



Parent & Faculty Education Conference  
THRIVING IN A COMPETITIVE WORLD  
Menlo School, February 7, 2015

**Po Bronson**  
**Rethinking Competition**  
*Attendee Notes*

**Opening Remarks:**

His most recent book is *Top Dog: The Science of Winning and Losing* with Ashley Merryman.

Po starts by describing all the many things on his mind as he walks up to the podium ... needs to get new character shoes for his daughter and her *Thoroughly Modern Millie* performance ... he wonders if his son remembered to charge his phone so he can text Po to tell him how he did in his speech/debate contest ... this is how we live!

Then he talks about all the au-courant parenting research and priorities ... kids need more slow-wave sleep, they need to spend 10,000 hours on something, they need to have enough free time and autonomy, they need to have a growth mindset. He points to the ridiculousness of all the "to-dos" of parenting.

Today - no more to-dos! He will discuss the two most important/crucial things:

- # 1) Factor 19 (he's working on the name!)
- # 2) Rethinking Stress and Pressure

**#1 Factor 19: Autonomy and Connectedness**

On Peer Pressure

Po refers to Joe (Joseph P.) Allen, a psychology professor at the University of Virginia and a longitudinal study he did of a group of 7<sup>th</sup> graders until they were 25 years old. They looked at a lot of factors, but at the top of the list was peer pressure and who was susceptible.

Findings: 20% of the population was impervious (not susceptible) to peer pressure. This group ended up having lower GPAs (about 1.0 lower) even though they were just as intelligent as the other group. They were less engaged and didn't care what anybody thought: their teachers, their peers, society. They weren't motivated by peer pressure.

Those susceptible to peer pressure at 12-13 years old had better or greater relationships with others when they were 25 years old. They were highly turned to the thoughts and feelings of friends, parents, and romantic partners and were willing to compromise. With time, susceptibility to peer pressure led to positive outcomes. Looks like peer pressure can be a good thing sometimes!

Po then went on to talk about another part of the study where there were big connections for later success in life. Something called Factor 19.

Part of the Joe Allen study had the kids imagine a situation where 12 people go on two spaceships to Mars. Circumstances make it so that only 7 people can return to earth. Which 7 would you pick? Each kid would make his list. Then they would need to get together with their best friend and compare lists and come up with "their list" of 7. Three different scenarios evolved:

1<sup>st</sup> scenario – one kid had the self-assertion mindset of, "I'm going to win and get my original 7 picks to be the 7 picks of our combined list. I'm going to win."

2<sup>nd</sup> scenario – one kid thinks, "Hey, I'm not going to tick off my best friend over an imaginary group of people going to Mars on imaginary spaceships. I don't care and it's not worth it." The kid caves and lets his best friend have his/her way.

3<sup>rd</sup> scenario – This is the Factor 19! This is where the kids decide to hear each other. They have the ability to assert their ideas and also to hear and care about the relationship with the other person. Not caving and not dominating. **FACTOR 19 or what Po also calls Autonomy and Connectedness.**

• *How do I get this for my kid? > This is the question we should all be asking.*

### On Lying

Po then went on to talk about teenagers and lying.

78% of parents think their teens tell them everything.

Only 4% of teens actually do this.

96% of teens lie (1/2 the time by omission, 1/4 by saying nothing)

Why do teens lie so much? They are shocked when they hear this because they don't realize they are lying. It's a habit. They want to protect their relationship with their parents. We, the parents, don't need to know everything.

At 11 years old, the kids say, "Stay out of my life!" At 18 years old, they let the parents back in.

Those who lie less tend to only lie about 5 things. The kids who blindly obey their parents also blindly obey their peers. The kids who learn to negotiate with their parents can use those tactics with their friends. The challenge for parents is to negotiate disagreements with their child in a way that allows respect but preserves the relationship. Basically, Po tells us not to freak out if our kids are lying.

### 3 Traits of Families with Less Lying

- 1) Fewer rules, but the rules are enforced. This consistency allows for the authority not to be undermined. Lenient parents don't hear more truth than others.
- 2) Challenging Them to Maturity. To be perceived as someone who is pushing them to maturity.
- 3) More arguing. When both sides are telling the truth, then you can argue. The arguing stresses out the parents, but if the kids are arguing about the rules and not the basic authority, then this is a good thing. Kids will tell the truth because they are hoping we might change the rule. The authority doesn't change.

What if your kid is being reasonable? When you hear them being reasonable, give in. Give them the FACTOR 19: hearing, connecting! They can only learn FACTOR 19 from us, their parents.

## # 2 Rethinking Stress and Pressure

The narrative these days is, when someone asks, “How are you?” We answer, “Stressed.” All is good individually, but cumulatively, things add up and we feel stressed.

### On Competition

A person with healthy competitive skills can turn up and turn down the stress/pressure as appropriate. They can stay within healthy boundaries.

It's important to be able to have a healthy “turning up the heat” or being able to “up your game” at times. It's equally important to have rest and recovery ... downtime ... when the pressure isn't up.

There are positive effects when there is close competition, when it's a close race, as opposed to a blowout. Kids need to experience these close competitions. They need to feel that their effort counts and that they may not always win, but it was a close race, a fair competition.

Po then told a story about the United States Air Force (USAF) Academy and how they put low performing and high performing students in a group together, hoping the high performers would bring up the low performers. This plan backfired. The high performers/achievers stuck to themselves and the low performers/achievers just felt bad about themselves and didn't improve.

What did work, however, was putting all the middle performers together. They had a close race/a close competition and they all improved drastically.

### The Warrior/Worrier Gene

There is a gene sometimes called the Warrior/Worrier gene. Some people have the Warrior gene that helps them think clearly under pressure and this gene isn't rare. It's evenly distributed. In fact, these people need the pressure/stress to think clearly.

In non stressful environments, it's good to have a Worrier gene. If you have the Worrier gene, when you're not stressed you have a cognitive advantage, which works out to be about ten IQ points. But under stress, Worriers did worse than Warriors.

Should we isolate our kids who get test/stress anxiety? No – don't run from stress. With practice, Worriers can learn to handle short-term stress which can give the Worrier the advantage. What about the SAT? It selects for genotype. Nothing is going to make the SAT go away. SAT is competition where only the final score matters. We don't choose this type of competition.

Po talks about Dr. Jeremy Jamieson, a professor from the University of Rochester, who has done a lot of research on how stress can be useful for performers. There was a group of Harvard students (smart kids) prepping for the GRE. They were asked to spit in a cup before taking a practice GRE and the spit was measured for stress hormone levels. There was a reading prompt, then they spit in the cup and then took the GRE practice test. Half of this group had some extra reading in their particular prompt that mentioned how stress can help them perform. Those that read this part scored 50 points higher than those that didn't read that extra part of the prompt. And, in the real GRE, they scored 65 points higher. *Their perception of the stress was important. They let themselves feel the stress and they performed better.*

### ***Reframe competition!***

Stress can put us in a *threat* state (vaso constriction/fear) or in a *challenge* state (vaso dilation, with extra blood flow, where the extra blood flow oxygenates the blood).

Want to frame competition as a challenge state, not a threat state!

### ***Reframe stress!***

If kids know rest and recuperation is coming, and it better come, then they can reframe the stress.

## ***Reframe the future!***

We talk about the future and scare the crud out of our kids (e.g. If you're not a design-thinker with an engineering degree, you won't be able to compete in our global economy and get one of the eight jobs that might be available by the time you graduate).

Instead of doom and gloom, as above, tell them, "This is one of the most exciting times to be alive – so much opportunity and interesting options and cool people! I'm so excited for you."

## **On Risk and Reward**

Po discussed the teen brain and rewards. A teen brain doesn't get excited about small rewards or even medium rewards. But a big reward, makes a teen brain say, "Finally!" However, an even bigger thrill to a teen brain is NOT KNOWING the SIZE of a reward. That's even more exciting. The "not knowing, the uncertainty" is very exciting. The thrill of uncertainty (and the potential surprising reward) is one reason why teens engage in risky behavior.

We need to put good risks in our teenagers' lives. When you're a teen, you feel like you're on the sidelines of real life, and you haven't been sent in to play.

What is a good risk? Anything they can fail at!

We like to say that failure is important, but this is confusing to kids. Why is a 4-1 loss or not getting the part in the play - why are these things good?

Po then asked us to think about our biggest accomplishment. It started with a risk on something you knew you could fail at. It didn't stop you. This biggest accomplishment came after a childhood of failures that didn't stop us. I wasn't scared. You weren't scared. You don't want your kids to be afraid of failing. We are showing our kids that they don't need to be scared. That is how we reframe stress and pressure.

## **Q&A**

Q: How do we get across to a high achieving kid that they need downtime?

A: If a kid is always on, then they are never really on. We need to draw a line. Call it family time. Call it alone time. Put it on the to do list. We are the parents! We need to teach them the important things in life.

Q: What is the best choice for a low performing kid? Should they leave Menlo?

A: Boys learn more by being Big Fish In Little Pond, but this may not apply to Menlo. There is such a thing as the "resource effect" which outweighs the "competitive effect." The resource effect is the positives about being around "high achieving" peers (cf. the Air Force study) as well as all the advantages here - even if they're not on the track to go to a highly selective college.

Q: Please comment on the homework, the stress and all the teen suicides in this area.

A: Po thoughtfully said that he couldn't reach any conclusions as he doesn't have enough of the facts. Suicides are not related to homework. So many other issues at play – bullying, sexual orientation, racism, etc.

Q: What do I do/say to my child who is sad that they are no longer a kid?

A: They need productive imaginative time. Tell them to hang on to this “kidness” part of themselves. You don’t always have to do something for the future. Do it just for the fun and enjoyment. It’s not all about being productive.

Q: What are the 5 areas where kids lie?

- A:
- 1) Chaperones at an event
  - 2) Homework being done
  - 3) Dating – have they started
  - 4) Who they are with
  - 5) Clothes they are wearing