

I'm Just a Kid

By Mel Schwartz

In many affluent communities, there's an insidious plot underfoot that robs our children of their youth. And that plot is perpetrated by us, their parents. Worse still, it's committed in the guise of being in the best interests of our children. We force our children out of their precious youth so prematurely, so that they hardly get to experience the carefree gifts of childhood. We begin to manipulate, mold and stress our children into little people all for the purpose of them producing the best conceivable grades; assumedly, so that they might have successful and productive lives. At least this is our operating assumption. I believe that assumption needs a bit of scrutinizing.

The amount of distress that our young children are subjected to is tantamount to abuse. What a monumental crime it is to steal childhood from our children. Yet, that is exactly what many of us are doing. And in so doing, the gifts of childhood like wonder, play and exploration are lost, forever. Childhood used to be a time for carefree exploration with an accompanying spirit of play and fun. Now childhood has become a preparation for success. In so doing, our culture has turned us as parents into managers for our kids' future success, but we've forgotten the value of a playful childhood. Moreover, the notion of success as it relates to happiness really needs to be reconsidered.

Most parents would proclaim that they want their children to be happy, yet getting the best grades, getting into the best colleges and getting the best jobs don't necessarily equate to happiness. In fact, there is sometimes an inverse correlation. Of course, we want to provide our children with the best opportunities they can have. But when not getting into the top colleges or being top of your class causes stress and emotional crisis, we need to stop and really think about the messages we're giving our kids. In addition, the stress that it places upon us and the inclination to be competitive with others over our kids grades is silly, if not outright absurd.

Will you please just let me be a kid

My youngest son will shortly be graduating high school. I recall vividly the day that he brought home a rather disappointing report card in fifth grade. I gave him the typical speech about grades. He looked at me and said, "Dad, I'm just a kid, this is the time in my life for fun. My grades don't count yet and when I get to high school and they do, I'll get serious. In the meantime will you please let me be a kid?" I was thunderstruck by his common sense and wisdom. It took a lot to resist the temptation to micromanage his early school years and I wasn't always successful, but I tried. When he got to high school he was true to his word and did very well. Now there's always the consideration that if the pressure had been on all along, his grades may well have been higher due to his increased study habits. But at what cost? The cost of his childhood? The lost opportunity there would have been his greater emotional foundation that a healthy childhood can provide.

I see elementary and middle school as the equivalent to the exhibition season before the baseball season begins. The scores don't count so it's a time to experiment and to get into

shape for the season. To develop your skills and not be concerned with winning or losing, there's time for that later. So it should be during early school years. How often do we ask our children what they think about what's being discussed in class and how often do we ask them what grades they got? If it's the latter, which is more likely, then we're not encouraging a love of learning but a demand to perform. Ironically, we don't really encourage learning, creativity and curiosity. We're not turning out a generation of hungry and acquisitive minds, but a generation of high achievers. We insist upon achievement. Perhaps that has something to do with the emotional and psychological states of many of our children. If you don't accept the notion of this stress as being abusive, then at the least, you might agree that it isn't nurturing. Shouldn't kids get to be kids? After all, it does go by so quickly.

* * *

Mel Schwartz is a visionary psychotherapist, thinker and author who earned his graduate degree from Columbia University. He has been a keynote speaker at Yale University. Mel is the author of *The Art of Intimacy*, *The Pleasure of Passion* and is currently writing, *Emergent Thinking*®. He is the founder of the *Emergent Thinking*® Process. He is in private practice in Westport, CT. and Mt. Kisco, NY. Visit his web site at www.MelSchwartz.com.