

Balance Blesses Our Youth

Wise Parenting Insights from Wendy Mogel

by Meredith Montgomery

Clinical Psychologist and author Wendy Mogel, Ph.D., is known for the practical parenting advice featured in her books, *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee* and *The Blessing of a B Minus*. She is a leading expert appearing in *Race to Nowhere*, a documentary film examining the achievement-obsessed culture permeating America's schools, and serves on the advisory board of Challenge Success, an organization that supports schools and families in reversing and preventing the unhealthy tolls assessed by our current educational system.

Speaking from the perspective of her "compassionate detachment" philosophy, Mogel explores the educational challenges that students face today and offers some solutions.

Race to Nowhere reveals the problems associated with America's academic testing culture. What are the most critical weaknesses of today's public school system?

It is breaking my heart to see enrichment programs sacrificed on the altar of standardized testing and such extreme focus on the core academic skills. We certainly want our children to have these skills, but we are losing sight of how much is learned through play, imagination, art and music.

High school students feel tremendous pressure to succeed. It seems that as a society, we are displacing our own anxieties about the unstable economy



photo by Brad Buckman

and the condition of the planet onto our children. As we try to arm them with a set of skills to face an uncertain future, we are also losing sight of who they are as individuals. Too often we overlook the reality that some young people are not natural scholars, athletes or gregarious leaders, but possess other equally worthy abilities.

How are such blind spots affecting our youths?

Students are paying the price for the pressure being put on them on multiple levels: Heavy backpacks are damaging their spines, sleep deprivation interferes with their learning process and expectation of perfection can lead to girls with eating disorders and demoralized boys with a desire to give up.

I routinely speak with students that feel compelled to personally end hunger in Rwanda while they must also score high grades in several advanced placement classes, excel in multiple extracurricular activities and maintain a slender figure. Some of these same high school kids tell me they fear that scoring a B- on a quiz may cause their parents to divorce or drive their mothers into depression, partly based on some sense that adult pride and security rest on their children's accomplishment.

What can teachers do to facilitate healthy learning environments?

While teachers can set an example of work-life balance, exuberance and

involvement for young people, healthy teacher-parent relationships are vital, as well. Anxious parents can sometimes act like bullies to teachers when they are concerned about their child's success. I encourage teachers to work with parents in a respectful and diplomatic way, without becoming defensive or taking anything too personally; I remind them that parents are often just nervous.

What advice do you have for parents of young children?

Encourage learning via this wonderful, natural world. Children are natural theologians, biologists, seekers of social justice, artists, poets and above all, explorers and inventors. We serve children well if we see them as seeds that came in a packet without a label. Our job is to provide sufficient food and water and pull the biggest weeds. We don't know what kind of flower we'll get or when it will bloom.

How can parents foster learning and success in all of their children at home?

A big piece of a parent's responsibility is to clearly see each of their children for who they are, independent of parental preconceptions and dreams, and to foster that individual's strengths and enthusiasm for life, instead of struggling to fit him or her into society's narrow definitions of success. A snapshot taken of a child today should not be confused with the epic movie of his or her entire life.

Good parents model balance; but the default position in our culture has become overindulgence, overprotection, overscheduling and expectations of perfection. When parents pick their kids up from school, instead of cross-examining them about test scores and who they sat with at lunch, a mom or dad can share something delightful about their own day; something interesting they saw or did or thought that reminded them of their son or daughter. Communicate that it's a pleasure to be a parent and an adult. Show them that as grownups, we continue to learn new things. Inspire them to want to be happy adults and parents.

Meredith Montgomery is the publisher of Natural Awakenings Mobile/Baldwin, AL (HealthyLivingHealthyPlanet.com).

Championing a Broader Vision of Success

by Meredith Montgomery

Challenge Success (*ChallengeSuccess.org*), a project of Stanford University's School of Education, works with schools, parents and youths to develop and institute customized action plans to improve student well-being and engagement. According to the nonprofit organization's co-founder, Denise Pope, Ph.D., "We recognize the great pressure being put on today's kids in regard to performance, tests and grades. Unfortunately, this is keeping many of them from becoming resilient, motivated, active contributors in society. Our initiative provides a voice of reason, translating research into actions that allow students to thrive."

Offerings include practical and engaging classes, online courses and videos for parents that help them learn best practices for their children. As one example, "We encourage parents to avoid overscheduling," says Pope. "Every child needs playtime, downtime and family time every day."

For schools seeking reform, Challenge Success offers dynamic conferences in which a team of administrators, teachers, parents and students, led by a consulting coach, creates site-specific strategies for change.

Proven tips for fostering balance at home:

Have fun: Unstructured playtime for young children is important, as is free time for teens to socialize and pursue hobbies.

Relax: Permit time for rest and rejuvenation. Encourage self-directed relaxation through reading and playing or listening to music, while moderating screen time.

Connect as a family: Aim for at least 20 minutes of daily family time. Enjoy meals together, consider going for a family walk or designate an "unplugged" time for everyone.

Ideas for schools and teachers to explore:

Revise school schedules and homework policies. Consider block schedules, trimesters or a later start to the school day. Schedule quarterly "no homework" nights and/or "off weeks", when no testing is allowed.

Emphasize projects and problem-based learning. Achievement improves when students are engaged in hands-on learning. Make daily assignments relevant to students' lives and try assigning a final project in lieu of a final exam.

Explore alternative and authentic forms of assessment. Because not all students perform well on tests, multiple forms of assessment, such as narrative reports, writing assignments or creative projects, can augment scores to more effectively reveal where teachers need to focus attention.

Enhance the climate of care. Encourage positive student/faculty relationships, so that teachers are approachable and accessible. Establish stress reduction and relaxation techniques, plus mindfulness activities.

Educate students, parents and teachers to work together. Sponsor professional development workshops for faculty on the causes of student stress and coping strategies. Empower students to find the "right fit" college or post-secondary path, while debunking the myth that there is only one path to success.