Teach Your Children Well
Also by Madeline Levine, PhD

Viewing Violence: How Media Violence Affects Your Child’s and Adolescent’s Development

See No Evil: A Guide to Protecting Our Children from Media Violence

The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage Are Creating a Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids
This book is dedicated to my mother, Edith Levine, who blessed me with unconditional love. Passed from generation to generation, her gift to me is also my children’s inheritance.
You who are on the road must have a code that you can live by.

—Graham Nash
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INTRODUCTION

Courageous Parenting—Taking the Long View

When *The Price of Privilege* was published in 2006, I thought I had written a substantive, if modest, book. After all, I was reporting on the unexpectedly high rates of emotional problems documented among a relatively small group of teenagers, those from families with high levels of income and education. While I assumed my audience might be small, I knew the findings were important and counterintuitive. Privileged children, long assumed to be protected by family resources and opportunities, are experiencing depression, anxiety disorders, psychosomatic disorders, and substance abuse at higher rates than children from socioeconomically disadvantaged families who have traditionally been considered most at risk. In addition, while these privileged children often perform well on tests, they are frequently wily but superficial and indifferent learners in spite of the congratulatory e-mails and fat acceptance envelopes many of them receive from prestigious colleges.

Based on a substantial body of research, *The Price of Privilege* suggests that our current fashioning of success, with its singular emphasis on easily measurable achievement, is a significant contributor to the high rates of emotional problems among affluent youth. Many academically driven kids take stimulant drugs to neutralize
the exhaustion of excessively long hours of homework, cheat regularly to maintain the high grades that have come to be viewed as matters of life and death, and resort to unhealthy ways of coping with overwhelming anxiety by substance abuse or self-mutilation. Just as this narrowly defined and hyperfocused system stresses many students (and their families), so does it marginalize many more who either cannot or choose not to participate in a highly standardized, pressure-cooker education. These children find the interests and talents that they do have either ignored or trivialized, and disengage from school feeling unsupported and devalued. This leaves them vulnerable to high-risk behaviors such as substance abuse and petty crime, or a hopelessness that keeps them from succeeding even on their own terms. I proposed then—as I have again in this book—that the system responsible for these poor educational and emotional outcomes needs to be reexamined and reconfigured.

I expected to take a few months off for a book tour and related speaking engagements, and then return to the psychotherapy practice I had maintained for close to twenty-five years. That’s not what happened. Five years later I have returned to my clinical work only part-time. The Price of Privilege was reprinted seventeen times before it was released in paperback. The small group that I had anticipated would find the book relevant has morphed into an extensive and diverse collection of parents, students, business executives, clergy, educators, university administrators, and public policy experts. Apparently, many of the problems identified in The Price of Privilege—stress, exhaustion, depression, anxiety, poor coping skills, an unhealthy reliance on others for support and direction, and a weak sense of self—are problems faced by large numbers of children across the country regardless of the socioeconomic status of their families. It turns out that many of these students are reporting high levels of stress whether they are trying to pass a high school exit exam or are juggling multiple AP courses. While historically
children have cited either family discord or peer problems as being their greatest sources of stress, school is now identified as the number one stressor in their lives.²

Major governmental studies report that one in five American children and teens shows symptoms of a mental disorder and one in ten suffers from “mental illness severe enough to result in significant functional impairment.”³ These numbers are expected to increase by 50 percent in the next decade.⁴ The reasons for this are complex and varied. However, our children are increasingly deprived of many of the protective factors that have traditionally accompanied childhood—limited performance pressure, unstructured play, encouragement to explore, and time to reflect. Too many of our children are simply not thriving. We know it. Yet many parents are unsure about what to do.

To begin with, we must embrace a healthier and radically different way of thinking about success. We need to harness our fears about our children’s futures and understand that the extraordinary focus on metrics that has come to define success today—high grades, trophies, and selective school acceptances from preschools to graduate schools—is a partial and frequently deceptive definition. At its best, it encourages academic success for a small group of students but gives short shrift to the known factors that are necessary for success later in life. It makes the false assumption that high academic success early in life is a harbinger of competence in many spheres, including interpersonal relations and sense of self. Sometimes this is the case; often it is not. Perhaps of even greater concern, because it involves far more kids, is the fact that our limited definition of success fails to acknowledge those students whose potential contributions are not easily measurable. If we insist on a narrow and metric-based definition of success then we maddeningly consign potentially valuable contributors to our society to an undervalued and even bleak future.
The “authentic success” that is the subtitle of this book sees success and its development in a different light, one based not on anxiety, but on scientific research, clinical experience, and a sprinkling of common sense. This version of success knows that every child is a work in progress. It recognizes that children must have the time and energy to become truly engaged in learning, explore and develop their interests, beef up their coping skills, and craft a sense of self that feels real, enthusiastic, and capable. Authentic success certainly can include traditional measures of success such as grades and top-tier schools, but it broadens the concept to include those things that we intuitively know are critical components of a satisfying life. While we all hope our children will do well in school, we hope with even greater fervor that they will do well in life. Our job is to help them to know and appreciate themselves deeply; to approach the world with zest; to find work that is exciting and satisfying, friends and spouses who are loving and loyal; and to hold a deep belief that they have something meaningful to contribute to society. This is what it means to teach our children well.

You will often come across the words well-being in this book as one of the hoped-for outcomes for our children. There is a reason why I’ve chosen well-being instead of happiness. Of course we’d all like our children to be happy, but we also know (albeit reluctantly) that life will throw curveballs at our children regardless of how hard we may try to protect them. The growth (emotional, psychological, cognitive, and spiritual) needed to make one’s way through life comes out of challenge, and challenge can bring disappointment, anger, and frustration. It would be foolish to want only “happiness” for our children. This would leave them stunted and poorly prepared for life’s inevitable difficulties. What we really want to cultivate is well-being, which includes as generous a portion of optimism as our child’s nature allows and the coping skills, and therefore the resilience, that make adaptive recovery from challenge possible. As
an added bonus, researchers tell us that the very characteristics that are most likely to encourage our children’s emotional well-being are the same ones that will make them successful in the classroom. Not surprisingly, optimistic, resilient, engaged kids report high levels of happiness.

The precursor to authentic success is the growth of a sense of self that feels robust and genuine. Your child’s “self” is not lost or in hiding, waiting for you to flush it out. Rather, it is in development. Your child develops a sense of self not simply because you’ve paid attention to and cultivated every interest and talent your child has. If our notions of child development stopped there, we’d continue to see the entitled, narcissistic kids with poor self-control who worry us now. The bigger and more accurate picture is this: A strong sense of self develops through a process that includes a combination of genetics; the influence of family, peers, and mentors; the opportunities presented; and the culture we live in. It certainly is informed by the way you support the particular strengths and interests of your child, but it also includes the ways in which your child interacts with the outside world, and, particularly, the values that are communicated in your household and in your community. Authentic success is being “the best me I can be” not simply in isolation, but as part of a community, and it always includes a component of meaningful contribution and connection with others. We would do well to start thinking about success not in terms of today, the next grading period, or the next year, but in terms of what we hope for our children ten or twenty years down the line, when they leave our homes and walk into their own lives. Yes, it requires both courage and imagination to parent with this long view, but it is also the most effective way to ensure that our children have satisfying, meaningful lives.

We’ve spent years being bombarded by the press about the competition for prized academic spots, told by corporations that we weren’t doing our jobs as parents unless we made every effort
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to give our kids a competitive “leg up,” and immersed in a culture that celebrates obvious and measurable performance over all else. When I first began traveling around the country, many parents found it difficult to take a clear-eyed look at the cost of too much involvement, too much “enrichment,” too much stress, and too little recognition of the real needs of children. Thankfully I no longer encounter much skepticism: the toll of a narrow version of success has become painfully obvious to most parents. What parents are clamoring for now are solutions. “What should I do?” has become the collective mantra of my audiences around the country.

*Teach Your Children Well* is my answer. We must shift our focus from the excesses of hyperparenting, our preoccupation with a narrow and shortsighted vision of success that has debilitated many of our children, and an unhealthy reliance on them to provide status and meaning in our own lives, and return to the essentials of parenting in order for children to grow into their most healthy and genuine selves. I will not shy away from providing concrete answers for concerned or confused parents when research is clear that children are most likely to benefit from one course of action over another. Parents are often willing to make changes faster than the institutions around them. The pace of institutional change can be positively glacial compared with the vigor of a parent who feels his or her child is in jeopardy. No matter where I speak in the country, the worried questions tumble out in predictable sequence.

- All the kids in kindergarten are reading. My son isn’t. What should I do?

- My eight-year-old son has been called a “gifted” chess player, but he’s refusing to go to a chess camp this summer. Instead he just wants to hang out with his friends at the local “adventure” camp. What should I do?
• My twelve-year-old daughter has three hours of homework a night and is exhausted. What should I do?

• My son seems content to get B’s, even C’s in high school. He works hard on his schoolwork but spends a lot of time puttering around in the garage. His counselor says he’ll never get into a good school. What should I do?

All of these questions are driven by the same concern: if we don’t get it right, our children may pay an intolerable price because of our uninformed, inaccurate, or poor decisions. Never before have parents been so (mistakenly) convinced that their every move has a ripple effect into their child’s future success. Depending on where you are in your own child-rearing cycle, some of these questions may seem foolish, others quite pressing and important. But even though there are always exceptions, it is easy to answer questions like these based on what we know from the scientific research. In other words:

• Many children can’t read in kindergarten. Don’t worry about it. Three years later there is no difference in reading skills between those who learned in kindergarten and those who learned a year or even two later. Finland, generally considered the world’s exemplar when it comes to education, doesn’t begin school for children until they are seven years old. Your child will feel bad only if you or the school turns normal development into pathology.

• Two of the major developmental tasks of middle childhood are developing friendships and sampling a wide range of activities. Kudos to your son for knowing his own mind. Having your child called “gifted” can be a siren song to parents’ ears. But remember that both Bill Gates and the
Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski, were considered gifted. These two men had very different relationships to their gifts. You can certainly encourage your son’s talent, but ultimately you need to follow his lead on how much time and involvement he wants to put into chess. Certainly parents can force their children to cultivate a talent and rightfully insist that they have perspective their children lack. On occasion this works out, particularly if your child has a genuine talent. It’s rare, however, and it always puts your relationship with your child at risk.

Research is clear that junior high students derive academic benefits from about an hour of homework a night, but not from more. Find out from your daughter’s teacher if she is having difficulties that are slowing her down. If she is, then she needs a lighter load and some help. If not, then talk to the teachers and school administrators about bringing homework time into line with known benefits. Get your community involved in a discussion about healthy amounts of homework. Kids who aren’t getting enough sleep are likely to be less engaged learners, and crabbier family members. Your first job is to guard your daughter’s health.

In spite of grade inflation, a B is a good grade and a C is an average grade. We are all average at many things. With almost 4,000 colleges in the United States, college placement is about making a good match, not about winning a prize. Steve Jobs’s grandfather often talked about the long hours his grandson put into “puttering” in the garage. As long as your son is putting in effort, he’s probably doing the best he can. Your son will feel like a loser only if you treat him like one. Ask for another counselor.
Although this book will provide these sorts of concrete answers, its goals are far more ambitious. Teach Your Children Well aims to help you identify and strengthen the basic strategies that are known to promote effective parenting. This will make it easier for you to stay on target as you guide your children through the different stages of development and help them strengthen the coping skills that they will need to move successfully from one level to the next. Think of child development as a scaffold. A scaffold needs a sturdy base in order to support its higher rungs. It is important that we respect this progression as our children climb rung by rung, and not push them to the top prematurely or without adequate support. Good parenting skills make this climb safer, more satisfying, and ultimately more successful for our kids.

Additionally, by carefully examining the capacities and the challenges of children at different ages, Teach Your Children Well will give you the tools to differentiate between minor and expectable transgressions and more concerning problems. A normally diligent child who forgets a homework assignment is not the same as a child who makes a habit out of it. One needs little intervention from us, the other needs more, and we need to know if that’s a discussion, a reprimand, a consequence, or an evaluation. Teach Your Children Well will help you figure out when to hold back and when to intervene, when to compromise and when to stick to your guns so that you are a more confident parent.

The other major goal of this book is to help you clarify and prioritize your values and your definition of success so that there is greater alignment between what you believe is important and what is emphasized in your home and communicated to your children. Nowhere is the issue of values more alive for parents today than in our conflict over how hard we push our children to be academically successful, since we also recognize that their healthy development takes more than high grades. Do we believe in the importance of
playtime but schedule our youngsters with a boatload of extracurricular activities because we worry that they might “fall behind”? Do we value spirituality but find ourselves measuring success by material possessions? Would we allow our child to compromise his integrity, say by cheating on an important test, if it helped him gain admittance to a prestigious school?

By applying the information, the relevant research, and a series of paper and pencil exercises in this book, you will be able to construct a personal definition of success that is in line with your family values, and with the skills, capacities, and interests of your particular child. Of course, no book, no matter how comprehensive, can possibly address more than a fraction of the dilemmas that are part of the everyday experience of parenting. But what Teach Your Children Well will do is help you construct and formalize a set of principles, grounded in research but unique to your particular family, that you can use as a compass to guide you through the inevitable thicket of parenting choices and challenges.

This book will ask a lot of you—it will ask you not only to recognize problems, but also to work diligently to change their causes. I’ll also ask you to do some psychological work of your own. This is critical; children thrive when their parents thrive. You will need to dig down deep and examine your own motivations, ambitions, and distortions. This is not easy work, but if you are willing to be both reflective and honest, I promise that not only will your child benefit, but you and your family will as well.

Here’s how Teach Your Children Well will proceed:

- The first section starts with an overview of our current high-stakes, high-pressure culture. How does this culture affect kids and families? What are the realities and the myths embedded in this lifestyle? Who stands to benefit
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and who stands to lose from a narrow view of success? Should this view be modified, and if so, why has this been so difficult to do?

• The second section deals with the particular challenges that children and teens face as they grow up and move from elementary through middle and high school. Understanding that children and teens have multiple tasks—growing up, figuring out their particular interests and talents, making friends, managing risk, and so on—can help us have a healthier perspective on academic achievement and a broader perspective on success.

• The third section presents seven coping skills that are known to be protective of children’s well-being and integral to the development of a sense of self. The more coping skills children have at their disposal, the more likely they are to successfully meet the challenges of growing up and finding their own definition of success. While some coping skills are more inborn and others are clearly an outgrowth of interaction with parents and the world, they all can be strengthened. Specifics on how to do this effectively (and what gets in the way) are presented at the end of each coping skill section.

• The fourth section is directed at you, the parent. It includes a series of exercises designed to help you clarify your values and carve out a specific action plan for bringing more of what you value into your life, your children’s lives, and your home. In order to optimize the chances of making real change, this section also focuses on helping you evaluate
your own history and explore how unresolved issues in your past may be contributing to current parenting issues or your reluctance to make the kinds of changes you would like to implement.

*Teach Your Children Well* refuses to accept the false dichotomy that in order to be successful children have to be physically run into the ground and emotionally disengaged from themselves, their families, and their studies. We do not have to choose between our children’s well-being and their success. Both are inside jobs. They are developed when kids are guided and encouraged to build a sense of self internally. To not be overly reliant on others for definition or validation. To trust that their parents are on their side and have their back, as they go about figuring out their interests, skills, capacities, identities, and values. Certainly externals matter. Kids have to follow the rules, master content, learn appropriate behavior, and conform when necessary. However, our kids have had a huge helping of external expectations and demands that have crowded out the time and energy needed for the exquisite and necessary internal work that is the bedrock of a healthy sense of self.

We know far too much about promoting healthy child development to continue to tolerate the myth that success is a straight and narrow path, with childhood sacrificed in the process. The truth is that most successful people have followed winding paths, have had false starts, and have enjoyed multiple careers. Academic excellence will always matter, and parents are right to maintain a high bar for their children. But there are other skills that are likely to be particularly important to success in the twenty-first century—creativity, innovative thinking, flexibility, resilience in response to failure, communication skills, and the ability to collaborate.

Unless success is experienced internally, in alignment with one’s interests, skills, and values, it never feels truly owned and can’t con-
fer either the pleasure or the protection that real success provides. Many kids have become proficient at image management. They have high grades or special talents, and a quick read of them suggests that they are successful. However, a deeper examination of these children shows that their external success is superficial and even meaningless to them. “I am only as good as my last performance” is what they really believe. Success that is not authentic, that doesn’t feel real or “owned,” never feels like success at all. Not to us. Not to our children. The “imposter syndrome” that all of us feel from time to time becomes a permanent state of affairs for our children when success feels inauthentic. Ultimately, it is only our children themselves who will pass judgment on their success, or lack thereof, in their lives.

This book is about choices and courage. Choices about how we view success, raise our children, and expend our energies and resources. It is also about the courage to make the changes we believe in even in the face of collective pressure to act otherwise. We live in a culture that has had a great deal to say about raising successful children. Much of it is dead wrong. Too often we are asking the wrong questions. Which school? How many AP courses? Which extracurricular activities? It’s not about whether kids should study more or less. It’s not about “rigor” versus play, where we score on international testing, or whether children should be indulged more or have their feet held to the fire.

Rather, the real questions are broader and more long-term. How do we create environments in which children thrive? How do we help them find, and keep, the sparks that kindle deep interest and real engagement with learning? How do we help them to live up to their potential? Advance their abilities to contribute? Find meaning? Develop their most genuine selves? These are the questions we need to ask, to think about, to work on. Given all the time, money, concern, and love we expend on our children, let’s make sure that
we're focused on the questions that really matter. Children cannot be defined by their grades, trophies, or “fat envelopes.” Not even by the sum of these things. They are whole people, and to see them as anything less is a form of parental blindness.

It’s time to reassert our parental prerogative. We need to decide for ourselves what we value, which activities denote real accomplishment, and which are superficial. We need to insist that the schools that serve our children be committed to developing the potential of every student and be just as vigilant about their physical and mental health as they are about their test scores. It’s time for us to reclaim our good judgment as well as our children’s well-being, and return our families to a healthier and saner version of themselves.