

Empathy or Achievement? What We're Teaching our Kids

Evolve Treatment Blog Content

The Empathy Gap

Over the past decade or so, schools in the U.S. have been playing a game of catch-up. When it became obvious in the early 2000s that students in other countries were outperforming U.S. students in core academic areas such as math and science, alarm bells went off all over the country. Programs at the national, state and local levels were hastily put into place, and by now everyone has heard that there will be “No Child Left Behind” in the U.S. and that our students will soon be back on par with the rest of the world, particularly in the areas of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics, a.k.a. the STEM subjects. Policy makers, school administrators, teachers, parents and students have all been working extremely hard to get our education system back on track in order to close what the experts call the “achievement gap.” Unfortunately, however, in striving to bring our systems back up to a level we can all be proud of, we’ve accidentally created something that might be worse than the gap we’re trying to close: we’ve created an “empathy gap.”

Harvard Study: Kids Value Achievement Over Empathy and Fairness

In a report published this year by the Harvard Graduate School of Education called “The Children We Mean to Raise: The Real Messages Adults are Sending About Values,” researchers discovered that kids in the U.S. “appear to value aspects of personal success—achievement and happiness—over concern for others.”¹ The study, in which over 10,000 students from 33 schools were interviewed over a period of ten years, includes some startling statistics. When students were asked to identify what was most important to them—academic achievement, personal happiness or caring for another person, 80 percent of students said that achievement and happiness were their top priorities, while only 20 percent said that caring for another person was their top priority. In addition, the study revealed that in the drive to get ahead, students would go to great lengths, and openly cross boundaries that might be shocking to adults: 50 percent of kids say that they’ve cheated on tests, and 75 percent say that they’ve copied homework from peers. The drive to succeed is also showing up in other undesirable ways: close to 30 percent of middle school and high school students reported that they were bullied in 2010-2011, and 50 percent of females in middle school and high school reported that they had experienced some type of sexual harassment. According to the study, when young people begin to place more value on personal success than they do on the values of fairness and caring, the results are not good. The authors conclude that when self-centered values outweigh other-centered values, our children are “at greater risk of many forms of harmful behavior, including being cruel, disrespectful and dishonest.”

The Empathy Gap: How Can We Close It?

Despite the somewhat gloomy numbers and the fact that it appears we’ve been inadvertently teaching our children values over the last decade that most of us really don’t espouse, there is good news in the study: though kids appear to value achievement over caring, a great number of them said that kindness (66 percent) and fairness (63 percent) were among their three most important values. Also, the study

¹ Harvard Graduate School of Education. “The Children We Mean to Raise: The Real Messages Adults are Sending About Values”. *Making Caring Common Project*. 2014. http://sites.gse.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/making-caring-common/files/mcc_the_children_we_mean_to_raise_0.pdf

outlines a simple, practical, step-wise approach to correcting the situation and closing the empathy gap. The path will be challenging and adults will have to accept responsibility for guiding kids along the way, but the recommendations set forth are all achievable:

- 1) Children need to be taught to care for others and given opportunities to practice values that are seen to be lacking: kindness, compassion, fairness and helpfulness. Administrators, teachers and parents need to create moments when kids can help each other out and guide them along the way. For some kids it will be easy, but some kids will need help—and it's the responsibility of the adults in their lives to show them how.
- 2) Children need to learn to listen carefully and mindfully to one another so that they may truly understand what other people are actually going through, and children need to learn to pay attention to the bigger picture—to the world around them—so that they may truly gain perspective and understand what's happening out there. How are they going to learn these skills? Again, it's the responsibility of the adults in their lives to teach them.
- 3) Children need to see kind, caring, fair and empathetic behavior *in action*. Kids are much more likely to do as adults do than they are to do as adults say. Adults need to be mindful about how they behave: how they talk to one another, how they talk to children and how they act at home, at work and at school. Kids are watching, and adults, whether they like it or not, are their direct role-models. If kids can *see* a behavior, they can learn to *be* that behavior.
- 4) Children need to learn how to positively and proactively deal with their emotions. In addition to reading, writing and arithmetic, adults need to teach kids how to handle anger, frustration, shame and fear—all of the negative emotions—so that they don't mistakenly mistreat each other in moments when they are blinded by their own intense feelings.

Taking Stock: Who Do We Want Our Kids to Be?

More than anything, the Harvard study is a wake-up call for the adults of the U.S. After all, our children only learn what we teach them. As much as we'd like to, it's really not possible for us to step back and wash our hands of the results of this research and pretend like our children's attitudes have come out of nowhere. While it's true that many of us value empathy, kindness, fairness and caring over academic achievement and personal success, and many administrators, teachers and parents strive every day to instill these values in our children, we have to recognize that numbers don't lie: we still have a lot of work to do. Hopefully this study will do two things: 1) Spark a national conversation that leads to a reassessment of the fundamental goals of our educational systems (at the very least, we need to make sure that the results we're seeing in our children line up with the kind of country we want to create) and 2) Encourage deep and personal conversations within families about what's important in life and which values parents want to pass on to their children. Perhaps as a result of these conversations, we'll find a healthy national balance between personal achievement and caring for others.