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Overcoming Parental Angst

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The hands all go up, without a moment's hesitation. The response seems almost cathartic as parents share the anxiety they feel. Anxiety that seems profound and burdensome.

The anxiety is about their children, their eighth grade children, and the hand-raising is in response to my question, "How many of you think you are more worried about your children than your parents were worried about you?" I've asked the question two to three times a year for nearly two decades when speaking with parents of eighth graders about the privilege of, and process for, secondary school choice. If the response, the anxiety, has changed in those years, it has only become stronger.

So, I ask, "What are you worried about?" Invariably, parents respond with, "Life is more dangerous. There are more risks. Life is harder today."

Why Are Parents So Worried?

This is a curious phenomenon, as there isn't any data to support the belief that life is more dangerous for these middle schoolers than it was for their parents. Indeed, the data about infant mortality, life expectancy, and violent crimes tells us just the opposite. Since 1960, infant mortality in the United States has dropped dramatically from 25.9 per 1000 live births to 6.8 in 2009.¹ In that same period, life expectancy has improved from 69.8 years to 78.7.² According to statistics from the FBI in its Crime in

the United States reports, since 1980 the violent crime rate has dropped significantly.³

I won't argue for a moment about life being challenging, perhaps even more challenging than it was for our parents and for us as children. (Though

from my childhood and adolescence I recall riots in our cities, protests on many college campuses, assassinations of a president, a presidential candidate, and a civil rights leader, the draft for a war unsupported

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by public opinion, a president resigning in disgrace, gas rationing and double digit interest rates. Let us remember the past clearly to avoid romanticizing it.) Life is difficult—always has been and will be. But the fact is that the risks are fewer for our children than they were for us.

Still, parental anxiety is real, very real.

And it is hurting their children.

Parental Insecurity is Good for Business

Given these facts, why are parents so worried, so burdened with this angst?

The answer starts with the understanding that parental angst, which often leads to insecurity, is good for business. Keeping parents worried and uneasy is good for business. It sells products and experiences—tutoring, enrichment, lessons, lessons and more lessons, test preparation, and publications. This is not to criticize any of these opportunities or products. For the most part, they have been and will continue to be of value. The problem is with

the timing, and the degree to which they are utilized—too early and too often. More on that in a moment.

The next culprit is the media. Specifically, the 24/7 news cycle. We live with every tragedy, every crisis, every misdeed that enters the media stream all day, every day. The news is negative, sensational and unrelenting. For goodness sake, the forecast that it might snow eight inches in the northeast is worthy of a STORMWATCH. So it is when ad space must be sold.

No wonder then that parents are apprehensive, and that they feel so much more burdened than their parents. This is much different from the experiences of parents who raised their children in the late 50s, 60s and 70s. And remember that the late 60s and early 70s were exceptionally turbulent and dangerous. However, our parents learned about the world in black and white, in print or on the screen, likely from one newspaper and one network. For so many Americans, Walter Cronkite gave us the day's headlines in his honest, avuncular style, which was reassuring regardless of the content of the broadcast.

There's more feeding the frenzy: the technology that keeps us in touch with our children constantly, technology that allows us to track their whereabouts. Enough. We don't need to hear—we shouldn't hear—about every bump and bruise, every disappointment and frustration immediately after they occur... even as they occur. And we need to allow children reasonable amounts of independence and responsibility within parameters that we, as parents, set for them and, as they demonstrate greater maturity, with them.

Anxious Parents, Anxious Children

How does all of this hurt children? In my experience anxious parents tend to create anxious children. And this simply is bad

for their emotional and physical development. Further, I believe that parental anxiety is at the foundation of a generation of overscheduled children, who often lack initiative and creativity as a result. At earlier and earlier ages, children are having their days filled with enrichment, remediation, and structured experiences to make them smarter and more competitive. As a result, there is less and less time for play, for children to organize themselves, to work together, to resolve differences, to deal with playground inequities and injustices without adult direction. Simply, too much is being done for them, instead of by them—from parents carrying hockey bags to, alas, doing their homework.

Worry and concern often rob parents of their genuine resources—common sense, the ability to say no and their willingness to allow their children to work through difficulty and disappointment. As we know, there is no manual for parents. We learn as we go. Common sense is essential to this process. For instance, if that plan carefully arranged and presented by your young teenager—usu-

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ally as you are rushing out the door or falling asleep—doesn't sound right, if it doesn't feel right, it probably isn't right. This then requires the willingness to say no, to set limits, to disappoint and upset your child. Anxiety and fear make this already challenging task all the more difficult. And these worries make it equally difficult to watch a child struggle and (gasp) fail. But this is exactly what they must do to learn persistence, resilience, and problem solving techniques, to pick themselves up from failure, to re-engage, and to look for ways to do better.

We agree that life is challenging and difficult. The irony (and concern) is that the worries that parents have, most of them overblown, stand squarely in the way of helping their children develop the necessary skills—optimism, determination, resilience, patience, and good humor—to deal effectively with life’s inevitable obstacles, disappointment and uncertainty.

My Advice: Take Heart

How do I respond to parents who are plagued by this anxiety? Take heart. There are manageable steps to help control the worry and uncertainty and inevitable challenges of being a good parent.

Remember that you are the adult and they are the children. Kids need stability and boundaries. This is certainly the case in the pre-school and elementary years. Consider the wise words of the prominent British pediatrician and psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott:

What is the normal child like? Does he just eat and grow and smile sweetly? No, that is not what he is like. The normal child, if he has confidence in father and mother, pulls out all the stops. In the course of time, he tries out his power to disrupt, to destroy, to frighten, to wear down, to waste, to wangle, and to appropriate. Everything that takes people to the courts (or to the asylums, for that matter) has its normal equivalent in infancy and early childhood, in the relation of the child to his own home. If the home can stand up to all the child can do to disrupt it, he settles down to play; but business first, the tests must be made, and especially so if there is some doubt as to the stability of the parental set-up and the home (by which

I mean so much more than house). At first the child needs to be conscious of a framework if he is to feel free, and if he is to be able to play, to draw his own pictures, to be an irresponsible child.⁴

Based on my experience of working with boarding school students for over thirty years, I would say that Dr. Winnicott's words apply equally to the teenage years, when boundaries, expectations and guidelines—the “walls of the home”—are equally necessary.

Keep the big picture firmly in mind. The goal of parenting is to help children develop into productive and responsible adults of sound character. This is your objective, rather than having your child make a specific travel team, or get the lead in the play, or gain admission to a selective college or university. These things can be good, the means to an end even, but they are not the point or the ultimate goal of our efforts as parents.

It's all about values and attitudes. These are what we must teach as parents: honesty, compassion, optimism, curiosity, ambition, discipline, responsibility, resilience and humor. Instill these in a child, and the chances are very good that he or she will find meaning and success in life.

**Worry and concern rob
parents of common sense.**

Pick your battles. If the battle is over the aforementioned attitudes and values, stick to them. If not, consider backing off. Do a cost-benefit analysis.

As your children grow, from the elementary years to high school and then to college, understand that you, as a parent, must grow with them. You move from director to guide. You collaborate on setting the parameters and expectations. For example, while there may be no collaboration on the existence of a curfew and the reality of consequences if it is missed, there may be good

conversation—and compromise even—on the exact hour for the curfew and the specific consequences.

Live with patience and faith. As the saying goes, patience is a virtue, especially when it comes to parenting. And patience goes hand in hand with faith—faith in yourself as a parent, faith in your child’s other parent, and, above all, faith in your child. He or she will grow up. He or she is likely to become more reasonable and pleasant to be with. He or she is likely to appreciate your efforts as parents and your hard-won insights and wisdom. Or, as Mark Twain wrote, “When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years.”

Finally, remember that your child’s school should be an ally in this process of growth and development. The right school should provide so much more than preparation for the next level of education or a career. The school’s values, attitudes, and objectives should fit with yours. Teachers should be advocates and guides, especially during the high school years when, as Twain said so well, we parents become “so ignorant.”

Until, that is, our children reach 21.

Footnotes

1. World Bank, World Development Indicators, Infant Mortality, USA, July 2011.
2. World Bank, World Development Indicators, Life Expectancy, USA, July 2011.
3. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Crime in the United States 2009.
4. Winnicott, D.W. Some psychological aspects of juvenile delinquency. 1946, p. 115.

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