

# THE CHILDREN WE MEAN TO RAISE: The Real Messages Adults Are Sending About Values



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....

Our youth's values appear to be awry, and the messages that adults are sending may be at the heart of the problem.

According to our recent national survey, a large majority of youth across a wide spectrum of races, cultures, and classes appear to value aspects of personal success—achievement and happiness—over concern for others.<sup>1</sup>

We asked youth to rank what was most important to them: achieving at a high level, happiness (feeling good most of the time), or caring for others. Almost 80% of youth picked high achievement or happiness as their top choice, while roughly 20% selected caring for others. Youth also ranked fairness low in relation to several other values. For example, they were far more likely to rank “hard work” above fairness. Some youth made it quite clear to us that their self-interest is paramount: “If you are not happy, life is nothing. After that, you want to do well. And after that, expend any excess energy on others.”

Happiness, working hard, and achievement clearly are important values. As we discuss in the full report, there are also important individual race, class, and cultural differences in how people understand achievement, hard work, and happiness.

But when youth do not prioritize caring and fairness over these aspects of personal success—and when they view their peers as even less likely to prioritize these ethical values—they are at greater risk of many forms of harmful behavior, including being cruel, disrespectful, and dishonest. These forms of harm are far too commonplace. Half of high school students admit to cheating on a test and nearly 75% admit to copying someone else's homework (Josephson Institute, 2012). Nearly 30% of middle and high school students reported being bullied during the 2010-2011 school year (NCES, 2013). In that same year, over half of girls in grades 7-12 reported at least one episode of sexual harassment at school (Hill & Kears, 2011).

Any healthy civil society also depends on adults who are committed to their communities and who, at pivotal times, will put the common good before their own. We don't seem to be preparing large numbers of youth to create this society.

At the root of this problem may be a *rhetoric/reality gap*, a gap between what parents and other adults say are their top priorities and the real messages they convey in their behavior day to day. Most parents and teachers say that developing caring children is a top priority and rank it as more important than children's achievements (Bowman et al., 2012; Suizzo, 2007).

But according to our data, youth aren't buying it. About 80% of the youth in our survey report that their parents are more concerned about achievement or happiness than caring for others. A similar percentage of youth perceive teachers as prioritizing students' achievements over their caring. Youth were also 3 times more likely to agree than disagree with this statement: “My parents are prouder if I get good grades in my classes than if I'm a caring community member in class and school.” Our conversations with and observations of parents also suggest that the power and frequency of parents' daily messages about achievement and happiness are drowning out their messages about concern for others.

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<sup>1</sup> In our report, we define “personal success” as the combination of achievement and happiness. However, we also examine achievement and happiness and their relation to other values separately.



And here's the irony: the focus on happiness, and the focus on achievement in affluent communities, doesn't appear to increase either children's achievement or their happiness. According to research by Suniya Luthar, children from affluent communities who are subjected to intense achievement pressure by their parents don't appear to outperform other students (Luthar & Becker, 2002). Parents who seek to preserve their children's happiness by constantly protecting them from adversity can rob them of coping strategies that are crucial to their long-term happiness. Parents who don't prioritize their children caring for others can deprive them of the chance to develop fundamental relationship skills, and strong relationships are one of our most vital and durable sources of well-being (Carter, 2010; Lyubomirsky, 2008; Myers, 2000; Valliant, 2012).

The good news is that we found substantial evidence that caring and fairness still count. While caring and fairness are subordinated to achievement and happiness, they are still important to youth, their parents, and their teachers. On our survey, roughly two-thirds of youth listed kindness as one of their top three values and 63% put fairness in their top three. A large majority of youth report their parents have communicated that kindness is important. And many youth have inspiring ethical commitments. In the words of one, "I feel that people should always put others before themselves and focus on contributing something to the world that will improve life for future generations."

The solution is straightforward, but not easy. To begin, we'll have to stop passing the buck. While Americans worry a great deal about children's moral state, no one seems to think that they're part of the problem. As adults we all need to take a hard look at the messages we send to children and youth daily.

The following guidelines can help shift the balance toward children and youth caring for others and help them become caring, ethical family members, workers, and citizens.

1. **Children and youth need ongoing opportunities to *practice* caring and helpfulness, sometimes with guidance from adults.** Children are not simply born good or bad and we should never give up on them. A good person is something one can always become; throughout life we can develop our capacities for caring and fairness as well as many other social, emotional, and ethical capacities. Learning to be caring and to lead an ethical life is like learning to play an instrument or hone a craft. Daily repetition—whether it's helping a friend with homework, pitching in around the house, having a classroom job, or working on a project on homelessness—and increasing challenge make caring second nature and develop and hone youth's caregiving capacities. With guidance from adults and practice, young people can also develop the skills and courage to know when and how to intervene in situations when they and others are imperiled. They can become effective "upstanders" or "first responders."
2. **Children and youth need to learn to *zoom in*, listening closely and attending to those in their immediate circle, and to *zoom out*, taking in the big picture and considering multiple perspectives.** It is by zooming out and taking multiple perspectives, including the perspectives of those who are too often invisible (such as the new kid in class, someone who doesn't speak their language, or the school custodian), that young people expand their *circle of concern* and become able to consider the justice of their communities and society.

3. **Children and youth need strong *moral role models*.** Being a role model doesn't mean that we need to be perfect or have all the answers. It means grappling with our flaws, acknowledging our mistakes, listening to our children and students, and connecting our values to their ways of understanding the world. It means that we, too, need to continually practice and zoom in and out, cultivating our capacities for care, widening our circles of concern, and deepening our understanding of fairness and justice.
4. **Children need to be guided in *managing destructive feelings*.** Often the ability to care for others is overwhelmed by anger, shame, envy, or other negative feelings. We need to teach children that all feelings are ok, but some ways of dealing with them are not helpful. Children need our help learning to cope with these feelings in productive ways.

Sooner or later, we will need to take on the large and fundamental problem of the messages that our society sends to our children about the definition of success and about what it means to be an ethical member of a community.

*This report is based in part on a survey of 10,000 middle and high school students from 33 schools representing diverse youth from across the nation, and on hundreds of conversations with and observations of youth, parents, and teachers over the last 10 years.*

## INTRODUCTION .....

Over Labor Day weekend 2013, approximately 300 teenagers, now known as the Stephentown 300, broke into the home of former National Football League player Brian Holloway. A particularly ugly party erupted. They urinated on carpets, graffitied walls, and stole personal belongings while gaudily photo-documenting their exploits on Instagram and Twitter.

Holloway graciously took the high road: He invited them to apologize and clean up the mess. Only 4 of the 300 students responded. Meanwhile, Holloway reported that parents of some students threatened him for re-posting pictures online of the students destroying his home.

Why did 300 teenagers spiral into this kind of mindless destruction? Why didn't these young people express remorse or make amends? Why did some parents lash out defensively rather than insist that their children show a particle of basic decency?

This event made national news and is clearly extreme. But selfishness and indifference to others among both children and adults are commonplace. Too often, students who are different are mocked or bullied, too many children are disrespectful to both other children and adults, and too few children and adults feel responsibility for their communities. Nearly 30% of middle and high school students, for example, reported being bullied during the 2010-2011 school year (NCES, 2013). In that same year, over half of girls in grades 7-12 reported at least one episode of sexual harassment at school (Hill & Kears, 2011).

These troubles have no single cause, but this report identifies key factors that may be at their heart. Our findings, based largely on a survey of over 10,000 diverse middle and high school students, as well as on scores of formal interviews, informal conversations, and observations with youth, parents, and teachers over the last 10 years, suggest that youth's fundamental values are awry.

A large majority of youth across a wide spectrum of races, cultures, and classes reported that they value aspects of personal success—achievement and happiness—over caring for others. An even larger majority of youth reported that their peers value achievement and happiness over caring for others. Our data also suggest that most youth give fairness little weight in contrast to other values.<sup>2</sup>

Our data expose a gap that may be at the root of these troubles: a gap between what parents and teachers describe as their priorities for youth and what youth perceive as adults' priorities. Research suggests that almost all parents say they are deeply invested in raising caring, ethical children and most parents see these moral qualities as more important than achievement (Bowman, Hunter, Dill, & Juelfs-Swanson, 2012; Suizzo, 2007). Data from our teacher survey suggest that most teachers also view preparing youth to be caring as more important than their achievement.

Youth, however, appear to be hearing a different message. When it comes to the child-raising priorities of their parents and teachers, a majority of youth say these adults are more concerned about achievement than caring. Our conversations and observations also reveal that despite what they say, in their daily interactions with children, many parents and other adults are prioritizing happiness and achievement over children's attention to others.

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<sup>2</sup> In our report, we define "personal success" as the combination of achievement and happiness. However, we also examine achievement and happiness and their relation to other values separately.

Let us be very clear: Achievement, working hard, and happiness are obviously important, and one can certainly be happy, achieve great feats, and be kind, fair, and concerned about the greater good. In fact, these values are entwined in many ways; many people, for example, find great gratification and happiness from caring and altruism. There are also important differences across race, class, and culture in the meaning of achievement, happiness, and caring.

Yet there are countless moments throughout childhood and adulthood when our happiness and desire to achieve collide with the interests of others, whether we're helping another student when we're studying to ace the same exam, taking care of a sick relative when we're exhausted, or passing the ball during a basketball game when we'd really rather shoot. When the balance shifts too far toward our interests, we not only compromise our relationships, we're also at risk of being cruel, disrespectful, ungenerous, and dishonest. When children don't prioritize caring, they're also less motivated to develop the social and emotional skills, such as empathy, needed to treat people well day to day.

Further, any healthy society depends on adults who are able to take responsibility for diverse members of their communities and to put, at pivotal times, the common good before their own. Our research suggests that we are not preparing children to create this kind of society.

And the irony is this: The intense focus on achievement and happiness can make children not only less caring, but also less happy.

At the same time, there are good reasons to be hopeful. Our findings suggest that both youth and adults do value caring, even if it is not their top priority. The issue is not that the values of caring or fairness have disappeared. It's that they appear in too many circumstances to be subordinated to personal interests such as achievement and happiness.

How can we close the gap between what adults say and what they actually seem to prioritize? The big challenge is not to convince parents and teachers that caring is important—it appears they already believe it is. The challenge is for adults to “walk the talk,” inspiring, motivating, and expecting caring and fairness in young people day to day, even at times when these values collide with children's moment to moment happiness or achievement. We also need at times to place real ethical demands on our children, even when it collides with our own happiness and achievement. And closing this gap means fighting our tendency to pass the buck. Americans tend to worry a great deal about the moral state of our country and about selfish and disrespectful children (Jones, 2010; Farkas, Johnson, Duffett, & Collins, 2002). But as this report describes, it's not clear who, if anyone, believes they're part of the problem. As adults, we need to hold ourselves accountable.

This report proceeds as follows:

1. We examine the subordination of caring and how it appears to be related to youth's actions.
2. We then explore a possible reason why caring has been sidelined: the gap between what parents and teachers identify as their top priorities and what youth perceive as these adults' priorities.
3. We look at the degree to which youth prioritize fairness and the possible consequences of their subordinating fairness.

4. We examine the ways that the elevation of achievement and happiness in child-raising can undermine not only ethical development but also happiness and achievement.
5. Finally, we propose solutions, based on the good news that caring and fairness are still valued by many adults and children.

### Do Youth Prioritize Caring?

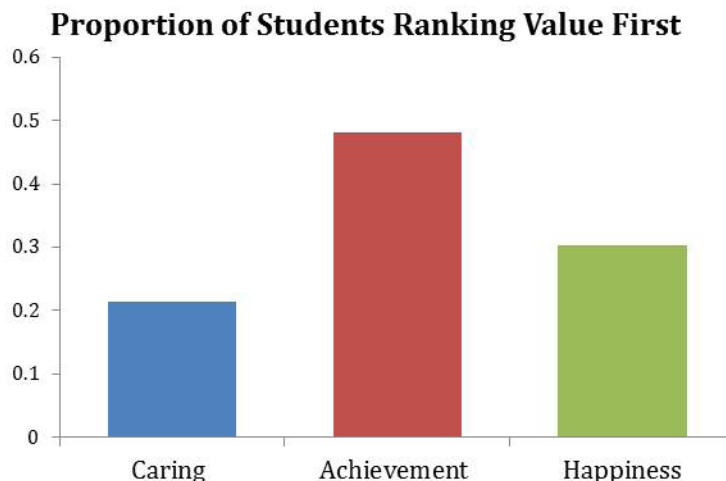
Our founding fathers sought to create a healthy balance between individual concern and concern for others. We now appear to have lost that balance.

We asked over 10,000 students from 33 schools in various regions of this country to rank what is most important to them: “caring for others,” “achieving at a high level,” or “being a happy person (feeling good most of the time).” We also asked students to imagine how their school peers and their parents would rank these values. (For more details about these questions and for information about our methodology, please see the Appendix.)

We found that young people neither prioritize caring for others nor see the key people around them as prioritizing it. As the graph below indicates, youth were least likely to pick caring as their own top priority and even less likely to pick caring as the top priority of their peers. Twenty-two percent (22%) of students picked caring as their top priority, whereas 48% picked achievement and 30% picked happiness.

When we looked at how different values stacked up against each other overall, we found that 60% of students ranked achievement above caring for others and nearly two-thirds believed their peers would rank achievement above caring. Students were also over three times more likely to imagine their peers would agree than disagree with this statement: “I’m prouder if I get good grades in my classes than if I’m a caring community member in class and school.”

Moreover youth appear to value caring for others less as they age. On average, older students in our sample were far more likely to prioritize happiness and less likely to prioritize both caring and achievement.



## Does Prioritizing Caring Translate into Action?

What youth say is clearly less important than what they do. Is how youth rank values such as caring, fairness, and achievement and view their parents as ranking these values related to their daily actions? Because we did not observe students directly, we certainly can't say definitively whether those students who say they prioritize caring and fairness are, in fact, more caring and fair day to day. However, our data indicate associations between youth's reported levels of empathy and altruism and what they prioritize and perceive their parents as prioritizing.

- If students didn't prioritize caring and didn't think their parents prioritized caring, their empathy scores were very low. (See Appendix for information on the empathy scale.)
- Students who placed a low priority on caring in relation to achievement and happiness were less likely to report altruism on two items (see Appendix). They were less likely to say they would volunteer on a Saturday to help at a school event or tutor a friend.
- Youth who believed that their parents placed a low value on caring were less likely to say they would tutor a friend.

### How Youths' and Parents' Values Today Compare to Their Values at Other Times in our History

Are youth and parents' today more focused on happiness and achievement and less focused on others than youth and parents in other times in our history? There's no simple answer. In the late 1700's and the early decades of the 1800's, it appears that a mother's primary role was to model unselfishness and commitment to the common good and to develop this concern and commitment in children (Bellah et al, 1985). Yet throughout much of our history, while parents tended to be focused on developing nurturing qualities in girls, they sought to cultivate aggressiveness and drive in boys, with little regard to nurturing qualities like empathy. In the 1950's and 1960's, as girls gained more power and status and as traditional gender dichotomies began to evaporate, parents became more interested in developing caring and other traditionally feminine qualities in boys and more invested in their girls' drive and competitiveness (Personal communication with Steven Mintz).

The modern, intense focus on happiness and self-esteem is relatively new. Except for a brief period in the 1920's and 1930's, parents did far less than they do today to directly cultivate their children's happiness, and neither children nor adults appear to have spent much time reflecting on the question of how much they liked themselves. (Mintz, 2004; personal communication with Steven Mintz).

Parents' focus on achievement in school is not new, although expectations about achievement have changed; in 1940, one quarter of adults 25 years old or older had completed high school. By 1967, just over 50% of adults 25 years old or older had reached this level, while in 2009, 87% of adults in this population had completed high school (Ryan & Siebens, 2012).

There may also have been a significant change over the last 8 years in the degree to which youth prioritize achievement and view their parents as prioritizing it. In research we did in 2005-2007, based on a much smaller sample (about 150 diverse students across 4 high schools), youth were far more likely to rank happiness as their top value and their parents' top value than either achievement or caring (questions were worded slightly differently in the earlier version of the survey).



## The Adult Rhetoric/Reality Gap

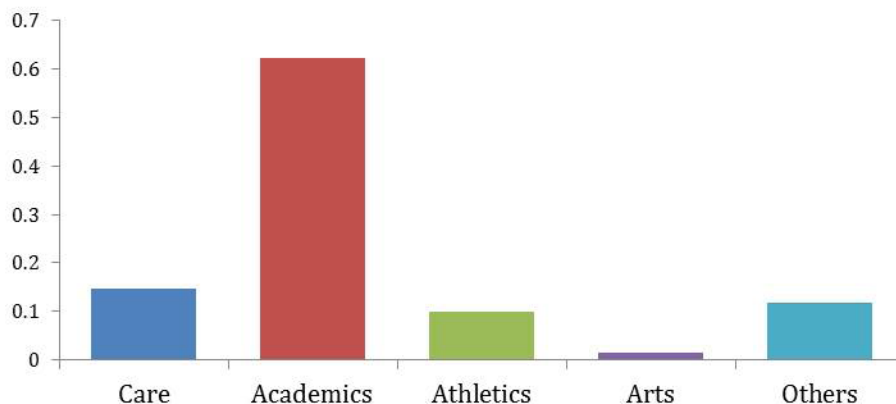
Because parents and teachers have such a powerful influence on children's values, it's no small matter that there is a gap between what these adults say and what they appear to *prioritize* daily. While American parents' values vary in many respects, almost all say that it is vital to raise children who will be caring people and good citizens. According to a 2012 study, 96% of parents surveyed viewed developing moral character in children as "very important, if not essential" and highly valued their children "being honest, loving, and reliable" (Bowman et al., 2012). Research suggests that most parents across race/ethnic groups value caring or "benevolence" more than achievement and are far more likely to value "benevolence" over "power" (Suizzo, 2007).

Youth, however, have a markedly different view of parents' child-raising goals. We asked students how they viewed their parents' child-raising priorities in terms of happiness, achievement, and caring for others.

- Nineteen percent (19%) viewed caring as their parents' top priority.
- Fifty-four percent (54%) reported achievement and 27% reported happiness as their parents' top priority.
- Nearly two-thirds reported that both their parents and peers would rank achievement above caring for others.
- Students were three times more likely to agree than disagree with this statement on our survey: "My parents are prouder if I get good grades in my classes than if I'm a caring community member in class and school."

On this matter, school adults agree with youth. According to the findings of our survey with school adults, the great majority of teachers, administrators, and school staff did not see parents as prioritizing caring in child-raising. About 80% of school adults viewed parents as prioritizing their children's achievement above caring and a similar percentage viewed parents as prioritizing happiness over caring.

**Proportion of Students Ranking Value First  
for Adults at School**



## FRAMEWORKS INSTITUTE RESEARCH

Our findings are consistent with an independent study conducted by the Frameworks Institute, a non-profit, non-partisan think tank that we commissioned in the fall of 2013 to investigate how American adults view moral, social, and emotional development, and specifically how adults think about their individual responsibilities versus their responsibilities to each other and the common good. According to the findings, Americans view children's morality as highly important. Yet in responding to various questions about child-raising, people's attention to children's caring and ethical behavior was often crowded out by concerns about children's autonomy and individual success.

According to the findings, the problem may not only be youth's lack of investment in caring for those in their immediate orbit, it may also be both youth's and adults' weak commitment to larger collectives and the common good. The Frameworks Institute found that while many Americans held strong "local" morality—they prioritized their children being decent and caring, and the civility of their immediate communities—they were far less likely to be focused on larger societal well-being or the goodness of those outside this immediate circle of concern.

Our interviews and observations over the last several years also suggest that the power and frequency of parents' messages about achievement and happiness often drown out their messages about concern for others. Some of the ways parents are going overboard to promote achievement and happiness over concern for others are now familiar, including sports parents who harangue coaches for more playing time for their own child, theater parents who campaign for larger roles for their kids, or parents who lobby teachers to give their child more attention. But the more pervasive problem is subtler. It's the steady diet of messages that children get, such as when parents let children quit teams without considering their obligation to the team, or don't require their children to reach out to a friendless kid on a playground, or allow children to talk too much, taking up too much air time with other children or adults. Many other cultural observers have chronicled parents' micromanaging their children's happiness, including catering to children's every need in ways that can make children concerned about little other than themselves (Kindlon, 2003; Miller, 2013; Mogel, 2008).

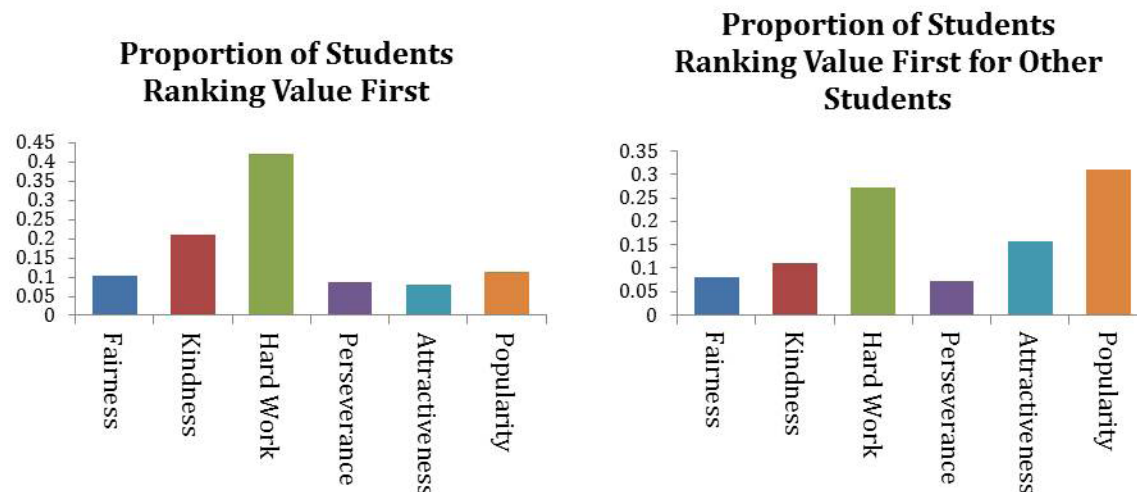
And it's not just parents' messages about the importance of caring that aren't getting through to young people. Sixty-two (62%) percent of teachers in our survey ranked caring as a higher priority than achievement for their students and 68% ranked caring above happiness. Over 80% of teachers, according to a recent study, want training in how to develop children's social and emotional skills, including skills such as empathy that are central to caring (Civic Enterprises, 2013). Yet 62% of youth in our survey perceived teachers as prioritizing "doing well academically" as their top value, while only 15% of students saw "promoting caring in students" as their teachers' top priority (see graph above).

## How Much do Youth Value Fairness?

Any healthy society depends not only on developing in youth the urge and ability to care for others but also on instilling in them other ethical values. Perhaps especially, a civil and just society depends on developing in youth a strong commitment to fairness.

We thus sought to determine how much weight students give to fairness in comparison to several other values, including "performance" values such as hard work and diligence and more "superficial" values such as popularity. We also looked at how kindness stacked up against both these performance and superficial values.

Students were over four times more likely to pick hard work than fairness as their top value and, overall, about two-thirds ranked hard work as more important than fairness. In addition, over 60% ranked hard work above kindness. Youth were even more likely to view their peers as prioritizing performance values.



Working hard is obviously important, and it often has a moral purpose. For many teens, working hard is, for example, a means to provide for their family, contribute to their communities, and honor their parents' sacrifices for them.

But it's also true that people can work hard for selfish goals and they can work hard on behalf of good or evil—Bernie Madoff worked hard. So can terrorists and con artists. And there should always be a healthy tension between our individual striving, concerns about others, and fairness.

While few youth reported valuing popularity themselves, many youth saw their peers as valuing popularity. Youth saw their peers as valuing popularity over both fairness and kindness.

High rates of cheating may be another sign that too many youth are putting their self-interests above fairness. A 2012 survey indicated that over half of high school students admit to cheating on a test and nearly 75% admitted to copying someone else's homework in the past year (Josephson Institute, 2012). Stanford researcher Denise Pope has found that high numbers of high-schoolers trivialize certain types of cheating: about two-thirds report that receiving unpermitted help on an assignment is either not cheating or a trivial infraction, and over half believe that lifting a couple of sentences from someone else's work is not something to worry about (Conner, Galloway, & Pope, 2009; Challenge Success, 2011).

Why are so many teens placing a low priority on fairness? Here again, the gap between what parents say and what they prioritize may be one culprit. While parents say they prioritize caring, many parents may be putting little weight on fairness or the common good when their children's academic interests are at stake. Many times we've heard, for example, about parents who allow their children to fudge community service experiences on college applications, get psychiatrists to falsely diagnose children as having Attention Deficit Disorder so they'll have more time on the SAT, or write too much of their children's papers for them. And these actions are often clearly on display for teens.

How youth view adults in general may further reduce their commitment to fairness. Teens don't appear to perceive adults as acting with any more integrity than they are. According to a survey by the Josephson Institute (2012), 57% of high-school students agreed that "in the real world, successful people do what they have to do to win, even if others consider it cheating."

What makes these findings especially distressing is that teens' negative *perceptions* of peer and adult norms can lower their own ethical standards, prompting them to cheat and setting in motion a downward spiral. When teens perceive their peers and adults as generally unconcerned about fairness they have good reason to become self-protective and self-interested, prompting others to focus even more on their own interests.

### **The Perils of Achievement Pressure**

The problem is not only that achievement pressure appears to be squeezing out caring for high percentages of youth. Our survey, interviews, and observations support what researchers and many cultural observers have been decrying over the last decade: many children in affluent and middle-class communities feel fierce, debilitating pressure to achieve at high levels, resulting in a range of emotional, ethical, and behavioral troubles.

Affluent youth appear to suffer comparable rates of behavioral problems, delinquency, drug use (including hard drugs), anxiety, and depression to low-income youth, despite the many stresses that low-income youth endure (Luthar & Becker, 2002; Luthar & Latendresse, 2005). One study that included suburban high schoolers in the Northeast found that affluent girls were two to three times more likely to report clinical levels of depression than the general population of teens (Luthar & D'Avanzo, 1999). Although there are many complex causes of behavioral and emotional problems, achievement pressure appears to be one source: another study found that youth with "very high perfectionist strivings—those who saw achievement failures as personal failures"—had high levels of depression, anxiety, and substance abuse, as did those who believed their parents valued their accomplishments more than aspects of their character (Luthar & Becker, 2002).

Putting too much emphasis on one's own accomplishments may also undermine children's empathy. In our data, ranking achievement first was associated with low levels of empathy. Youth's relationships and ethical standards can be bent and warped by achievement pressure in other ways as well. As several students we spoke with in one affluent high school, known as an achievement pressure cooker, put it:

"I have to lie to kids here about my [low] GPA so they won't look down on me." "I get so stressed and irritable about all the pressure here to get good grades that sometimes I'm a jerk." "Kids here say that they would help someone out rather than work hard, but they're lying." "I'm tempted to gloat to the person next to me when I get a good grade rather than help them understand."

Ironically, this pressure is not even likely to achieve what it's intended to achieve. Children who are subjected to intense achievement pressure by their parents in affluent communities don't appear to outperform other students (Luthar & Becker, 2002). Further, a good deal of research now points to the importance of social and emotional capacities in achievement and professional success (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Yoder, 2014), capacities that are too often neglected in the press to achieve.



### The Dangers of Elevating Happiness

It may seem strange to suggest that youth can be too focused on their happiness or that parents can be too focused on their children's happiness. But too much focus on happiness, just like going overboard on achievement, can imperil both children's moral development and, ironically, their happiness.

When children and youth are too occupied with their own happiness, and when parents are too focused on children's happiness, children are less likely to do what's right, generous, and fair both in making mundane decisions such as whether to pass the ball to a friend, and when in the throes of high-stakes conflicts between their own welfare and that of others, such as when deciding whether to risk standing up for a friend who is being bullied.

Here, too, our data indicate associations between prioritizing happiness over caring and low levels of empathy and altruism. Prioritizing happiness is associated with being less willing to volunteer or tutor, and with less empathy. Students who think their happiness is more important to their parents than their caring are less likely to tutor.

Further, a small but nonetheless important fraction of the young people we heard from could be poster children for vacuous self-interest. Some students in our survey and interviews made comments such as:

"It would be meaningless to be good if I'm not happy." "Happiness is my primary goal in life. Achievement and moral 'goodness' are only important if they make me happy." "If you are not happy, life is nothing. After that, you want to do well. And after that, expend any excess energy on others."

How can focusing intensely on children's happiness wind up making them less happy? The great lengths to which many parents go to spare their children adversity—swooping in to resolve minor peer conflicts, for instance, or maneuvering to get their kids on winning teams, or filling out job applications—can rob kids of coping skills that are vital for their short and long term well-being. When parents prioritize their children's happiness over their concern for others, they can also deprive children of the development of fundamental relationship skills that are key to being a good parent, friend, romantic partner, or mentor. And these relationships are one of our most important and durable sources of happiness (Carter, 2010; Lyubomirsky, 2008; Myers, 2000; Valliant, 2012).

If we want children to be happy, we'd be better off focusing on helping them develop meaningful relationships and coping capacities, cultivating in them the tools they need for meaningful, sensible achievements and reducing their self-occupation by, for example, engaging them with principles and projects larger than themselves.

### The Good News: Caring and Fairness Still Count

Troubling as it is that a low percentage of youth ranked caring and fairness as a top priority for themselves, their peers, and the key adults in their lives, we also found substantial evidence that caring and fairness are still important to youth and to these adults. We found that youth still value—and perceive these adults as valuing—caring and fairness to some degree.

One indication that caring is still important is that while only 22% of youth ranked caring first on our scale, almost half of youth ranked caring second, and 45% imagined their parents would rank caring second. Similarly youth, while not ranking kindness first, ranked it high.

In choosing among six values, about two-thirds of youth put kindness in their top three. Eighty-one percent (81%) of youth also agreed that their parents clearly communicate that it's important to be kind to other people. While fairness appears to be subordinated to other values by many youth, we also found evidence that youth still value it to some degree: 63% put fairness in their top three of our six values.

Many youth also expressed altruistic leanings. Thirty-eight percent (38%) of youth said they would “definitely” and 48% said they would “probably” tutor a friend, and 15% would “definitely” and 45% would “probably” volunteer on a Saturday to help out at a school event.

Some students revealed a deep commitment to caring and a strong ethical orientation:

- “If I am a good person who cares about others then in my mind I am already happy.”
- “When being a good person who cares about others, happiness would also just come naturally.”
- “I somehow obtain my own happiness by witnessing the happiness of others and my friends. Being kind is a moral that I follow and that I would never do towards the motivation of ‘merit’ or to ‘look good.’”
- “I feel that people should always put others before themselves and focus on contributing something to the world that will improve life for future generations.”
- “Making others happy will make you happy, and this is achievement in and of itself.”
- “I like to help others. Sometimes I help others to the point where I don't even get enough time to help myself; however, it makes me feel good inside to know that someone who is struggling has less on their shoulders.”

The challenge, then, is not to drum up caring or a sense of fairness from scratch. The challenge for adults, as we take up next, is to strengthen both our own and youth's commitments to caring and fairness.

### **Solutions: Taking the High Road**

Can we as adults “walk our talk” about child-raising? After all, almost all of us believe that raising caring, ethical children is crucial. It's also no small matter that adults' basic credibility is at stake if young people, with their razor sharp alertness to hypocrisy, view us as saying one thing while consistently prioritizing something else.

Moreover, the costs of inaction are high, given not only the risks to both our children's social, emotional, and ethical capacities and happiness but other threats, including increasing political factionalism and incivility at a time when we face huge problems that need to be addressed collectively.



It came to me pretty suddenly one day that parenting is a moral task—that the principle of being a mother of a child who is a good person is more important than how much my kids like me or how happy they are in the moment. If my kids were going to be good people, I realized that I couldn't go to them all the time if they cried or always be a fixer or problem solver, that I had to make real demands on them.

— Parent interview page 47  
(Weissbourd, 2009)

Closing this rhetoric/reality gap with kids won't happen overnight. It will mean doing a kind of reckoning, a check on our messages about happiness and achievement in contrast to our messages about caring and fairness. Do we regularly tell our children, for example, that “the most important thing is that you're happy,” or do we say that “the most important thing is that you act with integrity and are kind?” Do we insist that our children are not rude to us or never treat other people offhandedly? Do we insist that our children do the right thing even if doesn't make them happy or successful? Do we remind our children of their obligations to their communities, for example their classroom and schools, their teams and school choirs, and their neighborhoods? Do we place consistent ethical demands on our children not only when it collides with their happiness and achievements but when they may be furious at us, when it threatens our own happiness?

It will also mean listening to our children and getting feedback to ensure that our words match our actions. We might simply ask our children whether it's more important to them to achieve or be caring, and ask which one of these values they think is more important to us, and then discuss misperceptions and misalignments that emerge.

We will, too, have to resist the tendency to assume that it is other parents—not us—who are raising disrespectful and irresponsible kids. Just as it is important for us to push youth to reflect on why they think their peers are less caring and ethical than they are, it is important for us to reflect on why so many of us view ourselves as superior to other parents. We can't let ourselves off the hook. To one degree or another, the problem is each one of us.

Schools clearly also have a key role to play in developing caring, ethical students. Our data suggest that there is variation among schools in the degree to which they are “cultures of caring” and in their investment and effectiveness in promoting key social, emotional, and ethical capacities in children and youth. In some schools, students say they are significantly influenced by their school's values, that bullying and cruelty are rare, and that most other students are empathic and helpful, while in other schools students report less investment in their schools' values, higher levels of cruelty, and less willingness to help others.

There are many concrete ways that schools can promote students' ethical development and their social and emotional skills (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Weissbourd & Jones, 2012; Yoder, 2014), even in an era when schools are pressed to assure that children meet rigorous academic standards. A growing body of evidence indicates that investing in these areas can also promote academic achievement (Durlak et al., 2011).

And teachers, like parents, shouldn't pass the buck. According to our teacher survey, most teachers believe they prioritize their students being caring, but that their fellow teachers don't. Recall that 93% of teachers also viewed parents as putting their children's achievement or happiness ahead of concern for others.

Further, we will need to go beyond school walls. Attention to our children's ethical qualities in our communities may be at low point in our history. Not only are parents and schools often putting achievement and success above caring and integrity, but other contexts for supporting ethical development in many communities are evaporating. For example, participation in religious groups is declining (Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2012).

Our point is not to romanticize the past or to make a case for reviving any specific institution. Our point is that we need to create more settings where children engage in traditions and rituals that build appreciation and gratitude and a sense of responsibility for one's communities, and that enable them to practice helpfulness and service. We also need opportunities for young people to connect with respected adults who stand for important ethical values and who engage them in exploring fundamental ethical questions about, for example, how to balance their needs with others', what they owe their families, and what their obligations are to their ancestors and descendants and to those who live in distant parts of the world. A variety of community institutions as well as schools can also mobilize the wisdom and energy of youth to create more caring, ethical communities (Weissbourd & Jones, 2012). Somewhere along the way, it seems, we have lost our focus on what it means to be a part of a community. We now see the costs of that inattention in too many young people.

In the big picture, there are several principles and strategies that will help make caring a priority and that should guide all of us who interact with children and youth. Based on our experience in the field, our own experience as parents, and our knowledge of social and emotional learning and moral development, we view the following strategies as essential to developing caring, ethical children:

1. **Children and youth need ongoing opportunities to *practice* caring and helpfulness, sometimes with guidance from adults.** Children are not simply born good or bad and we should never give up on them. A good person is something one can always become, and throughout life we can develop our ethical capacities. Learning to be caring and to lead an ethical life is like learning to play an instrument or hone a craft. Daily repetition—whether it's helping a friend with homework, pitching in around the house, having a classroom job, or working on a project to reduce homelessness—and increasing challenge make caring second nature and develop and hone youth's caregiving capacities. With guidance from adults and practice, young people can also develop the skills and courage to know when and how to intervene in situations when they and others are imperiled. They can become effective "upstanders" or "first responders."
2. **Children and youth need to learn to *zoom in*,** listening closely and attending to those in their immediate circle, **and to *zoom out*,** taking in the big picture and considering multiple perspectives. It is by zooming out and taking multiple perspectives, including the perspectives of those who are too often invisible (such as the new kid in class, someone who doesn't speak their language, or the school custodian) that young people expand their *circle of concern* and become able to consider the justice of their communities and society.
3. **Children and youth need strong *moral role models*.** Being a role model doesn't mean that we need to be perfect or have all the answers. It means grappling with our flaws, acknowledging our mistakes, listening to our children and students, and



connecting our values to their ways of understanding the world. It means that we, too, need to continually practice and zoom in and out, cultivating our capacities for care, widening our circles of concern, and deepening our understanding of fairness and justice.

4. **Children and youth need to be guided in *managing destructive feelings and in thinking through ethical questions and problems*.** Often the ability to care for others is overwhelmed by anger, shame, envy, or other negative feelings. We need to teach children that all feelings are ok, but some ways of dealing with them are not helpful. Children need our help learning to cope with these feelings in productive ways. Children are also, from early ages, moral philosophers. They're naturally engaged by ethical questions. When adults spark children's thinking with ethical questions they put issues of injustice on children's radar and help children learn how to weigh their various responsibilities to others and themselves.

Sooner or later, we will need to take on the large and fundamental problem of the messages that our society sends to our children about the definition of success and what it means to be an ethical member of a community.

Changing these cultural messages will not, of course, be easy. But it's worth noting that cultural messages have fluctuated, sometimes dramatically, throughout history. The idea of self-esteem has, for example, occupied a tiny place in our history. It was not until the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the sense of the self became significant (Bell, 1976), and not until the last 40 years or so that liking oneself became an important value in its own right.

The question is not whether cultural priorities can change. It is whether we can summon—for the sake of our children's happiness and achievement and, above all, their morality—the discipline to wisely direct that change, and how soon.

## **APPENDIX: Methods**

Much of the data we present were collected using the Making Caring Common (MCC) Student Survey tool, which was developed to learn more about students' values and their perceptions of others' values, as well as about traditional domains of school climate such as physical and emotional safety, social support, and school connectedness. Below we describe the scales and items that were examined for this report.

We administered the survey to over 10,000 middle and high school students in 33 schools this past fall and winter (2013-2014). Of these schools, 21 were traditional public schools, 7 were charter schools, and 5 were independent schools. The sample included 16 urban schools, 10 rural schools, and 7 suburban schools. The sample had diverse geographic, socioeconomic, and ethnic representation.

Based on the Student Survey tool, we recently developed a Teacher, Administrator, and Staff Survey. Schools participating in the fall and winter (2013-2014) Student Survey were invited to participate in the pilot of the Teacher, Administrator, and Staff Survey. We administered the survey to over 300 middle and high school teachers, staff, and administrators in 8 schools this past fall and winter. Of these schools, 4 were traditional public schools, 1 was a charter school, and 3 were independent schools. The sample included 4 urban schools, 2 rural schools, and 2 suburban schools.

The current student survey is the result of two prior versions that were piloted in middle and high schools across the country and were revised based on embedded survey feedback questions, focus groups, and interviews with both students and school personnel. Because one of our main goals was to find out how students prioritize happiness in relationship to caring for others and achieving at a high level, in our first round of surveying we asked nearly 3,000 middle and high school students to define “happiness” in their own words. Based on these responses as well as follow-up interviews and focus groups, we defined happiness as “feeling good most of the time.” We then asked students to rank what is most important to them: “caring for others,” “achieving at a high level,” or “being a happy person (feeling good most of the time).” We also asked students to imagine how their school peers would rank these values for themselves. And we asked students to imagine what is most important to their parents: “that I care about others,” “that I achieve at a high level,” or “that I am happy (feel good most of the time).”

The Teacher, Administrator, and Staff Survey included similar questions developed to reveal how teachers, administrators, and staff prioritize happiness in relationship to caring for others and achieving at a high level. We asked teachers, administrators, and staff to rank what is most important to them: “that students care about others”, “that students achieve at a high level,” or “that students are happy (feel good most of the time).” Similarly, we asked teachers, administrators, and staff to imagine how parents, in relation to their child-raising goals, would rank these values. We also asked teachers, administrators, and staff to imagine what is most important to students: “caring about others,” “achieving at a high level,” or “being a happy person (feeling good most of the time).”

The survey also included a standardized measure of empathy, the Children’s Empathy Questionnaire (CEQ), which assesses empathy in response to a given situation (Funk, Elliott, Jenks, Bechtoldt, & Tsavoussis, 2001). The measure includes statements about events or anticipated situations that respondents are likely to have encountered and asks them to indicate whether they would respond as stated (e.g., “When I see a kid who is upset it really bothers me”; “I would feel bad if my mom’s friend got sick.”).

In order to assess student altruism, described here as engagement in prosocial behavior, the survey also included two items from Visions of Morality Scale (Shelton & McAdams, 1990). The measure includes prosocial situations that are likely to occur in everyday adolescent life. Respondents are presented with a situation and then asked how likely they are on a four-point Likert scale ranging from “definitely would” to “definitely would not” engage in the prosocial response (e.g., “The school I attend needs volunteers who will come two hours early one evening next week to help with parents’ night”).

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