



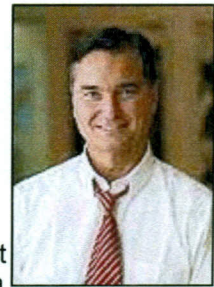
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Independent
perspective

When Parents and Schools Align

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To educate children and adolescents, good schools know that they must also spend time educating parents. When parents are not on the same page with educators, kids move through the *chiaroscuro* of misaligned home and school life, receiving conflicting messages rather than similarly focused ones from both sides. Accordingly, I'd like to share some observations that parents and educators can contemplate together.



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In choosing a school, parents should place high value on their child's peers.

When considering the quality of "better schools," too many parents miss one of the most essential drivers of student and school achievement: the peer group and kid culture at a school.

While elementary school-age children continue to identify with the values of their family and the example of their parents, by middle school the psychological separation from parents begins. In other words, by middle school, parents' influence on their children begins to wane in proportion to the influence of peers. Thus, the quality of one's peer group is critical to healthy and successful development. Fortunately, there's a "test" one can apply to peer groups: the cafeteria test. At the schools you are considering for your child, observe not only classes but also the cafeteria, using what Malcolm Gladwell calls your "blink reaction" to the various groups and cliques you find there. Do you see a group of kids with which your child would feel comfortable? Do you see groups that you'd like your child to avoid? How do students speak to and treat one another? How do they interact with adults? Ultimately, you want to choose a school where the groupings are few but healthy, where it's cool to be "smart," where the athletes also participate in the arts and artists in sports, where everyone strives to perform academically.

Too little parenting is selfish and irresponsible; too much parenting is unhealthy.

Novelist James Baldwin once observed that, "Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them." Independent school leaders and veteran teachers constantly remind new teachers and staff members that the educator's job is to model the values they wish their students to display. This works well when the values of teachers and parents match up, but it's a problem when the parents' and school's values conflict. Too often, we see one of two extremes with parents: either a lack of responsible parenting ("under-parenting") or zealous hovering and controlling parenting ("over-parenting").

Under-parenting occurs when parents are afraid to establish boundaries for their children, or when love and approval are conditional, even conspiratorial. A parent once told me about "The Deal" his kids said prevailed at their upper school: Dad says in so many words and gestures, "As long as you perform well academically and athletically, I won't scrutinize too carefully what you are doing on the weekends." But it is exactly their children's behavior on weekends, and weeknights, that parents should scrutinize, since this is when most trouble happens. A wiser "deal" to strike: "I'll trust you to do your homework, to show up for your activities, and to stick to rules. But if you break the rules and violate the trust, then we go back to not trusting you for a time and supervising you more closely." And, by the way, the more your child is involved in salubrious activities — sports, arts, student government, etc. — the less direct parenting you need to do. Contrary to admonitions by some cultural observers, don't worry about your teenager's "over-packed"

schedule; be thankful for it — since those activities tend to self-organize a child's time and interest. And in all these activities, your school's coaches and advisors are parenting allies offering your children healthy adult role models.

Over-parenting occurs when parents adopt the "helicopter" mode: hovering over their child incessantly and swooping down to the rescue when the first hardship occurs. As psychologist Wendy Mogel puts it in *The Blessings of a Skinned Knee*, it can be a blessing for, say, a child to fall off her bike — if parents encourage her to pick herself up, dust herself off, get back on the bike, and learn to ride. If constantly rescued, the child learns dependency. If encouraged to endure life's bumps and bruises and "try again" when something is hard but worthwhile, the child learns independence, courage, and determination.

In school, there's a blessing in letting children wrestle with learning without parental interference. As Stanford researcher and psychologist Carol Dweck documents in her book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, having a "growth mindset" — one that views failure as an opportunity to work harder or to consider the task at hand more deeply — is one of the greatest assets a child can have.

The most dangerous "helicopter" parents are those who want to intercede whenever their child has a setback — argue a poor grade, make excuses for an absence, or, in its worst manifestation, bring an attorney to school to fight a disciplinary action. The lessons students learn from such over-parenting is lifelong dependency: "I'm not capable of fighting my own battles or accepting the consequences for my bad behavior, so thank God my

parents will rescue me." This may be why colleges are reporting problematic parents trying to register classes for their children, why workplace employers are reporting parents trying to negotiate their children's first job contracts, and why an increasing number of parents are seeing their college-graduate adult children moving back home "to save money."

When parents keep saying and signaling, "I just want you to be happy," they send dangerous signals and set unrealistic expectations that life is supposed to be one continuous rush towards Nirvana.

To prepare children for school, parents should read with them often.

The research is clear: students from family environments where books and newspapers and other publications are part of daily life — where kids regularly see parents reading and engaging in discussions on what they read — end up as the most verbally-accomplished students. And this "left-brained" academic skill is the key to success in school and college. It doesn't matter what kids read, so long as they read and develop an interest in story and narrative. As psychologist Michael Thompson has pointed out, if a boy is excited by *Captain Underpants*, let him read *Captain Underpants*.

That said, as a student of popular culture, I'm an advocate of reading *The Brothers Grimm Fairy Tales* to young children, and, when they are able, having them read the tales to their parents as "bedtime stories." These narratives, originally from the oral tradition, speak powerfully to children and help them in their imaginative lives as they navigate the challenging and sometimes scary path to adulthood.

As children mature in middle school and secondary school, I'm an advocate of parents reading with their children the "rite of passage" novels that schools tend to assign at those stages. To name a few — *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or *To Kill a Mockingbird* (to understand injustice); *Funny in Farsi* or *Typical American* (to understand the similarities and differences of growing up in other cultures); and *Catcher in the Rye* (to understand some of the fears about entering the adult world).

Yes, play games (sports and Wii games); go to cultural events and sporting events together; watch (and critique) TV shows together; but, most importantly, limit TV to an hour per evening during the week and two hours per day during the weekend, so kids and adults can make time to read. Nothing else you invest in *later* (SAT-prep courses, private tutors, summer school enrichment) can return as much as a little investment sooner by nurturing the reading habit in your child.

Focus on helping your child to be "good." Happiness will follow.

The sociologist Anthony Campolo notes that, in Japan, when he asks parents about their aspirations for their child, mothers say, "I want my child to be... *successful*." While this is a universal parental aspiration, the preoccupation with success in Japanese culture has had serious deleterious consequences for the well-being of some adolescents, namely an unrelentingly stressful experience in school and a high suicide rate among adolescents (14.1 per 100,000 in 2006, the most recent data available). In America, when asked the same question, mothers respond, "I want my child to be... *happy*." In American culture, the preoccupation with happiness has had serious consequences of its own, and it may explain the growing need among youth for constant approval and gratification, the growing incapacity to transcend id-driven pleasures for ego-necessary tasks, and the alarming devolution into hedonistic excess. When parents keep saying and signaling, "I just want you to be happy," they send dangerous signals and set unrealistic expectations that life is supposed to be one continuous rush towards Nirvana, located somewhere between Bliss Street and Ecstasy Avenue.

Campolo's observation is that children are better served if their parents completed the sentence by saying, "I want my child to be... *good*." By "good," he means "virtuous," since the research shows that the pursuit of success or happiness leads to neither, but young people who seek to be good end up, disproportionately, to be both successful and happy. The corroboration of Campolo's point about the "goodness effect" is in the research by Douglas Heath in his books *Schools of Hope* and *Lives of Hope*, both of which are based on his study of independent school students and graduates. His conclusion is that a combination of three factors — psychological balance, "androgyny" (by which he means honoring both our masculine and feminine sides), and virtue — track with the most successful (and, yes, happy) people.

Tony Jarvis, the legendary head of Roxbury Latin School (Massachusetts), would tell parents (often MIT and Harvard professors) of prospective students that there were only two things the all-boys school could promise: "That your son will be known and that he will be loved." In the end, that's all a parent should wish for, since, when schools deliver on that promise and parents support and partner with the school, everything else tends to fall into place for the kids.

Encourage your child's school to be experimental and innovative.

Schools, especially those steeped in tradition, face huge resistance from their faculty and parents to change, since the natural conservative nature of education (with teachers preferring to stick with "what's worked in the past" and parents thinking school should look and feel like whatever they experienced decades ago) militates against experimentation and innovation. Basically, teachers want some other teacher to experiment first, and parents want some other kids to have the experimental teacher — until it's obvious that the experiment works or doesn't work. Trust me, if, as a parent, you ever have a choice, choose the teacher who wants to experiment. Your child will benefit from the excitement of being part of a change dynamic, regardless the outcome of the experiment.

The picture is starting to emerge about what "schools of the future" will look like, so if your school is moving in one or more of these directions, be a supporter, not a critic.

Schools of the future will toss out textbooks (which are dated as soon as they are published) and use the news as the context for posing questions related to real-world problems that require students to use a variety of academic and problem-solving skills. What math, science, and political science knowledge do we need in order to figure out why that bridge collapsed in the Twin Cities, and how vulnerable bridges are in our locale? What economics and social studies knowledge do we need in order to understand the current global economic meltdown? What religion and history knowledge do we need in order to understand the conflicts in the Middle East or Darfur? What web-based resources and digital tools can we access to answer these questions?

In and out of school, students will work in teams in a digital environment that fosters collaboration — and their "grade" will include components for individual and teamwork.

Content publishers will create virtual environments for simulation of real-world challenges, including an open-source "marketplace of ideas" for wikis (what *Wikinomics* calls an "ideagora") that begin to collect the best solutions.

Kids will continue to have face-to-face interactions, however, and not just virtual ones. The opportunity to meet one another in the same physical space will continue to be important for learning. "High touch" will continue to be just as important as "high tech."

Once again, teaching and learning will become intergenerational — involving students, parents, and grandparents, as well as others from all three generations — and not just transactional exchanges between a teacher and a student. Learning in the context of family and community and historical traditions (religious and cultural) will be restored as central to effective education and the well-being of communities.

Yogi Berra tells us, "It's tough to make predictions, especially about the future." It's also tough to predict how kids will turn out, but parents who prepare the path by following the admonitions above will grease the skids.

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