

**Of Greater Importance to Teens:  
Compassion or Achievement?**

**Robert Brooks, Ph.D.**

“What is most important to you? Achieving at a high level, happiness (defined, in part, as feeling good most of the time), or caring for others?”

This question was asked of 10,000 middle and high school students throughout the United States. Those who responded represented a wide range of youth from different races, backgrounds, and socioeconomic classes. The study also included hundreds of interviews with children, parents, and teachers during the past 10 years. Of the three factors—high achievement, feeling happy, and caring for others—which do you think was rated the highest?

This study was conducted by psychologist Dr. Richard Weissbourd and his colleagues at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The findings of the survey together with implications and recommendations were summarized in the report “The Children We Mean to Raise: The Real Messages Adults Are Sending About Values,” which may be found at [http://sites.gse.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/making-caring-common/files/mcc\\_report\\_7.2.14.pdf](http://sites.gse.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/making-caring-common/files/mcc_report_7.2.14.pdf)

I first learned about the study in an article written by Deborah Kotz that appeared in *The Boston Globe* on July 21. Interestingly, one week earlier an article authored by Julie Halpert, in which I was quoted, was published on the caring.com website. The article focused on how helping others can enrich your own life. Halpert summarizes research that indicates that when people have a purpose in life such as caring for others, they tend to be less stressed and more healthy and live longer.

As one example, Halpert cites the work of psychologist Dr. Patrick McKnight of George Mason University who emphasizes that when you have a purpose, when you have a goal that is not at the expense of others, “a biological process takes place that leads to better immune functioning. Even a simple purpose can be effective such as providing a resident of a retirement community a plant that allows them to be the caregiver for that plant.”

These kinds of research findings resonated with my beliefs about the positive impact that contributing to the well-being of others has on our own lives. In my presentations and writings during the past 35 years, including several of my books with my colleague Dr. Sam Goldstein, I have emphasized that an important feature of resilience is involvement in what I call “contributory activities.” Engagement in these activities reinforces a sense of purpose and a belief that our actions play a role in making our world a better place. It adds meaning to our lives.

### **Disheartening Findings from a Study**

Sam and I have advanced the position that children possess an inborn need to help and that it is essential for adults to honor this need by providing youngsters with opportunities to enrich the lives of others. In subscribing to this view, I was very interested in reviewing the results of Weissbourd’s study. What he and his colleagues discovered was somewhat disheartening and raised questions of how best to nurture compassion and caring in our youth. It is beyond the scope of this article to go beyond a brief summary of some of the findings, but I would encourage the reader to go to the full report for a more in-depth consideration of the questions that were asked and the results that followed (the link to the full study is listed above and on my Facebook page).

Of the three options, 48% of students selected high achievement as their top priority followed by 30% who selected happiness. Only 22% placed caring for others at the top of their list. Weissbourd and his colleagues take a strong position about the implications of these findings, noting that achievement and happiness are important values and that “one can certainly be happy, achieve great feats, and be kind, fair and concerned about the greater good. In fact these values are entwined in many ways; many people, for example, find great gratification and happiness from caring and altruism.”

However, they add, “Any healthy civil society also depends on adults who are committed to their communities and who, at pivotal times, will put the common good before their own. We don’t seem to be preparing large numbers of youth to create this society.”

These researchers describe what they label a “rhetoric/reality gap” between what parents and other caregivers say are the values that are most important to teach and model

for children and teens and the messages they actually communicate on a day-to-day basis. Most parents assert that a top priority is to develop caring children, ranking it as a more important goal than children's achievements. However, 80% of the youth involved in the study expressed the belief that "their parents were more concerned about achievement or happiness than caring for others." The report notes, "Our conversations with and observations of parents also suggest that the power and frequency of parents' daily messages about achievement and happiness are drowning out their messages about concern for others."

### **Unrealized Goals**

Ironically, other studies have suggested that a focus on reinforcing happiness and achievement doesn't appear to lead to these goals. In a very telling comment, with which I am in total agreement, Weissbourd emphasizes, "Parents who seek to preserve their children's happiness by constantly protecting them from adversity can rob them of coping strategies that are crucial in their long-term happiness. Parents who don't prioritize their children caring for others can deprive them of the chance to develop fundamental relationship skills, and strong relationships are one of our most vital and durable sources of well-being."

I have been concerned for years with parents who rush in to keep their children from feeling any discomfort or worries. Such actions actually communicate a message to children that is far different from what parents may intend, namely, "I don't think you are capable of handling pressures or setbacks so I have to jump in and rescue you." I am not implying that we should fail to act when our children are faced with situations that may eventuate in dire consequences. Instead, I advise that while it is obvious we should not throw children in ten feet of water if they cannot swim, we should certainly encourage them to enter the water and teach them to swim even if it takes much time, effort, and practice. How can children feel dignified if they are deprived of experiencing genuine success when confronting challenges?

The other key message housed in Weissbourd's comments, one that I enthusiastically support, is that enriching the lives of others reinforces rather than detracts from developing a sense of accomplishment and happiness. As an example, I have seen

many children and adolescents in my clinical practice whose school performance improved when they were given responsibilities to help in the school setting. The tasks have been very varied, whether reading to younger children, stacking books in the library, taking care of plants in the lobby, or assisting in the office. In enlisting youngsters in these activities, the accompanying message from adults should be, “We need your help” in order to highlight that the actions make a positive difference in the lives of others.

Weissbourd emphasizes that not all of the results in the survey were disappointing. “While caring and fairness are subordinated to achievement and happiness, they are still important to youth, their parents, and their teachers. . . . Roughly two-thirds of youth listed kindness as one of their top three values and 63% put fairness in their top three. A large majority of youth report their parents have communicated that kindness is important.”

### **Guidelines for Nurturing Compassion and Caring**

In our writings and seminars Sam and I have offered what we consider to be realistic guidelines and strategies for nurturing compassion and acts of caring towards others beginning at an early age. Weissbourd and his colleagues propose four such guidelines, which “can help shift the balance toward children and youth caring for others and help them become caring, ethical members, workers, and citizens.” These guidelines resonate with those that Sam and I have advocated. They include:

**1. Children and youth need ongoing opportunities to practice caring and helpfulness, sometimes with guidance from adults.** This is a basic directive for raising compassionate, resilient children. Using phrases such as “I need your help,” involving children in “charitable activities” as delivering meals to the elderly during the holiday season, going for a walk to raise funds for a charity, or decorating the lobby of a school are but a few examples of this guideline. I have received feedback from parents, teachers, and other caregivers about the positive impact that assisting others has on a child’s sense of caring and dignity. I have found that too often we simply lecture about being kind and considerate rather than providing experiences in which these behaviors are expressed.

**2. Children and youth need to learn to listen closely and attend to those both in their immediate circle and those in their wider circle and consider multiple perspectives.** In assuming the perspective of others, we are addressing one of the most important skills that we hope to nurture in children, one that has been highlighted by psychologist Dr. Daniel Goleman in his descriptions of both “emotional intelligence” and “social intelligence,” namely, empathy. Weissbourd observes, “It is by taking multiple perspectives, including the perspectives of those who are often invisible (such as the new kid in class, someone who doesn’t speak their language, or the school custodian) that young people expand their *circle of concern* and become able to consider the justice of their communities and society.” While many believe that empathy can be taught through a formal curriculum, I hold the opinion that empathy is best learned by the countless situations that arise each day in which we can help children to appreciate the importance of seeing the world through the eyes of others.

**3. Children and youth need strong moral role models.** Under this guideline Weissbourd includes “grappling with our flaws, acknowledging our mistakes, listening to our children and students, and connecting our values to their way of understanding the world.” It involves our modeling empathy and caring. In my workshops for parents I always ask, “How do you think your children would answer the following questions: ‘When your mother or father makes a mistake, how do they handle it?’ ‘In what activities have you seen your parents involved in the last few months that help others?’” I use these questions to prompt parents to reflect upon their role as models in dealing with setbacks and demonstrating caring. We have often heard the statement that children focus much more on what we do than what we say. If we fail to cope effectively with setbacks, if we fail to display acts of kindness, it will be more challenging for our children to learn to do so.

**4. Children need to be guided in managing destructive feelings.** Weissbourd observes that our capacity to care for others is often eclipsed by emotions of anger, jealousy, or envy. We must convey to youngsters that while such feelings arise at times, the ways in which we express these feelings are of paramount importance. A primary task for adults is to nurture self-discipline in children. Self-discipline, which is one of the

most significant skills in leading a resilient, compassionate lifestyle, involves thinking before acting and considering constructive ways of coping when faced with difficult situations and negative emotions.

**A Concluding Observation**

Weissbourd and his colleagues offer a thoughtful, concluding observation in their report. They note, “The question is not whether cultural priorities can change. It is whether we can summon—for the sake of our children’s happiness and achievement and, above all, their morality—the discipline to wisely direct that change, and how soon.”

I believe that as parents, teachers, and other caregivers we can all take small steps in creating environments in our homes, schools, and communities in which empathy and caring are reinforced. In the process achievement and happiness will also find a prominent place in the emotional and social development of our children.

**<http://www.drrobertbrooks.com>**