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At What Price, Privilege?

Local Parents Question Author about Raising Kids in an Affluent Community

BY SAMANTHA PARENT

We love living on the Tiburon Peninsula – the schools are fantastic, the weather is great, life is good. But does raising our children in such an environment mean that they may end up empty and depressed?

According to Marin psychiatrist and author Madeline Levine, affluent communities are creating a generation of children that are “extremely unhappy, disconnected and passive.”



SAMANTHA PARENT

Dr. Madeline Levine autographs copies of her book, The Price of Privilege, at Bel Aire School last week.

Dr. Levine has been on tour to promote her bestselling book, *The Price of Privilege*. She stopped in at the Bel Air School on March 8 to discuss the book and take questions from the audience, which included Tiburon and Belvedere parents.

Below are Dr. Levine’s answers to questions posed by local parents, including me.

Samantha Parent: There’s a lot of discussion these days about the negative effects of “over-scheduling” your child. As an overscheduled and overachieving child myself, I have been careful not to do the same with my own children, to give them “down time” to be kids and play. The problem is, when we have down time, my kids often tell me that they are “bored.” How do we achieve a healthy balance between over-scheduling and being bored?

Dr. Levine: My favorite response to “I’m bored” is “I have a chore for you.” That takes care of boredom really quickly. My kids used to say I’m bored and I’d say, “That’s great because the laundry needs folding.”

Every kid is different. Maybe your child needs a little more physical activity; maybe he needs a little more structure. But ultimately, he needs to be able to structure himself.

You provide the environment, and then you get out of the way and see what he does with it. It’s an opportunity to talk to him and ask what he’d like to be doing.

You mentioned not wanting your kids to have the overly busy childhood that you had. It’s important for you to see your

kids for who they are, not with the agenda of undoing whatever happened to you.

Karen Carerra: Haven’t teenagers always experimented with drugs and alcohol? Isn’t this just a right of passage? I remember *not* being privileged as a teenager, being depressed when I was 16 because I thought I was not popular or beautiful enough.

I also remember going dancing at Hollywood nightclubs and going to parties on the weekend where there was lots of alcohol. Why do you assume it is an epidemic among affluent teenagers, rather than experimentation and peer pressure that has existed at all times among all socio-economic groups?

Dr. Levine: You’re right that there has always been experimentation with drugs and alcohol among teenagers. However, the rates of experimentation and abuse have gone way up. And the ages at which kids are starting to abuse substances are much younger, which is a real concern. There’s a lot of drinking going on in junior high school, and it’s become more prevalent.

We’re seeing more abuse. If a 16-or-17-year-old is experimenting, we are not as worried as when we find a 13-year old experimenting. Every year that you can put off the kids’ drinking or drug use, you buy that kid a tremendous advantage I not becoming a substance abuser. We know that young kids who are abusing drugs and alcohol have higher rates of abuse down the road.

Sharon Sand: As a family with a modest income, I would like to know if it is beneficial to a child to raise them in a more affluent community where they have a better public school education and a safer environment, but are growing up with kids who have extreme wealth and privileges that are unique to such affluence. Or, is it better to raise your family amongst people of similar socio-economic levels and therefore lifestyles?

Dr. Levine: Interesting question. If living in a more affluent community means that you are working two jobs and very stressed in order to maintain that, then it’s not a good idea. What kids need most is a parent who is around and available. If you can swing it and the schools are really good, it’s probably an advantage to your child.

You need to explain to your kids that they live in a privileged community and that they have more modest resources. They aren’t the only ones. Even kids who are really wealthy, you hear parents say that they are not buying a car for their kids; they make them work for their car.

Even for the really wealthy kids, there is always someone who is wealthier and has more. That’s just life. My only concern is with parents who really struggle to get into a more affluent community, and they are not available and are too stressed out.

Dianna Rittenhouse: What, in your view, is the importance of families having a strong faith foundation? How does that impact a child or adolescent?

Dr. Levine: Research shows that religious attendance is a good thing for the family, for longevity, for health. Personally, my personal epiphany in writing this book has been around the value of the faith community, which I didn't write about a lot, but I've been invited to so many churches and synagogues around the country.

In terms of community service, they've got it right. As opposed to the schools where community service is a requirement – kids know it's a show. They do their 10 hours and check it off the list.

In the faith-based community, it's a group of kids who do the work together, present it to the congregation, and even teach it to the younger kids. That's how you internalize altruism. I think it's really important and in retrospect it's an area that I wish I had done more with in my own family.

Cris Elders: What are the top five things that you would recommend parents of grade school children change now in our parenting styles that will help our children grow into more independent, confident, self-sufficient and happy human beings?

Dr. Levine: I have six things: 1) Focus on process, not product. Don't be so interested in the end result but how your kid got to where they are. 2) Make sure you have family meals together. 3) Make sure your child has some time every day to do nothing, to chill, to kick back and relax. 4) Make sure your child has a chore or two to do around the house so they feel like they are part of the community. 5) Be involved in something outside of yourself. Make it clear that something that is valued is philanthropy or altruism or community. 6) Make sure your kids get enough sleep. This is a huge issue – that kids are sleep deprived. Make sure they get enough to eat, enough sunshine. Things that we have left in the dust that still matter.

Anonymous: Reading your book scared me. My 3rd grader is usually happy, open in his discussion with me, honest and sensitive. At what age does the disconnect happen, and how? I had assumed that establishing a pattern of open communication with my child at a young age would make me immune to becoming the mother of a sullen teenager, but your book makes it sound much more complicated.

Dr. Levine: You need to get ready because you want your child to disconnect at some point. You can't send your kid out into the world with the same level of dependency that your nine-year-old has on you now. He'd be unable to function. So rather than seeing it as a potentially negative development in your relationship, it's hard but you have to see it as "I've done a good job. My kid is moving forward and doing what they are supposed to do."

Samantha Parent: Where do kids go to "connect" and communicate in adolescence when they aren't going to mom and dad anymore?

Dr. Levine: Hopefully kids go internal; clearly they go to their peer group, which replaces parents as arbiter of what's right and wrong.

Does that mean your kids never talk to you? No, but it becomes incredibly sporadic, and parents need to make themselves available for their kids to talk to them. Nine out of 10 times parents will ask kids how they are and kids will respond "fine" and that's the end of it. But on that 10th time, they may have something they want to tell you and parents need to make sure they are available for that.

Mary Jane McDermott: Since bullying has been such a prominent issue in the past few years, what advice do you have for handling it from the perspective of children, parents, and educators?

Dr. Levine: One of the problems with bullying is that kids who bully tend to come from authoritarian households, where there's a lot of bullying in the household. So they are not the easiest group of parents to reach because they tend to be sort of touch and black and white themselves.

The school has to have very clear limits and consequences for bullying. There also needs to be education about bullying so the school culture does not tolerate it, not just the principal. In general, bullies are not the popular kids on the school playground. To the extent to which you can educate the students about it, it becomes not in your best interest to be the school bully because you're not liked.

Samantha Parent: What about bullying prevention programs?

Dr. Levine: It's a good idea. Nothing really works unless you have everyone on board. You need to set up a committee of teachers, students, parents, administrators, and counselors to address the issue and then implement a curriculum for everybody.

It's unfortunate that all this falls on the schools when the schools' resources are being cut these days. But school is the only place where you have the generation captive. There is no other place where you have everyone under your control, so it is the logical entry point for making some of these shifts.

Samantha Parent: You spend a lot of time describing how important it is for kids to develop a healthy "sense of self" in order to prevent depression and anxiety and the other pitfalls kids fall into. Can you explain first, what you mean by a "sense of self," and secondly, sense of self?

Dr. Levine: A healthy sense of self is made up of three things: 1) autonomy – you can be independent and take care of yourself; 2) connection – life is better when it is shared; people who are successful know how to work with other people, are liked, and know how to be part of a team; 3) confidence: you have to be capable of something. And within that, there is an internal home, a place you go to when your independence is shaky, your connection is broken, or you don't feel so confident, where you can self-soothe in healthy ways. That is my idea of a sense of self.

Childhood is precious and it is over way too soon. School is not a conduit to college. College is not a conduit to a great and successful life. Let kids be where they are in their development; don't try to tell them what they are interested in.

For those who missed her presentation, Madeline will speak again at Redwood High School in Larkspur at 7 p.m. on Thursday, April 19.