

## COMMON GROUND SPEAKER SERIES

RICHARD WEISSBOURD

November 15, 2016 - The Nueva School

*“What matters most as a parent is not whether my wife and I are ‘perfect’ role models or how much we talk about values, but the hundreds of ways – as living, breathing, imperfect human beings—we influence our children in the complex, messy relationships we have with them day to day.” - Richard Weissbourd*

Richard Weissbourd is a child and family psychologist on the faculty of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and School of Education...and a dad. He is also a self-described ‘recovering achievement addict’. He is the author of [The Vulnerable Child](#) and [The Parents We Mean to Be](#).

In [The Parents We Mean to Be](#), Weissbourd argues incisively that parents—not peers or popular culture—are the primary shapers of their children’s moral lives. A surprising picture emerges through the author’s original field research. While there is much that is encouraging about modern parenting, many parents are intensely focused on their kids' happiness and achievements and on being close to their children, but they are not cultivating morality in the same concerted, sustained way. Many parents are sending hypocritical messages about achievement—telling their children achievement doesn't matter, for example, while researching SAT prep classes in 8th grade—that erode their influence as moral mentors. Our fixation with being great parents—and our need for our children to reflect that greatness—can actually make them feel ashamed for failing to measure up.

### **IRONY - all the parental focus on happiness may be making children less happy.**

A longitudinal study done in the suburbs has some surprising news about children growing up in the culture of affluence. The surprise is that wealthy kids often have more problems than age-matched kids growing up in the inner city—and their problems persist despite the mental health services presumably available to them. For all problems, the troubles seem to start in the seventh grade. Before then, the affluent kids do well. Affluent suburban high schoolers not only smoke more, drink more, and use more hard drugs than typical high schoolers do—they do so more than a comparison group of inner-city kids. In addition, they have much higher rates of anxiety and, in general, higher rates of depression. Most depression for affluent kids is due to achievement pressure.

### **RED FLAGS - when we, as parents, are applying too much achievement pressure:**

- If our self-esteem plummets when our child does poorly on a big test;
- If we are doing vocabulary flash cards at dinner;
- If we are not eating/sleeping well due to stress about our children’s futures.

### **TWO PROBLEMATIC TRENDS**

**1. OVER PRAISING:** Telling kids that they’re wonderful/special all the time. When we are praising them all the time, we are also judging them all the time.

- GUIDELINES for praise:
  - Make praise specific - Tell your kids that they behaved well at the dinner table last night;
  - Make your praise child-specific (some kids soak it up and some need to be weaned from praise);
  - Ask ourselves, why, at this time in our history, are we praising our kids so much? What’s wrong with us? Is it because overworked and guilty parents use praise as a substitute for time?
  - The self grows by being known. Adults need to spend time with their children and reflect a deep appreciation and knowledge of who they are.

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**2. BEFRIENDING OUR KIDS:** There is no culture in history that views parenting the way we do currently. Some mothers claim that their kids are their best friends and some dads even admit to smoking pot with their teens. Weissbourd has concerns about this trend and stresses that we can be close to our kids WITHOUT being their friends. Parents who are emotionally dependent upon their kids find disciplining difficult because they don't like having their kids mad at them. Kids need to go through stages in which they idealize us - when we treat them as equals, we can compromise that stage.

**Bottom line - We have to be our kids' PARENTS and not our kids' FRIENDS**

As parents we must disentangle our needs from our kids' needs. Many adults are having fewer and fewer friendships - spending more time alone, more time working, or more time watching TV. If we are not going to be too dependent upon our children, we need to maintain our key friendships.

**Parents need to MAKE CARING A PRIORITY and  
HOLD THEIR CHILDREN TO A HIGH ETHICAL STANDARD:**

**MORAL LITERACY:** When we think about moral development, most of us think of moral literacy - we may not believe that kids actually know right from wrong. We have built up a billion dollar industry around Social Emotional Learning and Character Education Programs. However, research shows that by the time kids are 5 or 6 years old, they know these values. They recognize that adults think that respect, honesty and caring are important. As a result, kids are becoming adept at parroting back what they think parents and teachers *want* to hear.

**MORAL IDENTITY:** More important than moral literacy is moral identity, or how to create a moral identity in a child. How do you make children WANT to become good people in the world? How do you make it part of their disposition? Have we made morality a priority? Are they willing to sacrifice an achievement to benefit someone else? More and more, they are not.

- **Children need to know how to manage difficult emotions/feelings.** According to Weissbourd, when you violate your moral standards, it is not because you did not know right from wrong - it is usually because you were overwhelmed by another emotion - envy, shame, anger, frustration, greed, pride, lust, etc. These 'difficult emotions' are the engines of moral development and can cause us to violate our principles. Parents can help their children manage these feelings by naming and acknowledging them and their accompanying behaviors.
- **Widen your metrics of success** - instead of defining success as accomplishing high academic achievement, sporting success, being happy or achieving popularity, allow your children to feel successful for being soulful or quirky or feisty. Kids need to find passion or purpose; then the stress begins to dissipate - Help your child begin to uncover their personal passions and purposes.
- **Prioritize morality in parenting** - when you ask kids what's most important to their parents, the kids report that their happiness and their achievements are more important than kindness and caring for others. Parents need to express a commitment to caring:
  - By telling your child, "The most important thing to me is that you're kind";
  - By not allowing your children to write off friends that they find annoying;
  - To reach out to friendless kids on the playground;
  - To be respectful to their parents' friends;
  - To write thank you notes.

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- **Expand your Child's Circle of Concern** - most kids have some empathy. The question is who do they have empathy for? For family and friends, perhaps, but are they also kind and friendly to the waitress, the bus driver or the custodian? Are these people on their radar/in their moral awareness? How do we make people who are invisible to kids, visible? Often they are people who are different - in terms of race, class, culture, or ability; difference in gender or sexual orientation. Parents need to work to teach their children to value and humanize those people.
- **Parents need to MODEL for our kids.** Are we, as parents, kind to the waitress and bus driver? Are we contributing to our communities? Do we practice caring and gratitude in our homes? Are we focused on our own kids or do we expand our concern to include the the kids on the other team? Or the well-being of the referee? Kids will want to be like us if they respect us. Ask yourself if your kids respect you. If not, why? What can you do to repair the relationship?
- **Ask for feedback** from people you really respect and admire. Ask someone to call you on it if you're modeling something that is damaging to your children. It is a hard thing to do as we are sensitive about this topic. You need feedback on your parenting. An overwhelming majority of parents believe that it's the other parents who overvalue achievement. The problem in many ways is us - not them. When we do the intentional, soul-searching work to determine why our children's success means so much to us, we can have great conversations with our kids.