

About HGSE

Impact in the World

Faculty & Research

Academic Programs

Library

Admissions & Financial Aid

Professional Education

News & Events

- Events
- Features & Releases
- e-Newsletters
- Ed. Magazine
- HGSE in the Media
- Webcasts
- Harvard Education Publishing Group

Alumni & Friends

News Features & Releases

 [SHARE](#)  [SUBSCRIBE](#) ♦ [SUBMIT STORY IDEA](#) ♦ [RSS](#)

THE PARENTS WE MEAN TO BE

By News Editor on March 11, 2009 11:11 AM | [17 Comments](#)



Lecturer [Richard Weissbourd](#)'s latest book, released this week, will likely catch parents' attention. In *The Parents We Mean to Be: How Well-Intentioned Adults Undermine Children's Moral and Emotional Development*, Weissbourd examines how, despite parents' best efforts to do what's best for their children, something is still missing. When parents are spending a considerable amount of time and money focusing on their children's happiness, success, and well-being, can they potentially be causing more harm than good?

Q. Why should we be concerned about well-intentioned parents?

A: We often focus on the small number of parents who have clearly lost their moral compasses. But the problem is much larger. Lots of us, in ways that we tend not to be aware of, can imperil our kids' moral development. Our research uncovered, for example, that many parents are narrowly focused on their children's happiness and believe that happiness and self-esteem are at the root of morality. We may be the first generation of parents in history who hold that belief. We think that a child who feels good -- and who feels good about herself -- is more likely to be good. Historically, parents have thought that suffering, burdens, and sacrifices were an important basis of morality -- that through suffering children learned empathy. And in many day-to-day ways, we as parents place our children's happiness above their caring about others. We are too quick to let our kids write off friends they find annoying. We fail to insist that they return phone calls from friends, or give credit to other children for their achievements, or reach out to friendless children at the playground. Or we fail to interrupt our children when they talk too much when they're



around other kids or adults.

Q. How can the pressure to achieve damage moral development?

A: We've all heard stories about out-of-control parents driving their children to achieve. We interviewed the parents of one high school junior in a school outside New York City who had set up a vocational school in South America so that their daughter could write in her college application that she had started a school in a developing country. But the bigger problem is more subtle. Many of us have unacknowledged fears about our children not achieving at a high level. And because of these unrecognized fears, many of us are quietly organizing our children's lives around achievement and sending inconsistent and hypocritical messages to our kids. The kids we interviewed talked about these hypocrisies. Kids would point out, for instance, that their parents would tell them they don't care how much they achieve and then pay jaw-dropping amounts of money for SAT-prep courses. When parents tell teenagers to achieve at a high level so they "can have options," teenagers sniff out that their parents are talking only about certain options -- it's not really okay for them to be beauticians or firefighters, for example. These hypocrisies undermine us as moral mentors. We should make achievement for our children one theme in the larger composition of a life, and we need to understand our own feelings better so we can have more authentic conversations with our children about their achievements.

Q: Why do you think it is risky for parents to be too close to their children?

A: On the whole, I think it's great that more parents want to be close to their kids. What concerns me is that some parents, based on their own needs, come to idealize their kids and their relationships with their kids. I have talked to parents who find in their relationships with young children exactly what they have always craved: another human being who gives them undivided attention, who overlooks or easily forgives their flaws, who is entirely reliable and trustworthy -- and they come to worship and depend on their kids for emotional sustenance. But this kind of idealization makes it hard for parents to discipline their kids, and for kids to idealize their parents. Yet children idealizing parents is key to children adopting parents' values. Such parents also have a great deal of trouble separating from their kids in adolescence and nurturing their children's independence, with damaging consequences for children's emotional and moral development.

Q: What should we do to raise moral children?

A: Morality is comprised of many attributes -- courage, honesty, kindness, a sense of justice, moral reasoning, etc. -- and there are many different ways that adults can promote these qualities. We can model appropriate moral behavior, help our children register kindness and unkindness in the world around them, define clearly their responsibilities toward others, listen responsively to their moral dilemmas and

questions, hold them to high moral standards, and develop in them from an early age the habit of attending to and caring about others. We can do much more to emphasize kindness rather than happiness -- rather than telling our kids all the time that the most important thing is that they're happy, it wouldn't hurt to tell them that the most important thing is that they're kind. But if I could give just one piece of advice to adults, it would be to focus not on children's happiness or self-esteem but on their maturity. Maturity, including the ability to manage destructive feelings, to balance and coordinate our needs with those of others, to receive feedback constructively, to be reflective and self-critical -- to fairly and generously assess our behavior is the basis of both morality and lasting well-being. It is these capacities that enable children and adults to appreciate others despite conflicts of interest and differences in perspective, to adhere to important principles and to engage in sturdy, meaningful relationships and endeavors that create lasting self-worth.

17 Comments

Joan Kelley | [March 11, 2009 10:15 PM](#) | [Reply](#)

I hope this transcript gets picked up by the AP and sent to newspapers all over the U.S. Professor Weissbourd's remarks are welcomed by this mother of three and teacher/coach of many. From the very earliest ages, more needs to be expected of children or they will expect less from themselves. We are raising a whole generation of middle class kids who have not developed resiliency because they are not allowed to flounder or fail. Bravo to this wise prof.

Libby Nguyen | [March 12, 2009 7:03 AM](#) | [Reply](#)

I teach at an international school in Vietnam. Most of my students are third-culture students who are very global minded for they have traveled extensively. Because of traveling, they are very mature in their thinking, and have a strong connection to the world, which gave them moral values. Their valuable real life experiences are transparent through their classroom discussions and writing assignments. Maturity, as professor Weissbourd stated, is a priceless tool in shaping the well being of today's children. As a teacher, I truly enjoyed reading this.

Fe'Dricka Moore replied to [comment from Joan Kelley](#) | [March 14, 2009 2:04 PM](#) | [Reply](#)

I agree, too, that this should be published in AP and all mainstream media. Too many households are centered around the children's happiness and superficial needs. Parents are behaving like they are afraid to disappoint and discipline their children. It is a shame that many of these children will experience failure and letdowns late in their lives due to parent's misguided notion that happy children will evolve into good people.

Ann Haycox | [March 15, 2009 5:27 PM](#) | [Reply](#)

Rick Weissbourd has brilliantly encapsulated core wisdom in this brief interview. As a teacher of young children, I am intimately involved in supporting parents as they start off down their lifelong path of developing into generational guides. Rick's perspective is timely and essential. Thanks to him for his wonderful work. I look forward to reading his book and passing it on to the many families I serve.

Nne Enechi | [March 16, 2009 11:36 AM](#) | [Reply](#)

I am particularly impressed by this interview, especially in an age where parents increasingly live in fear of 'upsetting' their children. No one troubles to teach children about friendship and giving, about compassion and kindness - important building blocks in personality formation - which form the necessary balance in the child's upbringing. All seems to be geared towards making the child happy and perhaps... good in Maths! Thank you Prof.

Jen S | [March 24, 2009 11:09 PM](#) | [Reply](#)

I'll be picking up a copy of your book. Here's one reason: Just yesterday I was telling a friend that she had to be more harsh with her child if she expected him to grow up into a responsible, independent adult. That she needs to give him some boundaries: force him to finish what he starts and to compromise in his play with friends. She agreed with me, then said that I could talk with him about these things if I wanted, because she didn't think he'd listen to her! I don't think I convinced her of the importance of putting her foot down, but maybe your book will do the trick.

Sadly, many of us were raised with (and thoughtlessly are passing on to our children) what, I believe, Frithjof Bergmann in his book "On Being Free" called the "No Obstacles" view of freedom. In this view of freedom, one is free if one has no impediments to the exercise of his or her free will. This view of freedom works when one is isolated in one's own world, but in the real world this view of freedom causes myriad problems for individuals, families, work, groups, and society as a whole. We need a deep paradigm change which addresses the underlying reality that there is no freedom without equal and opposite responsibility.

Jen Burns | [March 30, 2009 3:56 PM](#) | [Reply](#)

I work for a network of schools that uses the very premises covered in this interview in our work with parents and students - Hyde Schools. An HGSE graduate, Malcolm Gauld, wrote a parenting book that we use called "The Biggest Job We'll Ever Have: The Hyde School Program for Character-Based Education and Parenting." Check it out!

Andrea Craig | [March 30, 2009 8:34 PM](#) | [Reply](#)

Praise for lecturer Richard Weissbourd's ideas! I struggle with the way my children's friends are

being raised, completely without a moral compass. I have high expectations of my children, yes, that they work hard at school, but also that they think and use their brains to do the 'right' thing: consider others, hold their tongues and not say every thought that they have because it may offend, have self control and choose friends wisely.

I teach immigrant adults and am constantly at a loss as how to explain when asked about the complete lack of 'parenting' that happens in our society. Children need structure and guidance and example from their parents. Nannies, babysitters and the like will not provide the model. Although I suppose if the parents themselves were raised poorly then they may actually be better in the long run. The greed for wealth and lassitude toward other that has marked my generation will come back to haunt us. The economic crisis we are currently experiencing is only the beginning.

Grace Shangkuan Koo | [March 30, 2009 9:58 PM](#) | [Reply](#)

Can't agree more! As Robert Kegan says the first order for parents is to take charge of the family - establish rules and roles. How kids are turning out is a result of how parents look at "doing good" in relation to "feeling good".

Laurie Rosen | [March 31, 2009 2:30 AM](#) | [Reply](#)

I just sent a copy of Richard Weissbourd's lecture to my grown daughters as ammunition to back up some of my former parenting techniques. I would routinely ask them if they had been successful in (elementary) school when I drove them home. My measure of success meant how many kind acts they could exhibit to others throughout the school day. Saying hello to someone who was shy, holding a door, picking up something for a teacher all counted. It didn't kick in right away but eventually they started making a game of it and would voluntarily start reporting to me on their achievements. They were very proud of their "successes", as was I. They are now gainfully employed college grads whose definition of success still incorporates kindness, consideration and respect.

I will give Professor Weissbourd's book to them before they start their own families. It should be required reading for anyone in the parenting business!

Launa Johnston | [March 31, 2009 9:20 AM](#) | [Reply](#)

Children today are spoiled rotten. They can do what they want, tell their parents what to do, TV's & phones in their bedrooms. It needs to stop! Look what is happening to our children. Take the TV out of the house, take the phones and playstations out of their bedrooms and give them a book, with some structure and rules and most of discipline! I tell my child that he was born with an "A" brain. So you have to work it by listening, focusing, studying and if you need extra help its your responsibility to get it from the teacher. My son is 11 years old and an "A" student. Also I noticed kids "talk back" to their parents and very disrespectful. Well if you allow them to talk back to you that what ends up happening. If you tell your child to do something than there are no ands, ifs or buts, JUST do it. Remember YOU are the parent.

Peter E. | [April 1, 2009 8:16 PM](#) | [Reply](#)

By my second year of teaching, I had figured out that many parents seemed more concerned about being the child's friend as opposed to the parent. I'm glad that someone has researched the long-term effects that this has on children. Currently, my independent, college prep school is so focused on "easing the transitions and stress" for students (essentially putting their happiness first), that many students are unable to cope with something truly difficult. I think all adults who work with adolescents need to remember it's okay to say "no" to them.

Thelma Macas | [April 6, 2009 6:13 PM](#) | [Reply](#)

This is awesome ! Thank you so very much for writing a book on parenting Mr. Weissbound! We should never underestimate how parents/families help develop the child's sense of morality. Let us go back to basics of GMRC simply read as teaching good manners and right conduct by making them catch it live via our own homes and schools! Enough with too much psychologizing, we need to teach them what is right and what is wrong!

RM | [April 7, 2009 1:34 PM](#) | [Reply](#)

I'm a project manager who guest-taught AP Physics and Calculus. My students weren't socialized by their parents so they didn't respect their peers let alone authority. I'm also a referee who sees parents enabling their child-athletes' misbehavior and rule-breaking.

The "Self-Esteem" movement has been proven wrong.

Ryan Landry | [April 8, 2009 8:23 AM](#) | [Reply](#)

I am a gay man WITHOUT children but that doesn't mean that I don't care about their welfare. Everyday I see more and more children developing into horrible brats. And if these are children that NO ONE wants to be around NOW, what does the future hold?!

After hearing Prof. Weissbound speak on NPR all I can say is that THIS MAN needs to be where bulls*** artists like Dr. Phil are.

In the national spotlight where he can do the most good. Everything he spoke of was so on target that, children of my own or no, I am buying this book just for the wisdom. There ARE brilliant thinkers among us after all. Thank you Prof. Weissbound.

Katie Wheeler | [April 29, 2009 8:35 PM](#) | [Reply](#)

Thanks for reinforcing my belief that kids need to learn to deal with limits, choices, and nos. Perhaps we need to start telling parents that it is their JOB to say NO to their children's wishes at least several times a day. Otherwise, in this microwave-mentality fast-paced, quick-reinforcements provided society, kids will never learn the art of delayed gratification, giving up what you want because someone else has a greater need (siblings are helpful for this lesson!), or empathy. Thank you Dr. Weissbound.

Gene | [May 2, 2009 11:50 AM](#) | [Reply](#)

thanks for this post.. im a single young mom and i can relate 2 ur article.. at least i was able 2 learn from this article... [hgv training](#)

Leave a comment

Name *required

Email Address *required

(Your email address will not be displayed with your comment.)

Remember personal info?

Comments: When responding, please ensure that your remarks are reflective, relevant, courteous, and engaging. Individuals are responsible for his or her comments, not the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Please refrain from offensive language, personal attacks, and distasteful comments or it may be deleted. Comments will not appear immediately but will be displayed by the next business day. Thank you for your thoughts and patience.

Preview

Submit

Questions or comments about this page? [Send an email to the Web Editor](#). Read the [HGSE Publishing Policies & Disclaimers](#).

© 2008 President and Fellows of Harvard College.

[Contact Us](#) | [Directions](#) | [Directory](#) | [HGSE Offices](#) | [HGSE Store](#) | [MyGSE](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Usable Knowledge](#) | [Harvard University](#)