

The Missing Link: Family Values Can Make a Difference

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No matter where you stand on educational reform or character education, there's no denying the fact that we are currently experiencing a worldwide epidemic of youth violence. Whether propelled by depression, fear of failure, the pain of being bullied, or a host of other troubles young people face today, more and more of them are turning to violence as a way of dealing with the stress of growing up. From the Virginia Tech massacre of 2007 to recent riots in Britain and racial attacks in Australia, it's easy to see that the problem of youth violence knows no geographical, socio-economical, or ethnic boundaries. It's a problem we all face together, and if we're going to solve it, it's going to take a united effort. So, the question becomes—where do we begin?

If you walk into a public school today, you'll no doubt see kids who are different. Not different in the sense that they wear different clothes or hang out in odd circles, not the traditional kind of different that normally comes to mind when you think back to high school.

No—these kids are different under the surface. Perhaps they keep to themselves or shy away from making eye contact with others, or maybe they deal with their pain by embracing the other extreme—wearing a fake smile, being the class clown, reaching out to teachers. Whatever their coping mechanisms, if you look closely, you'll see something similar in all of these kids, something that screams desperation, even if that scream is sometimes muffled by the roles they play for their teachers and peers.

So, what is it that these kids are desperate for? What do they need that they are not getting at home or at school? The answer is simple—basic human values instruction. These children are desperately seeking someone who can teach them how to get along in this world, how to be happy, peaceful, and successful. They are fed a stream of pocket-lining sales pitches from the media to look a certain way and wear a certain label of clothing. When the bell rings for each school day to begin, they face the scrutiny of their peers, all of whom are also trying to find their way in a world of mixed messages and misplaced values. Perhaps at some point, it all becomes too much.

Often, teachers shy away from imposing their personal values on their students. I suppose some parents think this is a good thing. Maybe I even agree to some extent. After all, would I want a teacher whose values differ from my own teaching those beliefs to my child? Perhaps not. But, what do we do about those kids who aren't taught worthwhile values by

their families or those who don't have families to teach them anything at all? What do we do when those kids show up at our doors begging to be taught? Do we turn them away? If we do, what will happen to those kids down the road? How will they deal with the stressors that we all face as our lives become increasingly complex and demanding? Will they turn to alcohol or drugs to control their fear and anxiety? Will they fill our streets and prisons with their misguided self-soothing? Will they do something unthinkable? Will it be their fault if they do?

These are all questions we must answer if we're serious about leaving no child behind in our society, as we say we are. Clearly, becoming a successful, productive, and fulfilled human being is about more than learning how to read and solve math problems. It's certainly about more than passing a standardized test, yet we continue to place so much importance on what are arguably trivial things, and in the meantime, kids continue to suffer—from the pain of being abandoned, from the fear and confusion of feeling lost, from the ignorance of not knowing any better. As David Light Shields (2011) says in his article *Character as the Aim of Education*, "we have too often equated excellence of education with the quantity of the content learned, rather than with the quality of character the person develops" (p. 49).

The school system is the ideal place for these seemingly lost children to receive the moral guidance they are craving. Teachers spend a good seven hours a day with these kids and no doubt impose a powerful influence on their lives, for better or for worse. Failing to take at least a small portion of each day to address issues such as social skills, coping mechanisms, life strategies, and character issues is a mistake that frankly, we can't afford to make. In fact, there are four key values all public school teachers should impress upon their students on a regular basis:

- **Love**- Students should be taught to love and respect themselves. Only by loving themselves can students ever learn to truly love others. Love, being the opposite of fear, is the one force that truly has the potential to change our world for the better.
- **Peace**-Teachers need to model and teach conflict resolution so that students learn to peacefully interact with one another even when a problem or dispute arises.
- **Compassion**-When given the opportunity to communicate with one another and share their feelings, students will learn to empathize and feel compassion for their fellow man.
- **Integrity**- Teachers should stress the importance of integrity to one's self-esteem. When students learn to make decisions based on honesty and integrity, they can then feel proud of their choices and empowered to continue making a positive difference in our world.

That is not to say that current curricula and content objectives should be thrown out the window. On the contrary, they should be kept intact and even enhanced. When character

education is taught alongside traditional standards and objectives, they complement each other rather nicely just as they do in real life. For instance, when a lesson in English class turns into a debate as to whether or not the main character was justified in his vengeful actions, and students are encouraged to think of other more productive ways the problem could be resolved, they are not just learning about literature or developing critical thinking skills (useful things in their own right), but they're also internalizing important moral lessons that can serve them for a lifetime. Stiff-Williams (2010) argues this idea eloquently, stating that "rather than adding a new course to an already overloaded school curriculum, character education should be integrated with other subject areas and routinely taught through all classes and by all teachers" (p. 115).

Ideally, values instruction should not be taught in the classroom alone. When students have these ideas reinforced at home, they become even more engrained. As British Prime Minister David Cameron stated in reaction to recent riots, "if we want to have any hope of mending our broken society, family and parenting is where we've got to start." Unfortunately, there's no way to guarantee that all parents will do their part to help their children develop basic human values. There is something we can do to encourage them, however. By inviting parents, grandparents, and other family members to take part in values-based education through in-class activities as well as enrichment exercises that can be completed at home, teachers can have a positive and transformative impact on the home environment.

What would be the fruits of such a targeted and concerted effort? Would our children get along better with one another both inside and outside of school? Would they, over time, develop their own moral compass and as a result, become confident and empowered young adults? Would they then take on leadership roles in their communities and influence others to do the same? Would we save just one kid from being the victim or perpetrator of an act of violence? Would our world change, if merely a little at a time? It's certainly possible, and if there's even a small chance—an inkling of a possibility— that we could really make a difference, one that goes beyond teaching a kid long division, shouldn't we at least try?

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