

Giving = happiness

By [Don Aucoin](#) Globe Staff / March 21, 2009

Not that any of you need more stress in your lives at this particular time, but Harvard psychologist Richard Weissbourd wants all you parents out there to take a long look in the mirror and ask yourself whether you're doing your children more harm than good.

For his new book, "The Parents We Mean to Be," Weissbourd and his research team studied five high schools, including three in the Boston area, where they interviewed scores of students and parents and convened several focus groups.

What he found was an obsession with achievement passed from parents to children. What he concluded is that many parents are letting themselves off the hook ("dangerously so," in Weissbourd's view) by pointing to peer pressure and pop culture as the primary forces that are undermining their children's "moral foundations."

Being a sensible fellow, Weissbourd grants that there is a measure of truth to these arguments, noting that there are "aspects of popular culture that seem designed to obliterate every particle of their humanity." (Any casual viewer of "South Park" can attest to that.)

But Weissbourd says parents need an urgent reminder that they are "the primary influence on children's moral lives. The parent-child relationship is at the center of the development of all the most important moral qualities, including honesty, kindness, loyalty, generosity, a commitment to justice, the capacity to think through moral dilemmas, and the ability to sacrifice for important principles."

Yet rather than foster those qualities by encouraging children to help those on the economic or social margins, Weissbourd told me, many parents consistently send a message that individual self-absorption is A-OK. "We let our kids write off other kids they find annoying," he says. "We don't ask our kids to reach out to a friendless kid on the playground."

The overriding goals of many parents, he says, are to make sure their children are happy, loaded with self-esteem, and armed with enough achievements to dazzle a college admissions officer. Is it any wonder they look inward rather than outward?

"This intense focus on happiness is not making our children happier. It's making them less happy," says Weissbourd, a child and family psychologist who teaches at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. "If you focus on kids being empathic and tuning in to others and helping others, they're more likely to be more moral and more happy."

(That assertion echoes the findings of John Izzo, author of "The Five Secrets You Must Discover Before You Die," who asked 235 elderly people what brought happiness to their lives. When we spoke last year, Izzo told me that time and again, the response by the oldsters was: "If you want to be a person who's happy, be a giver." Young 'uns, take note: "They said when you're young you think your greatest happiness will come from what you get from life," said Izzo. "But looking back they realized the only things that gave meaning was the fact that they gave.")

Many parents believe that if they bolster their children's self-esteem, the kids will logically turn out to be good people. "It's just not accurate," says Weissbourd. "If you look at the data, bullies and delinquents and gang leaders often have high self-esteem." In fact, Weissbourd contends, most parents have it exactly backward. "The evidence really points in the other direction, that if you can help children become caring and responsible people, it can develop their self-esteem," he says.

Which brings us, inevitably, to the current economic downturn. To Weissbourd, the recession offers a golden opportunity for parents to enhance their children's moral development - and to lead by example. "People are

really going to have to look out for each other, and find ways to support parents who are going through unemployment," he says. "This might be a time when kids can see their parents pitching in and helping the unemployed and helping strengthen their communities."

Yet he is enough of a realist to acknowledge that the downturn could have the opposite effect, and prompt parents to focus even more obsessively on achievement in high school. "The economic recession can exacerbate parents' fear that their kids are not going to reach the same station in life that they reached. There's this sense that there's a dwindling number of spots for our kids in the professional world," Weissbourd says. "This could break a number of ways. I hope it will break with more people feeling more responsibility to their communities, and modeling that to their kids."

Don Aucoin can be reached at aucoin@globe.com. ■

© Copyright 2009 Globe Newspaper Company.