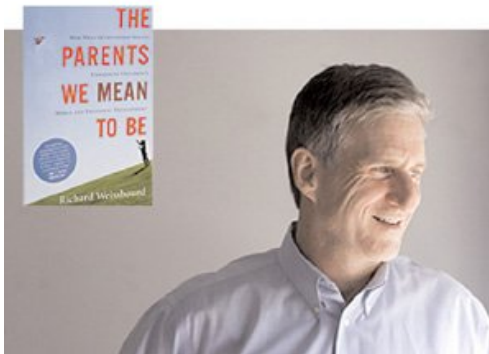


April 30, 2009



[Richard Weissbourd wants to reinvigorate the aspect of parenting concerned with a child's growth into a responsible, moral citizen.](#)
[Rose Lincoln/Harvard News Office](#)

[News Office Multimedia](#)

[Slide Shows](#)

[Videos](#)

[Special Presentations](#)

Raising happy — and moral — children

By Colleen Walsh
Harvard News Office

A teenager tells her parents she is considering quitting her soccer team. Worried that her daughter is unhappy, her mother wants to let her skip practice. Her father argues that soccer is important on her college résumé.

While both parents are concerned about their child, they neglect another question entirely: How would her leaving affect the team?

“Not infrequently, parents fail to help their children grasp their responsibility for a community. ... Caught up in our children’s happiness, we too often let children off the hook when they fail to take responsibility for their peers,” writes Richard Weissbourd of the scenario in his new book “The Parents We Mean to Be: How Well-Intentioned Adults Undermine Children’s Moral and Emotional Development” (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009).

By ignoring the repercussions of her decision on the team, argues Weissbourd, the parents fail to help their child consider her obligations to others, a key factor in moral growth.

In his work, Weissbourd tackles the complicated terrain of parenting, examining how those who focus too much on their child’s happiness often neglect their role of teaching their children to become caring, moral human beings.

A lecturer on education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) and the Harvard Kennedy School, Weissbourd was intrigued by morality early on, thanks to his

father, a real estate developer with a love of moral reasoning. Frequent topics at the dinner table, said Weissbourd, were classic moral conundrums, such as the “Heinz dilemma,” which poses the question, Should a husband who can’t afford the cost of an expensive medication steal it to save his wife’s life?

“It was a great way to grow up,” said Weissbourd, a child psychologist, who delved deeper into moral education and reasoning while pursuing his Ed.D. at Harvard under the guidance of former Harvard Professor Lawrence Kohlberg, a leader in the field of moral education.

Later, Weissbourd’s interest in how children develop moral qualities — how they become generous; learn to take responsibility for other people; handle shame, frustration, and anger; and develop the social skills that embody decency — became the foundation for his research.

A personal inspiration for his work was parenthood.

Raising three children, Weissbourd realized, “We are in a parent environment focused moment to moment on their happiness, on being close to them, on their achievements, and many of us don’t cultivate their responsibility for others in the same way.”

While wanting your child to be happy and successful are noble desires, focusing too much on a child’s achievements and happiness, he argues, means their moral development and well-being often suffer.

“In lots of subtle ways we can prioritize our kids’ happiness over their caring for others. We’re too quick to let them write off friends they find annoying. We don’t insist that they return phone calls from friends or reach out to a friendless kid on the playground.”

Weissbourd’s research, conducted with the help of a group of doctoral candidates, took place over several years, as he and his colleagues interviewed and surveyed parents and students in three Boston-area high schools as well as two small-town high schools in the South.

In addition, Weissbourd drew from his own experiences as a parent and coach and from informal interactions with families over the years.

His work has also inspired his new class at the HGSE, titled “Moral Adults: Moral

Children," which explores how children's moral capacities develop in their relationships with adults.

One of the most surprising phenomena that Weissbourd explores is why immigrant children's moral and emotional well-being slips measurably the more time they spend in this country.

"Studies show that when they first get here, immigrant kids are doing better than their peers on key emotional and moral measures. The longer they are here, the worse they do; and by the third generation, they are doing about as poorly as American kids."

But most surprising, he found, was the message many parents send to their children that if they are happy and have high self-esteem, they are ultimately also going to be good people.

"There are some parents who are essentially telling their kids to achieve, get into a great college, earn a lot of money, and then you can think about giving to others, like you can then turn on a morality switch. ... That is a way of thinking about the development of morality that doesn't make sense. Morality is really something you have to cultivate in your kids day in and day out."

In order to develop truly happy children, parents must focus not on self-esteem, Weissbourd argues, but on the maturity of the self.

"The maturity of the self develops when adults can really know kids, and help them distill who they are. That means in part valuing kids for their multiple qualities ... for being funny or vibrant or feisty or soulful or intuitive. When parents know those qualities and appreciate them, that is one way the child's self develops," he said, adding that parents also "really need to listen to [their children] and understand how they think about moral problems, and [then] connect their own values to their children's experiences."

With maturity often comes an appreciation and respect for others, a cornerstone of true morality and happiness.

"If we can help kids ... tune into others, including people who are different from them, they are going to have better relationships their whole lives. ... That is a key foundation both for morality and happiness," said Weissbourd, adding that instead of parents saying, "All I want is for you to be happy," it wouldn't be a bad thing for

parents to say, 'All I want is for our kids to be kind and responsible and happy.'"

It's important to remember, said the father of three teenagers, that parents can learn important moral lessons from their children, too.

"Parenting is this enormous opportunity to morally grow. This idea that our moral qualities are locked in, that they are developed in childhood and are static in adulthood, is just not true."

[Harvard News Office](#)

[Photo Reprints](#)

[Previous Issues](#)

[Contact Us](#)

© 2009 The President and Fellows of Harvard College