

"I was a Better Parent Before I had Kids!"

An Interactive 6-session Parenting Series exclusively for parents of our preschool with School Psychologist, Dr. Jonathan Dobkowski.



Parent Enrichment Program Session 2 Discussion Notes

Topic: "The Price of Privilege: Are We Pressure Cooking Our Kids?"

This discussion was led by School Psychologist, Dr. Jonathan Dobkowski on January 15th, 2013. The discussion notes below were written by Dr. Dobkowski.

Introduction

As parents, we all possess the urge to pressure our kids. We all want our children to excel for their own sake, to feel happy and good about themselves. Most of all, we love and care about our kids and want what is best for them. The challenge is, at times, we unconsciously take control of our children's lives. This phenomenon is referred to by Dr. Wendy Grolnick as the *Pressured Parent Phenomenon*.

- **What does this pressure look like?**
 1. It can take form in pressuring our children to excel academically ("academic perfection"-I expect my child to get straight A's), socially ("I want my child to interact with the more social/outgoing group of kids"), or, athletically.
 2. A parent will not rest until they know their child got accepted to a certain school, earned a spot on a specific team, or received the "right" teacher for the upcoming school year.
 3. It makes us do things we would not normally do (ex: pulling strings to get our child into a special program or class).
 4. This phenomenon often kicks in after an incident that impacts us more than our child (ex: child is left out of a clique/playdate, "social snubs"). The parent can end up caring about certain incidents more than the kids do.
 5. Parents no longer have patience or tolerance for late bloomers or slow starters. Anything unusual is unacceptable. If a child gets a bad grade, a parents immediate thought is does my son have a learning disability or a motivation problem. The "normal curve" has disappeared.

- **Why is it so bad?**
 1. Children like adults are not happy living in a world of intensifying pressure and competition. They lose their intrinsic enjoyment for the task or activity.
 2. Constant pressure to excel creates unreasonable expectations on children. Consequently, loss and failure is quickly attributed by the child to his own incompetence. If a child is pushed to talk with a certain group of friends and is not successful at socializing, this makes him feel badly about himself.
 3. Some children begin to feel as if they are working only for their parents' satisfaction and they begin to rebel.
 4. The innate urge to push our children, actually alienates them from us. It creates a result exactly the opposite of what was intended.
 5. Children hate feeling controlled just as much as adults do. It is unpleasant to feel that your actions are not your own. The child ends up devoting all of his energy to avoid obeying.
 6. We make **unfairly generic demands on our children**. Childhood is the only period in life when there is seemingly an expectation to do all things well. Adults do not hold themselves to these same standards!!!

7. Peter Gray in his research found that today's kids are having a hard time successfully growing into adulthood because they are overprotected, over-pressured, and are not given enough time for "free play".
 8. Building independence and self-reliance in children are values and goals of parenting that have disappeared. Children need to learn to do things on their own in order to grow into fully functioning, responsible adults.
- **Why are parents so anxious to be raising perfect children? Why can't parents let their children develop at a natural pace?**
 1. We live in a country that reveres competition. It is endemic to our culture (i.e., think of *American Idol*). With competition escalating in every arena of our children's lives, we find ourselves forced to "manage" our children's academic, athletic, and social "careers".
 2. Pride- Parents use their children's achievements for their own sense of security, personal glory, or the fulfillment of unfulfilled dreams. Some parents are psychologically unable to separate themselves from their children. They are only capable of focusing on themselves.
 3. Fear- Parents worry that in this hyper-paced world, only the child who excels at everything will survive.
 - **Respecting the "individual" child and not fearing the ordinary**
 1. Parents seem to think that children come in "two flavors": learning disabled or gifted. **Not every child has unlimited potential in all areas and that is ok!**
 2. Jewish thought is rooted in the concept that parents should not expect their children to be anyone other than who they are.
 3. Every child is made in the divine image. When we ignore a child's intrinsic strengths in an effort to push him toward our notion of extraordinary achievement, we are undermining Hashem's plan.
 4. Don't discount the common and normal differences between children within a family. Parents need to be aware of the innate distinctions between boys and girls, children of different ages, and developmental levels. **Each child in a family has their own interests and reaches their developmental stages at their own pace. We need to take into account our children's differences.**
 5. The job of a parent is to build on a child's strengths and not create strengths and talents that we deem important.
 - **Building Intrinsic Motivation & it's Benefits**
 1. What a child needs to excel in is his own inner passion and not the pressure of a parent. In essence, parents need to foster their child's own motivation and interest in performing an activity, behavior, or action.
 - Who cares why kids behave, as long as they behave?
 2. The more intrinsically motivated kids feel, the more they achieve. Children learn and achieve more when they enjoy it (ex: when a subject or activity interests students, they pay more attention).
 3. Coercing or forcing a child to do something will lead to fighting and resentment. While encouraging the child's intrinsic motivation demonstrates that you understand the child and have his best interests in mind.

4. Intrinsic motivation increases a child's happiness and general well-being (i.e., children feel better about themselves). This is true in adults as well. The more adults experience inner passion, the more satisfied they feel with their lives. Lack of interest is a hallmark of depression, but when people are driven by curiosity, enjoyment, and the excitement of intrinsic motivation, they feel better about themselves.
5. A parent's anxiety should be calmed when they know the child is working hard at pursuing *their* passions and interests. **No amount of pushing will create a passion in your child.**

Question: What about the child who is intrinsically motivated to play video games all day?

Answer: Creating a sense of autonomy, involvement, and structure

- Autonomy lets the child feel like he initiates his own actions and solves his own problems, rather than feeling pressured or compelled by someone else (ex: A family can let the child decide what after-school activity he wants to participate in).
 - Giving your child support through your involvement is a crucial step. A parent who affords his child time and other resources fosters feelings of connection.
 - Structure means the guidelines, rules, and consequences that every child needs to act in the world. By showing a child the positive effects of her actions and providing the tools she needs, structure creates a feeling of competence.
- **Promoting Autonomy**
 1. Children need to feel that what they do is self-initiated. They like to solve their own problems whenever possible.
 2. Autonomy does not mean allowing the child to do whatever they want. A child can feel autonomous even if the parent is in charge (ex: a teacher assigns students to read a chapter book but allows them to choose from several titles). Helping a child with homework when he *asks for it* fosters his autonomous feelings.
 3. Parents should not control their children, but they should be in control. In other words, acting as an authority and a decision maker when the child is too young to make certain decisions. Research has shown that children need rules, guidelines, and limits.
 4. Autonomy boosts motivation and achievement (study involving one-year-olds and their mothers)
 5. Promoting a child's feelings of choice and freedom strengthens the connection with the parents. Children feel close to parents when they acknowledge what they want. Another way to encourage autonomy is by explaining the reasons for rules and not just giving rules.
 6. Providing choices is a critical component of autonomy. When we choose to take a specific action, that gives us a sense of ownership of that action.

Question: What happens if the child is lackadaisical? What happens if he always procrastinates or does not seem to care to do his homework? Nurturing his autonomy seems like the last thing you want to do.

Answer: A child's sense of responsibility actually grows when they feel autonomous ("When do you think would be the best time to do your homework?")

Summary: How do parents make sure they don't cross the line?

1. Know where the motivation to engage in an activity or task is coming from. Is it from you or your child? Is the child truly enjoying the activity?
2. Watch what you say. Make sure you are not communicating that only exemplary performance is the only goal that matters. Don't fear the ordinary! Accept "good enough" for your child!
3. Do not pressure yourself to be an extraordinary parent. So many parents try so hard to be "perfect" parents, that they are draining away the pleasure of parenthood.
4. Strive to be a "good enough parent" and not a perfect one.
5. If we love our children for their own sake, rather than for their achievements or for their auxiliary talents, it is more likely that they will reach their true potential. If you place too great of an emphasis on perfect grades, a full schedule of extracurricular activities, or the "just right" peer group, your child may feel that he needs to excel in all areas to retain your respect.
6. If a child senses that his parents respects him for the qualities which he has been naturally endowed with, his own individual strengths, he will gain the confidence he needs to achieve in this world.