

‘The Price of Privilege’ by Madeline Levine, Ph.D

[Presentation on 4/9/2008 at Gunn High School. This talk will be broadcast on a local cable channel at a later date. Notes below were taken by Kathy Besser. If you have any questions or issues with the accuracy of the notes, please contact khb@graystar.com.]

What do depressed kids look like?

In the past, things such as hygiene, social skills and grades declined in clinically depressed children – these were considered obvious signs. Today, however, in upper middle class children all of these things can be fine – depressed kids can look and seem terrific on the outside but they are bleeding on the inside.

Recent studies have indicated that upper middle class children are experiencing the highest rates of depression and anxiety – twice the rate of the general population in junior high/middle school and three times the general rate in high school. Upper middle class is defined as having a family income of \$120,000 and above. Note that this is not the normal ‘ups and downs’ of adolescence – this is clinical depression/anxiety and is a serious impairment to how they function.

With upper middle class families, there is typically a higher level of parental involvement so why the higher rates? It is estimated that **40% of middle class kids** are affected by anxiety and depression.

Dr. Levine shared two quotes she feels are very relevant to tonight’s discussion:

“My whole life has been a series of disappointments. I can scarcely remember one thing that I have been successful in.” John Quincy Adams, 6th President of the United States

“Failure is not fatal. Failure to change can be.” John Wooden

In the past, suicide rates among teens remained fairly stable and there were more obvious signs that suicide was a possibility [Dr. Levine presented an anecdote about known ‘bad’ kids/troublemakers when she was growing up]. Now, however, kids who are committing suicide are not easily identifiable [anecdotes about kids who had gotten into prestigious colleges and then committed suicide].

There is also a new group at risk – girls 10-14 years of age. There has been a 74% increase in suicides among upper middle class girls in this age range. We need to encourage children to break the code of silence and let adults know if someone they know is in trouble.

So why are kids who have been given every advantage faring the worst with respect to depression and anxiety?

According to Dr. Levine, there are two main factors:

1. **Pressure**
2. **Emotional disconnection** from parents

1) Pressure

School is the greatest stressor (with 88% of children surveyed considering school to be their greatest source of stress). Today, there is too much emphasis in our society to be stellar at everything in school versus previously having to just be good at some thing (math OR science, writing OR reading).

This push for straight-A students is UNREALISTIC.

And is it really worth it in terms of stress? NO!

Dr. Levine surveyed the audience for the amount of kids' structured activities per day (including time in school + homework + extracurricular activities/organized sports). The range went from 8-9 hours (jokingly referred to as a 'Bay Area slacker kid') to 16-17 hours PER DAY. Dr. Levine postulated that for every hour of structured time, kids need about two hours of unstructured time in order to decompress (yes, do the math).

For optimal brain development, younger children (elementary school age) need 10 hours a night. This only drops to 9 hours, 15 minutes for adolescents (middle and high school age). Sleep deprivation is a HUGE issue – this can cause the same type of impairment as consuming alcohol. It is very dangerous to put our sleep-deprived teenagers behind the wheel of a car every day.

A few observations:

- Learning is typically very superficial – just enough to pass the tests (sadly, cheating among high school students is estimated to be about 75%)
- There is a pre-occupation among the upper middle classes with a handful of colleges (Harvard, Stanford, etc.) which borders on delusional – akin to child abuse according to Dr. Levine
- The emphasis on academic and athletic performance is making our children incredibly dependent on the outside world for validation; there is not enough time given over to helping them internally develop (having a solid moral compass as well as understanding compromise and reciprocity)
- The pressure (academic/athletic/social) makes kids feel that love is conditional (upon performance) – e.g. praise for high grades or performance (versus effort), criticism for anything considered sub-par

We need to make them feel loved for themselves!

Parents trump EVERYTHING – school, culture, pressure, peers.

Aside from genetics, perfectionism is the greatest indicator of the potential for depression.

There are two types:

- Adaptive perfectionism “I want to succeed”
- Maladaptive perfectionism “I can't bear to fail”

We need to consider 'do overs' for tests. In business, if you get something wrong, you are given the opportunity to fix it. Why not for our kids?

[Kathy's comment: I strongly believe we need to implement this at Cherry Chase, Sunnyvale Middle School and Homestead. After the tests are collected and right/wrong answers assessed, kids should be able to go back and 're-do' the ones they got wrong and to raise their grade. This is not something that is hard to do...why aren't we doing it across the board? Parents need to open a dialogue with teachers and administrators about this.]

We need to help our children develop a healthy self.

A healthy self has a sense of autonomy, competence and connection and knows "what I'm interested in."

We're much more supportive of risks with younger children; for example, teaching a child to walk. We never say, "you keep falling down like that and you'll be flipping burgers for the rest of your life!" Well, it's the same for older children, they need to be encouraged to explore and take risks. For some reason, we're more afraid of letting this happen (something for parents to take a good, hard look at).

Life skills needed by our children:

- Persistence
- Self-control

Don't apply external solutions ("Let's go shopping to celebrate/feel better!") where internal ones (persistence, self-control, self-satisfaction) are required – we should not be looking outside.

Evaluating what we are actually doing as parents is very, very difficult but it is highly important to inventory ourselves and our parenting styles.

We also need to look back at our own histories for triggers (when and why we lose it with our kids). What is it in YOUR history that is making it so vivid in your child?

2) Disconnection from parents

We need to SLOW DOWN, relax and spend real time with our kids.

A few things Dr. Levine is passionately AGAINST:

- AP classes and tests (or 'kill and drill') – AP is all about taking the test at the end. A rigorous course is good, but doing it for the test (and resulting college credit) is bad. We do need to let kids delve deep into subjects and explore the why's and how's rather than the names and dates.
- Traveling teams – Why are our kids spending HOURS each day practicing with an athletic team? Why are families spending weekends in a fractured state so that parents and kids can attend out-of-town sports events? About 1.9% of high school athletes actually play on a college team. Is it really worth it?

Academics and athletics are disproportionately valued in our society.

Kids (and parents) need time for friendships and DOWN TIME.

Childhood is all about experiencing a wide range of things so that you can decide what you really like. It is in the best developmental interests of your child to try as many different things as possible rather than devoting their lives (at an early age) to one sport or activity. There is a very real dilemma that parents face, of course; if you start them at 12 instead of 8 they are going to be years behind the other kids. But, so what?!? Is it really that important that your child excel in athletics? (With all the attendant stress on the child and family)

We are desperate for a sense of community. There is so much competitive parenting and narcissism. It is tough to be vulnerable – you are just as likely to be met with aggression as with compassion. There is a tremendous fear of not being treated kindly or graciously if you are truthful. We need to overcome this and reach out to each other.

Money is not the problem.

The problem is the culture of affluence we are living in – where **material things are valued too highly.**

Dr. Levine's soapbox:

- Being materialistic is bad for our kids
- A pre-occupation with money is bad for our kids
- Competitiveness (academic, athletic, etc.) is bad for our kids
- Schools posting where kids are going to college is bad for our kids (kids who go to community colleges don't feel good about themselves when this occurs – how about posting/noting something that is character driven about each student instead?)

A few parenting tips:

- Don't allow the world to revolve around your children
- Help them to build character
- Do not say "you've gotta do what you've gotta do"
- Ask yourself: "Are my children robust/resilient?"
- Consider investing in a character tutor rather than a math tutor (offered jokingly)
- Find out what kind of people they are!
- Ask them what they think about things!
- Make sure your child sleeps* and eats!

*A good sleep schedule is related to resilience and deep learning/making connections.

Our most potent tool is our connection with our children.

There are no silver bullets.

Eat dinner as a family as often as you can. It sends the message that ‘we are a family’ and that family is important. Dad being around is highly important, too; it shows that family is more important than money.

However, do anything (that is suggested here) to the degree that you think is really possible!

Kids should have chores – everyone has a job. Do not pay them for the chores, it is part of being in a family. Keep kids to their responsibilities!

Hang out with them at least once a week – but no talking about grades, achievements, etc.

Learn the research and become an activist for your child!

Last bit of soapbox from Dr. Levine:

Homework is of no value to young children!!! What are we doing assigning homework to kindergarteners? Get together as a group and advocate for what is best for them!

[Kathy’s soapbox: How about making homework optional? If you feel your child needs it, then do it, if not skip it. Also how about only 5 math problems to reinforce the concept of the day rather than 20-25???)

There are basically two sides to parenting: **warmth | discipline.**

Be warm but do not try to be your child’s ‘friend’. Maintain discipline – it teaches them how to get along in the world.

Our job is to pay attention to the right things:

Curfew? **Yes!**

Where are they/check in? **Yes!**

Are the parents home where they are? **Yes!**

Are they developing character and resiliency? **Yes!**

Are you focusing on outward signs of achievement? **Don’t!**

A few last things:

- You have to come to terms with who your actual children are (in terms of personality, abilities, temperament, etc.)
- The best gift you can give your children is your own mental health – they are very dependent on the serenity of their parents – you have to be OK! Take care of any problems as they crop up – your child will be OK if you are OK.

[From Kathy: My personal goal is to stop myself from automatically trying to help fix a problem asking instead, “Do you need outside help or can you handle it on your own?” I need to instill this habit in myself in order to help my children develop persistence and a sense of competence. I am including a reader’s review of Dr. Levine’s book below because it is a very interesting continuation of the topics covered in tonight’s lecture.]

Reader’s review of ‘The Price of Privilege’ from Amazon.com:

The Price is psychologically devastatingly high. Read the book to protect your family from psychological dysfunction

This is an excellent book about how the affluent have adopted undermining values (perfectionism, materialism) and how it negatively affects parenting style and causes psychological neurosis among teens. I am the parent of a teenage daughter who goes to a public high school in Marin County. Thus, we live in the social milieu described by Dr. Levine. The book content was both shocking and revealing to me. When I shared some of Dr. Levine's findings that I could not believe I would ask my daughter about them. Invariably, she confirmed that Dr. Levine was correct. That's how I found out that one of my daughter's acquaintances did cut herself frequently. That's also when I knew that Dr. Levine was onto something and not just sensationalizing another marketable myth about Marin County. Also, this book really is not about Marin County as it depicts a nationwide prevalent phenomenon of teenage psychological dysfunction among the affluent.

The book's main thesis is that teenagers from affluent families suffer more intense psychological problems than anyone thought. Her findings reflects her 25 years of experience as a psychologist working with children in Marin County and her reviewing related clinical studies on the subject. Dr. Levine has extensively referenced the material of the book. Thus, her thesis and arguments are well supported by contemporary psychological research.

The book includes four parts. The first part diagnoses the psychological problems affecting teenagers from affluent families. The second part reviews how our material culture contributes to undermining the development of the inner self. The third part provides recommendation on how to parent to overcome cultural hurdles and develop healthy children. The fourth part reflects on how you have to develop your own strength and independence before you can impart those qualities to your kids. The first three sections overlap a lot as diagnostics of affluent teenagers problems, criticism of our materialistic society, and advice on parenting are peppered throughout the book regardless of the section. Somehow, the liquidity in categorization of the topic does not detract in the book's readability.

Dr. Levine mentions two key factors leading to dysfunctional teen among the affluent: The first is achievement pressure. The second is emotional isolation from parents. She observed that parents are over involved as far as grades and performance are involved but they are often too busy for down to earth conversation with their teens that would help their inner self growth.

The parents' focus on performance leads to the kids' perfectionism that leads to serious

problems. Dr. Levine observed that studies uncovered a strong relationship between perfectionism and suicide among teens that are gifted. It is not the parents' high expectations that are the culprit, but when parental love becomes conditional to the child's achievement.

Within the third chapter of this section, Dr. Levine studies the counterintuitive disconnect between money and happiness. Once basic needs are met, apparently surplus money does not make people happier. Dr. Levine has reviewed cross lateral and longitudinal scientific studies that confirm that. For example, the Irish apparently are happier than the Germans and the Japanese. Yet, the Irish GDP per capita is about less than half the Germans or Japanese. Americans are not happier today than they were a generation ago even though their GDP per capita (adjusted for inflation) has nearly doubled.

In the third part of the book, Dr. Levine analyzes parenting by referring to the seminal research of Dr. Baumrind who established the foundation of psychological studies on parenting. Dr. Baumrind differentiates between three parenting style: 1) authoritarian, 2) permissive, and 3) authoritative.

The Authoritarian parent adopts a military style. They think of the child strictly as a subordinate. The parents order, the child obeys. And, that's it. This typically leads to terrible problems during the teen years. Either the teen violently explode out of rebellion or he breaks down. Such teens have often low self esteem, poor social skills, and a high rate of depression. Such child often lacks curiosity and creativity and is unable to explore and develop his inner self.

The Permissive parent is very loving and caring but short on discipline. They think of the child as a friend. The resulting teen is often likable and has high self-esteem. But, they tend to be impulsive, immature, and lack awareness of the responsibility of their own action. They also have lower rates of academic achievement and higher rates of substance abuse.

The Authoritative parent is warm and accepting, but they set clear expectations and limits. They place a high value on cooperation, responsibility, and self-regulation. They value achievement and self-motivation but do not emphasize competition. Authoritative parents promote autonomy by encouraging children to figure it out on their own whenever they can. Such parents support the child's growing autonomy by focusing both on independence and connection. As expected, such household foster better overall child development with lower rate of depression and substance abuse than either of the other two parenting styles. Autonomy, not dependency, is always the goal of such parenting style.