

**Nouns vs. Verbs and Other Studies about
Teaching Children Moral Behaviors
Robert Brooks, Ph.D.**

Last month I wrote about the inordinate stress and pressure that is placed on children and adolescents to succeed, especially as measured by grades, extra-curricular activities as a way to pad one's college application, and admission to so-called elite colleges. In keeping with this theme, I was delighted to read a recent article published in the op-ed pages of *The New York Times* by columnist Frank Bruni titled "Our Crazy College Crossroads." Bruni's piece is intended for the thousands of seemingly qualified students who were rejected for admission by elite colleges. Similar to my March article, Bruni cites an observation offered by Malcolm Gladwell in his new book *David and Goliath* that in some instances getting into one's "dream school" may actually backfire in terms of long-term success and happiness.

Bruni advises those who have been turned down for admission by their top school(s), "About money and professional advancement: Shiny diplomas from shiny schools help. It's a lie to say otherwise. But it's as foolish to accord their luster more consequences than the effort you put into your studies, the earnestness with which you hone your skills, what you actually learn. These are the sturdier building blocks of a career. . . . Your diploma is, or should be, the least of what defines you."

Bruni identifies the qualities for which we should strive—qualities not necessarily associated with the college from which one graduated. He asserts, "And your diploma will have infinitely less relevance to your fulfillment than so much else: the wisdom with which you choose your romantic partners; your interactions with the community you inhabit; your generosity toward the family that you inherited or the family that you've made."

Many will realize that these qualities fall under the rubric of what psychologist Daniel Goleman labeled "emotional intelligence" and "social intelligence," both vital skills for navigating life's challenges with dignity, success, and satisfaction.

In ending his op-ed column, Bruni describes a high school senior he knows who was not accepted at her top colleges. He eloquently expresses a view that is in keeping with my beliefs about resilience and the human spirit.

I've never been more impressed with her, because she quickly realized that her regrets pale beside her blessings and she pivoted from letdown to excitement.

That resiliency and talent for optimism will matter more down the line than the

name of the school lucky enough to have her. Like those of her peers who are gracefully getting past this ordeal that our status-mad society has foisted on them, she'll do just fine.

Raising a Moral Child

Bruni's sentiments were echoed in another *New York Times* op-ed piece, "Raising a Moral Child," by Adam Grant, a professor of management and psychology at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania and author of *Give and Take: Why Helping Others Drives Our Success*. These two op-ed pieces have prompted me to share additional thoughts about what I consider to be those values towards which we should direct our child-rearing and educational practices.

In conveying my perspective in my March column, I asserted, "I know that what I am going to write next represents walking on a slippery slope, and I truly hope I am not misunderstood." I offer the same warning in this month's article. In the discussion to follow about moral and social/emotional development, I wouldn't want my message to be interpreted as suggesting that parents who encourage their children to strive for excellent grades in the hopes of acceptance at an elite school are not interested in their children developing a moral, caring compass. However, my concern is that when particular values and activities are used to measure success, other important values and activities may be pushed to the background. I have witnessed this occurring frequently enough in many well-meaning families that I believe it is a problem worthy of consideration.

Grant examines variables involved in teaching children to be moral and compassionate and asks how does caring develop. I was intrigued by this question since my colleague Sam Goldstein and I have proposed that there is an inborn tendency for children to want to help. We have advocated that all youngsters be engaged in what we call "contributory activities" since such activities reinforce a sense of purpose and resilience.

Grant approaches the inborn tendency issue from another vantage point, noting, "Genetic twin studies suggest that anywhere from a quarter to more than half of our propensity to be giving and caring is inherited. That leaves a lot of room for nurture, and the evidence of how parents raise kind and compassionate children flies in the face of what many of the most well-intentioned parents do in praising good behavior, responding to bad behavior, and communicating their values."

Two Kinds of Praise

Many parents subscribe to the belief that it is better to compliment the behavior of children and not the children themselves. Guided by this belief parents are more apt to say, "That was a kind thing to do" rather than "You're a kind person." However, as

Grant notes, research conducted by Joan Grusec and Erica Redler calls this opinion into question. They compared the outcome when adults reinforced either commendable behavior or commendable character. Seven and eight-year-olds won marbles and donated some to children who were poor. In this study children were randomly assigned to receive different kinds of praise. Some were praised for their actions: “It was good that you gave some marbles to those poor children. Yes, that was a nice and helpful thing to do.” Others were praised for the character displayed by the actions: “I guess you’re the kind of person who likes to help others whenever you can. Yes, you are a very nice and helpful person.”

As you reflect on these two kinds of praise, would you predict that they would have a different impact on the subsequent behaviors of the children in each group? Grusec and Redler found that they did. As Grant reports, “A couple of weeks later, when faced with more opportunities to give and share, the children were much more generous after their character had been praised than after their actions had been. Praising their character helped them to internalize it as part of their identities. The children learned who they were from observing their own actions: I am a helpful person.”

Grant compares these findings to recent studies undertaken by psychologist Christopher Bryan—findings that triggered many thoughts in me. As noted earlier, I have described the importance of providing children with opportunities to help others as a way of promoting their sense of caring and resilience. I have advocated that instead of reminding children to do their chores, it is more effective to say, “I need your help.” Many parents, teachers, and other caregivers have written to tell me how the request to children to help is met with enthusiasm, unlike the request to do “chores.”

After reviewing Bryan’s research, I may refine the words I recommend adults use to nurture caring actions in children. Bryan found that nouns were more effective than verbs for nurturing moral behaviors. Rather than inviting children “‘to help,’ it was 22 to 29 percent more effective to encourage them to ‘be a helper.’” Relatedly, “cheating was cut in half when instead of, ‘Please don’t cheat,’ participants were told, ‘Please don’t be a cheater.’”

Many of us believe that “words are power” and this notion was certainly reinforced in Bryan’s study. Grant adds, “Tying generosity to character appears to matter most around age 8, when children may be starting to crystallize notions of identity.”

Shame and Guilt

An adult’s response to a child’s negative behavior is also a major factor in the development of moral behavior. Grant observes that in response to misbehavior, children typically experience one of two emotions: shame or guilt. “Shame is the feeling that I am

a bad person, whereas guilt is the feeling that I have done a bad thing. Shame is a negative judgment about the core self, which is devastating: Shame makes children feel small and worthless, and they respond by lashing out at the target or escaping the situation altogether.

“In contrast, guilt is a negative judgment about an action, which can be repaired by good behavior. When children feel guilt, they tend to experience remorse and regret, empathize with the person they have harmed, and aim to make it right.”

Obviously, given this distinction, if we want children to learn to care about others we must respond to their misbehavior in ways that elicit guilt not shame. Grant offers advice on how to accomplish this task by referring to the research of psychologist Nancy Eisenberg who found “that shame emerges when parents express anger, withdraw their love, or try to assert their power through threats of punishment: Children may begin to believe that they are bad people.”

Instead, Grant contends that the most effective way to deal with negative behavior and raise caring, moral children is “by expressing disappointment and explaining why the behavior was wrong, how it affected others, and how they can rectify the situation. This enables children to develop standards for judging their actions, feelings of empathy and responsibility for others, and a sense of moral identity, which are conducive to becoming a helpful person. The beauty of expressing disappointment is that it communicates disapproval of the bad behavior, coupled with high expectations and the potential for improvement: ‘You’re a good person, even if you did a bad thing, and I know you can do better.’”

Grant concludes, “People often believe that character causes action, but when it comes to producing moral children, we need to remember that action also shapes character. As the psychologist Karl Wieck is fond of asking, ‘How can I know who I am until I see what I do? How can I know what I value until I see where I walk?’”

A Change in Focus

If a primary goal is for their children to constantly demonstrate achievements, especially in the arena of academics, one should not be surprised to observe that stress and pressure continue to dominate their lives. Bruni, Grant, and others remind us that our efforts as parents and other caregivers should be devoted to raising compassionate, caring, empathic, emotionally intelligent children. As noted earlier, this does not mean we do not want our children to excel at school but rather that academic achievement and acceptance at elite colleges should not eclipse developing these other social-emotional qualities. Not every child can be an “A” student or a star athlete or a star performer, and

they should not feel we are disappointed in them because they are not able to fulfill what may be our unrealistic expectations as parents.

I have often asked my audiences, “How many of you when you meet someone for the first time begin the conversation with the question, ‘Before I can decide what kind of relationship we might have, can you please tell me where you went to school/college and what was your grade point average?’” Many laugh when I pose this question, prompting me to say that meaningful relationships in both our personal and professional lives are rooted in our interpersonal skills, not the college from which we graduated or our class standing.

I am reminded of an article titled “The New Humanism” written several years ago by David Brooks, a renowned and highly respected columnist and author (as I have stated in previous columns, David and I are not related). Brooks’ insights have significant relevance for child-rearing and educational practices. He writes:

For the past 30 years we’ve tried many different ways to restructure our educational system—trying big schools and little schools, charters and vouchers—that for years, skirted the core issue: the relationship between a teacher and a student. . . . When we raise our kids, we focus on the traits measured by grades and SAT scores. But when it comes to the most important things like character and how to build relationships, we often have nothing to say. Many of our public policies are proposed by experts who are comfortable only with correlations that can be measured, appropriated, and quantified, and ignore everything else.

It is imperative that we constantly examine our priorities as we articulate guidelines for parenting and educating children. I believe increased emphasis should be placed on raising resilient, caring, socially skilled children rather than on raising children who are best known for achieving high grades and attending prestigious colleges. This does not imply that emotional and social intelligence in children is mutually exclusive from being a high-achieving student but rather that the main spotlight should be directed towards nurturing those attributes that will contribute to a life filled with caring, compassion, and happiness rather than stress.

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