is their own fear. That parents with the security of wealth could be plagued by anxiety for their children might be counterintuitive. As Levine points out, we can identify with parents of an earlier era who once feared their children would be stricken by polio. Equally understandable and frequently studied is the emotional toll exacted on families with scarce resources

“Everyone said don’t screw up because if you screw up you won’t get into honors math and if you don’t get into honors math in the seventh grade then you don’t get into it in the eighth or ninth or tenth or eleventh and you’ll die poor and lonely.”

- Matt Stone, describing anxiety he felt during a 7th grade math test

as they seek to meet basic needs for food, shelter and health care. Not so obvious are the unrelenting societal pressures on affluent families. Despite the absolute truth of regression to the mean, which holds that gifted parents will not necessarily produce gifted children, the message communicated to bright, successful parents is that their infants must not only meet but exceed each developmental milestone. Many parents and students in our independent school communities can relate to Levine’s recounting of a story told by Matt Stone, creator of South Park, describing the anxiety he faced during a sixth grade math test. Stone recalls, “Everyone said don’t screw up because if you screw up you won’t get into honors math and if you don’t get into hon-

ors math in the seventh grade then you don’t get into it in the eighth or ninth or tenth or eleventh and you’ll die poor and lonely.”

Ironically, this pervasive fear that any misstep in the prescribed progression from uber-toddlerhood to an anointed, effortlessly successful adult life drives the very parental behavior often responsible for emotional “poverty” and loneliness in the lives of adolescent children. Levine reminds her readers of Voltaire’s caution regarding perfectionism that “The enemy of the good is the best.” She argues that trying to live up to impossibly high standards makes life exhausting and unbearable. Better to accept than none of us, parent or child, is perfect, and get on with the “real business of living with strengths and weaknesses, abilities and deficits, accomplishments and failures. This is how we help our children learn the art of living... and it is also how we raise them to be moral, contented, productive adults.”

Finally, Levine challenges parents to examine their personal values and to take action to ensure that their own psychological and emotional needs are being met. The last chapter of *The Price of Privilege* enumerates ways in which affluent mothers are especially beset by pernicious cultural pressures that force them into positions of isolation and vulnerability. Levine characterizes the mothers of her clients as frequently shouldering much of the responsibility for raising happy children when they themselves are anxious and unhappy.

Levine’s assessment of the psychological state of affairs in many privileged families is cause for concern. Yet she offers sound strategies for reestablishing a balance between holding our children to high academic standards and helping them develop a secure, authentic sense of self. And she reminds us that the real work of parenting has much less to do with GPAs and SATs than with preparing kids for an adult life that is fulfilling, productive and enriched by healthy relationships with others.

Crafting a Family Mission Statement

BY JULIE STEVENS

Mission statements have become the norm in corporate board rooms. More and more executives in a wide range of industries recognize the importance of clearly articulating the values that undergird their business practices to their employees, their customers and their share holders. Independent schools have embraced the trend, and research indicates that reflecting on and publishing the values that unite a school community is an essential step toward successful character education.

Despite the obvious advantages of consciously examining the values and the corresponding mission statements that distinguish our workplaces or our classrooms, the notion of sitting down at the kitchen table with your spouse and your kids to spend an evening or two hammering out a “Family Mission Statement” might seem like a far-fetched plot for next year’s answer to the indie film *Little Miss Sunshine*. But taking such an exercise seriously is one of the many pieces of practical advice in *Living Simply with Children: A Voluntary Simplicity Guide for Moms, Dads, and Kids Who Want to Reclaim the Bliss of Childhood and the Joy of Parenting*, by Marie Sherlock, New York, Three River Press, 2003.

That the process described will result in an actual document that a family could post between recipes, photos and artwork on the refrigerator might also seem a bit contrived at first. Yet consider the power of a mission statement or any sort of conscious pledge to live by our values. When we are about to be wheeled into the operating room, reading a thoughtfully worded hospital mission statement may calm us as effectively as the drug in the IV. And while bad weather and bad decisions may conspire to unleash a perfect storm of negative press on Jet Blue, drafting a “Passenger Bill of Rights” may offer more meaningful redress to disgruntled fliers than a \$100 travel voucher.

In *Living Simply with Children* Sherlock suggests a three-step process for developing a document that can serve as a spiritual roadmap, reflective of and unique to your own family. First hold a values brainstorming meeting. Then hold a vision brainstorming meeting. Finally, use notes generated in these meetings to draft a family mission statement.

1. For the first meeting (values) Sherlock offers a series of questions that function as conversation starters. She

predicts that some will speak to family members more directly than others, and advises focusing on those that resonate most. Questions include:

- How do you define success? What would a “life lived with no regrets” look like?
- What do you think our purpose is here on earth?
- What matters to you most? What do you hold sacred?
- What characteristics do you value in your friends?
- What are families for?
- What activities bring you the most joy and what do you most like to do with your family?

Sherlock suggests that answers to these questions or conversation starters will elicit some core values that family members mention repeatedly. A list of six or seven such values should be prepared and distributed to all family members prior to the second meeting, which will focus on how your family puts its values into action, or how your family could live by its values more intentionally.

2. After family members have agreed to the list of values generated in the first meeting, or changed the list to reach agreement, the following questions should be posed to trigger another brainstorming session (vision):

- What are examples from daily life of each value?
- What would our family look like if we practiced this value every day?
- What would the world look like if everyone practiced this value daily?

3. Notes from the two brainstorming sessions are organized along the lines of the following outline:

- Our Family Values. In our family we value the following: List each value with descriptions of each.

“For children of all ages, a powerful aspect of creating and revisiting a family mission statement is that it allows parents to model consciously putting their values into action in their lives.”

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- **Living Our Values.** Our family practices it values in the following ways> List each value and the different behaviors and actions that show family members living in concert with that value.
- **Our Family and World Vision.** We believe that practicing these values can make a difference: List each value again and state what would happen if your family – and the rest of the world – practiced that value.

Sherlock suggests that the resulting document should be discussed, edited, and refined by the entire family. When consensus is reached, the family mission statement can be posted and referred to during family meetings or on some other regular basis.

Note: Of course the process outlined above will need to be tailored to fit individual family needs. In *Living Simply with Children* Sherlock describes a broad approach to redefining the way that families live, of which the family mission statement is only one part. Family meetings and brainstorming are key strategies she discusses in depth. She notes that these techniques require that the children in the family be at least four or five years of age and be able to tolerate sitting through at least fifteen minutes of discussion. With very young children, the benefit of the exercise is to begin to create the habit of reflecting on how their actions align with or diverge from their values. For children of all ages, a powerful aspect of creating and revisiting a family mission statement is that it allows parents to model consciously putting their values into action in their lives. Research about character education points to the benefits for children of seeing parents and teachers model moral reasoning skills. The exercise also provides practice with the kind of discussion techniques proven to enhance the development of moral reasoning. The success of brainstorming hinges on remembering that the approach is non-judgmental, and no contribution from a family member should be summarily dismissed. While older kids might offer responses that superficially seem less than serious, when brainstorming about what they value (i.e., “I value more time to play my X box 360.”) their comments should be accepted at face value and probed (i.e., “What is it about playing video games or about the X Box 360 in particular that you value?”)

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the child.

- Practice words of encouraging praise for acts of everyday kindness.
- Be prepared to negotiate an issue where the child has appropriate reason to claim it as personal (“I’m old enough!”), but be firm regarding issues which lie within the moral and prudential domains.

As our children grow up and into their own adulthood that we remember they are not rejecting our sense of what is morally and conventionally appropriate, even when we fear they are doing just that. Teens will always claim more autonomy than we as adults wish to grant, yet we must recognize and acknowledge teens’ growing desires for independence and increasing competence to make their own decisions. Ultimately, parents and teachers should feel relieved to know that moderate conflict can be functional in positively transforming relationships and in facilitating our teenagers’ development into highly capable and moral adults.

And remember: In four years or so, these teenagers will most likely be off at college making their own choices—without our permission or supervision. We have to help our kids grow to the point where they are ready to take on that challenge and to negotiate their world morally, safely and productively.

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