



## **Teach Your Children Well: Parenting for Authentic Success**

### **Why Values and Coping Skills Matter More than Grades, Trophies or “Fat Envelopes”**

**Madeline Levine**

Remember last month when I shared how captivated I was by Madeline Levine’s book, *The Price of Privilege* and how excited I was to read the sequel? *Teach Your Children Well: Parenting for Authentic Success* did not disappoint. This riveting book looks at how much parents have been caught up in the grade game at the expense of spending time on cultivating whole people. Levine combines her 30 years as a practicing psychologist with research to explode the thinking that if kids can just get good grades and get into the “right college,” all we will be ok. She reminds us that, “while we hope our children will do well in school, we hope with even greater fervor that they will do well in life.”

Levine’s book is divided into four parts. The first part talks about how warped our current education and parenting systems have become where most of our efforts and applause are focused only on test results, college acceptances and academic accolades. About schools, Levine tells us:

until we are willing to enlarge the tent so that more children feel that school is a safe place open to the diverse talents of its students, school will continue to be the single greatest source of stress in kids’ lives. In the real world, success has all kinds of different faces in all kinds of different fields of endeavor. It would be nice if we could acknowledge as much to our kids.” At the same time, Levine reminds parents that when we make our children our sole focus, we are not only at risk of creating entitled children who believe that world revolves around them, but also in losing our own identity in the process, making letting go of them to lead their own lives more challenging.

Part Two of the book is a developmental primer, reviewing ages and stages from elementary through the high school years. Each section contains a section entitled, “How Parents Can Help” as well as real world examples with examples of parenting done effectively and ineffectively. Throughout the entire book, Levine is adept at anticipating the, “yes but” rebuttal of a reader and continually backs her

reasoning and thinking with research to support. Puberty, Health and Peer Groups are the focus of the middle years section of the book. Acknowledging that an increase in conflict and a decrease in closeness are inevitable during these pre-teen and early teen years, Levine reminds parents that it is a critical time to find satisfaction in other areas of life: a job, volunteerism, friends, sports etc.

In addressing the high school years, the focus shifts to creating autonomy in teens, defined as self-reliant, connected and loving. Additionally, Levine believes teens need to do work to create their own identity so that they feel “both authentic and capable of influencing the world around you.” This authenticity in turn builds self-reliance and self-esteem which further ignite kids toward sound decision-making.

In Part Three of the book, Levine posits seven coping skills that contribute to resiliency. Resiliency is what allows us to bounce back from setbacks, to turn inward to find hope and strength to carry on in the face of grief and challenge and is a hallmark of life success. These seven coping skills include: resourcefulness, enthusiasm, creativity, a good work ethic, self-control, self-esteem (defined as competence plus competence) and self-efficacy. For each, Levine provides a list of Do’s and a list of Don’ts for parents when encouraging these skills in our kids. For each, I admit that I was far more familiar with the don’ts than the do’s but so appreciative of a list of concrete actions to help improve my parenting as well as a chance to review why my best intentions have sometimes been the farthest thing from helpful.

The final chapters in the book invite parents to clarify their true values through an actual pen and paper exercise that then leads to the creation of a family values statement and a family action plan. Levine urges us to be honest when ranking our values and then to really examine if our parenting practices support what we most value. Levine asks us to go further too, by defining what each of our chosen values looks like in action. For example, valuing self-control might mean a family would expect kids to do for themselves as much as they are able and to take care of responsibilities before free time. Another parent who values deep interests might model the pleasure of deep interest himself and expose his children to a wide range of different experiences. Finally, after encouraging parents to make positive changes based on the values they have discovered are most important to them, Levine talks about what gets in the way of any kind of behavioral change: denial, projection and peer pressure. I was particularly interested in her discussion of peer pressure as being a lifelong challenge, rather than something only kids encounter. Many parents (me included) get drawn into the pressure and prestige game and away from the values we feel are most important because we fear our children will be left behind.

Both of Levine’s books were outstanding and I highly recommend them to every person parenting someone between the ages of 0 and 25. By sharing real world stories, her own parenting challenges and backing it all up with loads of research, Levine empowers us to challenge the high pressure cultural paradigm and provide our kids with an active and curious childhood that will equip them with the personal strength, curiosity and love of learning to serve them a whole life long.