

RAISING “KIDS THESE DAYS”

Parenting can be hard! Especially when it comes to handling issues that happen at school. We aren't there with our children and so we take the role as lead investigator to get to the bottom of it all. With such a large amount of time being spent from bus ride to bus ride, our kids are likely to face complex academic, social, and emotional situations on a daily basis. So when we see them struggle, of course we want to help.

“Anti-participation ribbon” and “let your child struggle” articles are shared with regularity. Reminiscence about playing outside all day and coming home by the light of the moon are coupled with sermons about modern day overprotective parents and criticisms about “kids these days”. But all too often, the people reliving the good ol’ days and lamenting the unfortunate changes that have happened in American homes, do not realize that *they* are the parents the authors are writing about. Parallels between the well meaning mistakes of other parents and our own actions are often obscured by the strong emotions we have for our own children. While we may not recognize ourselves in the articles and stories we read, every parent reading this now must realize that “kids these days” are raised by “parents these days”.

I believe that our struggle to respond appropriately is influenced by our own hurt or anxieties. We want to protect our kids. It makes sense! Parents are anxious due to the uncertainty of what their kids can actually handle. After all, it feels like a high stakes guess as to what level of conflict might lead to larger problems. We are challenged to identify the difference between injury and hurt, true bullying and conflict, clinical anxiety and nerves. We remember our own experiences with being made fun of and future issues with body image. We remember being bullied and not wanting to go to school. We make connections between our own experiences and those of our children. However, we must realize that our own experiences were likely helped or hindered by adults in our lives trying to solve the problem with their words (you are not fat. You are beautiful), explaining it away (I bet he likes you), telling us that our feelings are not acceptable (suck it up), or ignoring it altogether. Beyond the advice to fight back, seldom were we coached to think through our options to handle it on our own. Teachers are also anxious because it's expected that they solve problems and never allow conflict to arise, or risk the liability and litigation that may soon follow. Parents demand it, administrators expect it, and we have been talked into believing that conflict and struggle damage instead of providing needed resistance to build strength or sharpen skills.

News stations and social media are flooded with reports of skyrocketing anxieties, depression, bullying, and worse. Our own anxieties are fueled by reports of disastrous and heartbreaking moments of ruined lives and broken futures. Whether we mean to or not, even the slightest possibilities of harm to our children are mirrored by the activities we withhold and the words of caution we echo. We regularly communicate (directly and indirectly) the dangers of the world and so our kids understand that the world is dangerous. We are all worried about the current state of mental health in our children, and we are constantly scouring the environment to explain the worsening trends. Any given day will see another report claiming correlations between

violence or the mental health crisis to screen time, social media, video games, shifting standards in entertainment, media coverage, lost autonomy and free play, overprotective parenting and more. If only we found the one cause of so many problems, we could stand against it and rid our world of so much destruction. The truth of the matter is that the major issues our kids currently face are likely due to hundreds of combined elements or singular circumstance that can't be easily solved or explained, especially within the few words of this article. So I won't pretend to do so. Instead, I will assert that the lines we draw between productive struggle and destructive trauma is far from where we have placed it. This article is not about ignoring pain or downplaying the hurt our kids feel. Instead, I say that we must acknowledge the feeling and then spend our time productively helping our kids build the skills to not only recover but to control their lives.

I have lived a life full of reflection and study focused on learning, cognitive, emotional and behavioral development, pedagogical practices, strategic planning, organizational leadership, and parenting. Over the past 20 years, I have played the role of coach, teacher, school leader, and parent. With a foundation from multiple advanced degrees in education and observations of thousands of parenting actions and the consequential responses from their children, I have been able to learn and grow through the knowledge and experiences of others. I spend nearly every waking moment putting all that I have learned into action as a school principal and a parent of three children. I have dedicated my life to preparing kids for their futures and that is a job I take very seriously. Below are my suggestions for parents whose kids will ever face a challenge at school.

Even Negative Emotions are Ok

Sadness, disappointment, hurt feelings, boredom, and other feelings are all normal. We must be ok with them being an ongoing and normal portion of the emotional spectrum for our kids. We should not stop it from happening but should teach them that it's normal and how to deal with it.

Help Them to Know How to Feel

Kids look for signals from the environment to know how to feel (safe, unsafe, controllable, manageable, insurmountable). They must see from our reactions what is appropriately feared and what is not as bad as it seems. Our body language, tone, questions, and conversation communicates the scale of threat or opportunity. If done right, our kids can learn that situations are not insurmountable and that they can overcome even larger challenges. This requires that we listen, wipe away their tears, and give them a shoulder to lay their head. In us, they must see that we care but also see the strength and resolve it takes to not let disappointment and hurt keep us down. As parents, our shoulders must carry the hurt of our kids while standing tall. Our external reactions must reveal a calm and caring faith in our children to overcome.

Be a Coach Instead of a Teammate

We must teach that words may hurt but they do not injure. Teach them to respond appropriately instead of fold. Both schools and parents are to blame for this. Often times, when simple disagreements or social struggles occur, the first thing that parents and teachers suggest is to

tell an adult. Instead, we should first ask what they did to solve the issue and help them to discover options for how to handle these challenges in the future. As parents and educators, we should not take the role of a teammate but should instead that of a coach.

Disappointments in Youth Can Prepare For Life

Disappointments will also happen from time to time. Our kids will put themselves out there, and despite their effort or how much they want it, they will take an emotional hit at the hands of a coach, director, or other adult. Subjective elements of auditions or tryouts may end in disappointment and heartache for both of you. Someone judged your child and decided that someone else was more deserving of a spot. While your child may take it personally, it is important to realize that decisions like these are often made for numerous reasons and may have more to do with the other kids than it does your own. Birthday invitations may be passed out and leave a once hopeful child empty-handed and sad. What a great opportunity to teach our kids how to handle disappointment and not allow it to damage their self-worth. What a great opportunity to teach them the value of grit and getting back up when they have been knocked down. We put our kids in extracurricular activities to help them develop as a whole child, but we must also recognize the value of learning through disappointments as practice for future challenges and an essential element for development. When they get older, they will likely be passed over for a job or or a well deserved promotion. It's a part of life, and one that we can prepare them for through the context of real disappointment. It all depends on how we coach them through the disappointments of their youth.

Kids Focus On and Emphasize Negative Experiences

Our brains are meant to remember negative experiences. This natural focus provides attention to possible dangers to help us survive. Therefore, even when the majority of a day was positive, the moments of struggle will likely make the list of experiences that our kids share with us. We must truly understand that this is often done because kids need us to “be there” for them. It's a long, hard day, and sometimes they just need a shoulder and an ear. As our ears get filled with the challenging moments from the day, and our shirt carries the tears that we dried, we must realize that these stories are one-sided, lacking other perspectives and often missing key context. Kids lie, forget, and do not have fully developed brains capable of understanding complex social interactions. Others' words and actions are often retold in exaggerated tones, interactions have added elements to explain reasoning for poor decisions, while omitting your child's actions or words that could explain the actions or words of others. This is all done to garner support and sympathy while minimizing the possibility of consequence.

Kids Exaggerate Support or Lack Of

Kids often exaggerate the support of one side or another in a situation. “Everyone was laughing at me”. “All of my friends saw it”. This is rarely the case. The reality is that “Everyone” is actually one child. Add to this a possible laugh from another child, or other children passively standing by, the absence of overt support for your child often multiplies the actual problem to include everyone within proximity. When kids tell us of the support for their side or the other, we must realize that this may very well be wrong. But what about calling the home of other children and

asking if they witnessed the mistreatment of your child? This may lead to additional inaccuracies as kids often retell stories aligned to the interests of friends in order to minimize conflict, avoid the loss of friendship, support a relationship, or protect themselves.

Not All Character Flaws Are Real

In order to easily gain support and limit the possibility that another person's side might be taken, people often describe the opposing side in ways that clearly defines character flaws or having a personal agenda against them. This is often used in politics or other areas when we want others to quickly choose a side. This common tactic is also regularly used by kids. If I can make my mom believe that my teacher is disorganized, then just maybe my poor grade is the fault of a teacher's organizational issues instead of my own. If I can tell a story about how the teacher yells or doesn't like me, then maybe my challenges are due to a personal conflict instead of my own issues of responsibility. If I can make my parents believe that another student is out to get me, then they couldn't possibly have a reason for what they did. We have all experienced issues with other people's character flaws, and we want to trust and protect our kids, therefore these stories are very easy for us to believe. This is why this tactic is so often used. In order to get to the truth, we must be careful not to believe in the absolute defining of people as good and evil.

His Perception Might Be Wrong

"His perception is his reality." This is absolutely one statement that has crossed the lips of nearly every parent and one that needs serious editing. The fact of the matter is that just because something is perceived, doesn't make it true. Parents often say this when their child perceives that someone doesn't like them or there is some sort of injustice. Our kids must learn to question their feelings and analyze the facts to find the truth. If we do not teach them to question their perceptions ("this is too much for me to handle", "everyone hates me", or "I am not worth it"), damaging comments and feelings may actually move from misperception to accepted reality. Additionally, raising children that accept information or feelings without some level of scrutiny will likely result in adults who are easily fooled, susceptible to exploitation, or are not open to alternative explanations. We all know people that believe everything they read, share inaccurate political posts tied to heavy emotionality, or believe they are always right. Perceptions move from feeling to truth when all information is gathered and objectively considered.

Don't Lead The Witness

There is a reason that police departments provide months of training for individuals who interview children. Various question types lead to large variations in accuracy of events, greatly influencing the reliability of statements. Research shows that parents most often use questions that lead to inaccurate accounting of events. While it is much more complex than this, one essential element to increase the likelihood of accurate answers is to ask open-ended questions. Usually, the more open-ended, the more accurate the response.

When Must Adults Intervene?

When should we reach out to the other adults in our children's lives? I believe that communication between home and school is extremely important, but the key is to do so while

not removing the ownership and solutions of challenges from our kids. Adult intervention is necessary if the possibility of injury is likely. Whether physical or emotional, hurt will go away but injury may not. If we are ever concerned that our children may be injured, we must make sure that adults at home and school understand that threat and step in. However, I believe that resilience can be cultivated in even the most challenging of situations. While we may be left with permanent reminders of pain once felt, pain fades and we can even grow from the experiences. We must teach that pain is temporary and that our kids are not fragile. My encouragement for coaching over coddling still requires a great deal of effort and care. In fact, I truly believe that kids will always need a shoulder, mountains of love, and genuine interest in who they are. The only difference between the two is a focus on who solves the problem, choosing between short term or long term solutions.

One final story before I go. We have sanitized the environments in which our kids live to the point that their immune systems are weak. Protection from regular exposure is leaving them vulnerable to larger infections, allergies, and major reactions. This is both medically true and an extremely accurate metaphor for the current reality of social sanitation, exposure, protection, and debilitation of our youth. It is done for the right reason but the benefits are far overshadowed by the unintended consequences.

Recently, my son came home from school and told us that he is lonely and doesn't have any friends, that other kids are isolating him. His best friend was moving and now his remaining friends have pushed him away. A child's tear can be a motivational thing for a parent. Just our luck, parent/teacher conferences were only a few days away. My wife and I sat down with his teacher, reviewed his grades and progress, and my wife was finally able to share the story of our son's friendship woes. The teacher did exactly what she should have. She told us that she was sorry to hear this and that she cares about our son. She told us that she would pull the other boys and get them to be inclusive of our son. How nice is that? This reminds me of a kind and caring trend in schools that has been shared by educators, parents, and news stations to the applause of nearly every person who hears it. Schools have put a special bench (often called a buddy bench) on the playground where kids that cannot find a friend can go to sit. This tells other kids that this person needs a friend and should be invited to play. How great is that!?! I truly share the above examples with the belief that all of the adults are trying to help solve the social issues that lead to heartache and tears for so many. However, my enthusiasm is extinguished by the reality that the above situations may be doing much more harm than good as short term solutions and long term gains are often at odds with each other.

I can't find a friend, someone help me. I feel lonely, someone save me. Instead of teaching our kids that the solution lies within them, we have only reinforced learned helplessness, inaction, and a reliance on others to solve problems. This might not be a huge deal when handling 3rd grade problems, but may be debilitating when dealing with them as an adult. Fredrick Douglas once said that "it is easier to build strong children than it is to repair broken men." This truly makes me wonder how the current state of overparenting and coddling will lead to the breaking of a generation.

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