

Menlo's Parent Education Conference February 3, 2018
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Richard Weissbourd - Modeling Your Values

Today Richard Weissbourd will talk about the core of why children are not growing up to be caring ethical adults.

He is worried about social media, peer pressure, but especially worried about the degree we have elevated achievement and happiness as the primary goal of child raising and demoted caring for others.

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Over the last 5 years, he surveyed over 40,000 diverse middle and high school students from every region of the country. Diversity includes among others religion, ethnicity, race, class and culture. He asked them to prioritize happiness, achievement, and caring for others and how they think their parents and teachers would prioritize these three. He also asked the parents to prioritize what they think is most important, achievement, happiness or caring.

Students ranked achievement first, happiness second and caring third.

80% ranked success achievement and happiness over caring. It used to be the mother's responsibility primarily to make sure the children were good citizens. It is no longer mother nor father's responsibility in many communities.

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Parents responded that they value their children's' caring over achievement.

How do youth perceive parents' priorities? Children think achievement, happiness is more important than caring.

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How youth perceive parents' priorities.

Youth were 3 times more likely to agree than disagree with this statement on survey.

"My parents are prouder if I get good grades in my classes than if I'm a caring community member in class and school."

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The Rhetoric-Reality Gap

The kids are not hearing from their parents that caring is more important than achievement and happiness even though the parent survey shows this. Parents' and schools' day to day messages may stress achievement and happiness over caring. For example, dinner table conversation occupied with achievement.

There are subtle things that parents were doing and saying even in early childhood that showed the priorities. For example, not reaching out to friendless kids in playgrounds, not requiring them to write thank you notes, not expressing gratitude or appreciate kids they felt competitive with at school/sports/arts ect.

Rick gave an example about conversation about whether or not a family should let their child quit soccer when the girl wanted to quit. Mother said ok for daughter to quit. Father said no since soccer would help her get into college. Neither of them addressed whether their daughter had any responsibility to the team. Rick's own daughter wanted to quit dance. He said ok, let her quit. His wife, the mother said no since she has responsibility to the dance group.

Important to know that kids have responsibilities to school community, neighbors, classmates. They have responsibilities to these communities, to things larger than themselves.

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The Irony

All the focus on happiness may be making children less happy.

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A picture of a child all suited up in bubble wrap. We are depriving kids of coping strategies. Parents are not letting them fail, they are manipulating their kids to be on winning teams.

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Mood meteorologists

Rick often times walks his dog at the parks and see parents being mood policer every 5 minutes, constantly commenting on what their child is feeling.

It is important to get the kids to articulate and identify their emotional feelings themselves. However, be cautious about the frequency so that it doesn't become self occupying for the child.

It is even better to help our kids identify other kids' feelings. If they can tune into other kids feelings then they will be better friends, mentor, parents, and romantic partners.

The irony is to make our kids happy in the moment, we end up depriving them of exactly the skills they need for self esteem, self worth which will lead to a life of well being.

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But let's not tell children to be moral because it will make them HAPPY...

He doesn't think we should tell our kids to be nice to make them happier.

For example telling your child to pass the ball so they will pass it back to you. What is wrong here is that first, it still makes one's happiness the goal. You should be nice to be nice.

The second problem is that morality by definition is about sacrifice. You should do things that are right because it is the right thing to do. For example taking care of someone with Alzheimer is not fun but you should do it anyway because it is the right thing to do. Another example, going to a faculty meeting (laughter from audience). We have civic responsibilities. Need to start sending messages particularly as they get older that you should care because it is right to care, should be moral because it is moral, it is the right thing to do. Be empathic because it is the right thing to do.

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Caveats

Caring is still important.

Happiness, achievement, and caring/ethics are not mutually exclusive.

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Some important individual and race, class, culture differences.

For many low-income and working class youth, achievement and hard work have a clear moral purpose.

For these children, achievement is not about trying to get into a highly selective college, it is about working to support family and many have a clear moral purpose.

In many immigrant communities, they have strong sense of community.

When immigrant kids first come to this country they are doing better than the non immigrant American kids in just about all aspects. Immigrant kids are less likely to get in trouble, less likely to do drugs, less likely to have behavioral problems. By 3rd generation they tend to be worse or the same as their non immigrant counterpart.

Some say the immigrant culture is a threat, but looks like the opposite is true.

It is America's culture that is a threat to immigrant kids. These collective cultures are integrating with the individual cultures. The more kids get inducted into individuality, the worse they do.

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Why this change in the values we prioritize?

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He asked parents how they perceive other parents' prioritize achievement, happiness and caring.

The result showed that the parents perceive other parents rank achievement highest. The large majority of parents think the problem is other parents.

Example of his own conversation with his son. He told his son, that "I want you to go to a college that is the right fit for you. Other parents may worry about status." His son replied, "dad, that is the biggest crock of crap. You can take the high road here because you know there are so many other forces doing the muscle work for you as a Harvard professor he son felt Rick was not truly honest with his subtle messaging of college goals"

So you have to think if we are walking the talk.

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Years ago public schools' and colleges' primary goal was to cultivate ethical character. He asked what values Harvard stand for today? He hears elitism, advancement, exclusivity. Couldn't find ethical character among the answers.

Current schools are not even seeing it as their responsibility to promote/develop ethical character.

Please think about the function of religious institutions. Religious communities stand for common ethical values. Religion is a place for rituals of gratitude.

There are opportunities for kids to talk about obligations to community in such ceremonies such as the Bar mitzvahs or communions. Religion teaches a sense of responsibility for ancestors and descendants. The point is how can we reproduce moral/ethical teachings found in religion in secular life.

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The Praise Craze

Picture of trophy

He is noticing too much praising about how the child is special and terrific.

Example: Rick watched a father and son play catch. The father complimented on each throw: "good catch or nice try".

Currently, some experts recommend one should praise 5x for 1 criticism and advise parents to say how proud they are of their children.

His own example, dad and son conversation. After his son's basketball game, he said to his son, " I want to tell you how proud of you I am" His son replied, "What is the matter with you dad?" At that moment he realized why he had to say this out loud.

Kids know when they are being patronized.

The other problem is that this is a constant performance. This makes the kids hyper aware, more vulnerable, more competitive, more threatened by other kids.

The more we praise the more we fill up the tank.

We need to understand our kids and know who they really are.

Carol Duwek recommends that praise should be specific and about effort.

But why are we praising so much? Perhaps praise may be substitute for time spent with children.

Another trend is the desire to be close to our kids, to be their friends.

He means parents wanting to have a reciprocal relationship with our kids in some way resembles friendship.

Rick: Story shared: Rick was on plane next to another father and had a conversation about father son relationship. He told the man next to him, "I love my own dad and he was remote, he didn't spend enough time with me." The other father said, "I know what you mean, I get stoned with my kids" There is a big difference between being close to your kids and being your kids best friend.

If we treat our kids as equal it undermines parents ability to discipline and set high ethical standards for our kids.

We need to let our kids separate from us in adolescence.

Need to be clear that in the final analysis we are the parent.

In the broad trend, adults are having fewer adult friendships and relying on their own kids more for friendship.

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7 Tips for Raising Caring, Ethical Children

1. Make caring a priority in your home

- There are 3 things that are important: 1st to be kind, 2nd to be kind, 3rd to be kind
- Ask kids what they think we prioritize.

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2. Caring is a muscle- Learning to care is like learning a sport or an instrument

- Kids need to practice this.
- Kids need chores. In Rick's opinion, there should be no rewards for chores. Chores should be expected. In many communities, there is a clear expectation

that kids are going to care for people in their family and community. This is not rewarded.

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3. Expand children's circle of concern

- Do they have empathy outside their community? Do they have empathy for people that differ from them racially, economically?
- Is the bus driver, secretary, server at restaurant on the radar? Are these people who contribute quality in their lives on their radar?
- Harvard students are nice but leave their crap in the cafeteria. They don't think about the custodian who has to clean this up. Who is in your circle of concern or obligation?

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4. Enable kids to be ethical philosophers

- If a teacher asks who stole the ipod? Should you be honest or should you be loyal to your friend?
- For some people, these are justice issues, and for some these are loyalty issues. What are my obligations? My best friend is cheating on somebody who is also my friend, do I have a responsibility to tell my friend that my best friend is cheating on him or her. What are your responsibilities?

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5. Reflective adult modeling

- Need to reflect on mistakes and be honest with kids about those mistakes and receive feedback on those mistakes.
- Identify at least one person, who will be odds with you and have them give you feedback on your parenting. Some people disagree with this advice but Rick feels it is important to have someone give the parents feedback.

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6. Liberating kindness- from shame, jealousy, anger, stereotypes, etc

- Example. When he was playing basketball, one player said, "Who is covering the old guy?" His teammate pointed out that the person was talking about him. He then said it is now war.
- Disrespect, shame is a common source.

- Part of the reason the kids are feeling shame is because there are so few and narrow metrics of success. There are many children who are kind, fun, insightful, wonderful but maybe not high achieving in academics or sports. If we don't elevate these kind qualities, kids will be feeling defective.

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7. Put children and teens in the lead

- They can use social media positively. We need to ask them to do meaningful service. Service can be transformative whether it is mandatory or voluntary.

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We are raising moral children in a morally troubled time.

It is important to talk to our kids about the importance of protecting the vulnerable.

It is important to talk and engage across the aisle.

Example, Rick's kids didn't hear conservative position living in a liberal area and vice versa, kids in another conservative area didn't hear liberal position. In the last 30 - 40 years we are no longer talking or discussing the other views which are different from our own.

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