

Parenting *ideas*

INSIGHTS

Building parent-school partnerships

WORDS Michael Grose

Be careful what you wish for as a parent

The focus on success and achievement doesn't have to come at the expense of our children's empathy and wellbeing.

What would you wish for? A caring child or a successful child?

If pressed to choose, which would you prefer?

If you were like the parents of kids in a recent study you'd go for successful rather than caring.

In a fascinating Harvard study referred to in a recent *Age* article, 10,000 kids were asked whether achievement and success, rather than caring for others, were their parents' main priorities. The kids overwhelmingly said their parents opted for success rather than caring.

I suspect Australian kids would come up with a similar response if asked. In my work with parents and schools over nearly 40 years I've never seen the educational and parenting landscape so competitive as it is today. The standard belief of 'Everyone can get ahead and be successful' has been replaced by 'my child needs to get ahead and be successful.'

Parents rightfully will go to great lengths to make sure their kids don't get left behind, but now academic success increasingly means achieving at any cost. Even at the expense of a child's well-being, and in extreme cases, at

the expense of other children's success.

A sign of the times

This is very different from even a generation ago when caring and respect for others were drummed into kids. "Do the right thing by others"; "Respect your elders"; "Take good care of each other" were common mantras that many of today's parents grew up hearing.

Now that these kids have become parents themselves they use achievement mantras rather than the empathetic statements they were raised on. "Always do your best"; "Think confident thoughts"; "Set your goals and work hard to achieve them" are typical of the comments that kids hear in today's more competitive environment.

The price of success at all costs

Washington Post parenting writer Ashley Trexler argues that putting happiness and success before caring and empathy is raising a generation of bullies. She claims that parents unknowingly encourage bullying through their focus on success at all costs, as kids are being encouraged to pursue power at the expense of empathetic behaviour.

We can have both

This is a controversial view based on the assumption that you can have either successful kids or caring kids. I believe you can have both. Parents and teachers can encourage kids to achieve, but also emphasise the importance of looking out for your mates, and taking care of others. Individual success doesn't have to come at the expense of well-being and the success of others. It does mean that we need to put caring for others firmly on our parenting agendas.

Here are five ways to do this:

1 Develop a language for caring

Parents invariably develop a deep language around the things they value. If caring is important then you need to develop language for caring (look after your brother; do the right thing; do unto others) just as you have probably developed a language around success (persist, work hard, do your best).

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2 Model caring behaviours

Parents need to model caring, relational behaviours if they want children to develop these behaviours. Positive displays of intimacy such as a kiss and a hug for every family member as they walk out the door each day is a great way to teach healthy caring behaviours. It's the small acts of kindness and caring that happen on a consistent basis that has the most lasting impact on kids.

3 Focus on co-operation rather than competition

It's easy to develop competition between kids. As a parent all you need to do is praise one child and criticise another and you've established the conditions for competition. It's far harder to develop cooperative behaviours, but it's worth the effort. Encourage kids to help each other; ask them to do jobs in pairs so they learn to work together; and teach older children to give way to younger children rather than always have their own way. Caring kids learn that not everything goes their way and that they need to compromise and give way to others in the name of being social and getting on.

4 Encourage nurturing behaviours

In the past families were larger than today and they had a natural advantage in developing caring and empathy. Elder kids would invariably have to look out

for, or look after younger siblings, often at the expense of their own interests. In an era of small families kids have fewer natural opportunities to look after each other. However parents can develop nurturance by encouraging children to look out for younger friends and relatives; to care for pets and also to be respectful of older relatives and friends.

5 Pay attention to children's emotions

Now more than ever it's important for parents to be attentive to children's emotional lives, and also to develop an awareness of their own feelings and the feelings of others. Empathetic kids rarely use power and bullying to get their own way. Empathy always starts with an awareness of a child's own emotional state.

As parents we want our kids to grow up to be successful and achieve their full potential. It's the default position for most parents. But that doesn't have to come at the expense of caring for others. In these times of small families and a more competitive landscape parents need to work harder than ever to develop nurturance, caring and respect for others in kids.

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