

October 13, 2011

Dear Families of The Island School,

On Tuesday evening, I attended a PALS (Passionate About Learning Society) lecture sponsored by the Bainbridge Rotary. The three members of the panel were all from Bainbridge High School's math and STEM programs. The topic was a controversial book called *That Used to Be Us*. One of the points in the book – and a point that all of the panel members heartily supported, even at the high school level – was the importance of play and discovery in learning and teaching. One of the primary challenges with achieving that is the anxiety parents experience with regard to their children's performance and "success."

More and more articles are being published in mainstream magazines and newspapers about how parent anxiety is having a significant impact upon our children. Most of the latest information is reinforcing the ideas published a few years ago in Madeline Levine's book, *The Price of Privilege*, which she wrote in response to the soaring number of "tween" and teenage suicides that she was experiencing among children of "privileged" families (incomes of \$120,000 to \$180,000). Reading her book is like reading a testimonial for The Island School's philosophy and approach to education, which is fundamentally grounded in doing what works best for children.

Levine's information is based upon 25 years of research and experience as a counselor; she explains that our baby boomer generation has raised children with the expectation that they are supposed to be *stellar* at everything. What many parents have difficulty accepting is that children, like their parents, are good at some things and not good at others. Levine believes that we have forgotten the bell curve in our population, which dictates that everything (including talent and intelligence) tends to regress toward the mean – that is, everything comes back to the middle.

Levine also pointed out that the current level of anxiety in parents and children used to be reserved for rare, life-threatening situations. Heightened anxiety has now become the daily experience of children who are constantly pressured toward doing more and more and doing it better and better. This parent anxiety over children's success has also driven the popular culture to espouse that "stuff matters more than relationships, that the individual matters more than the community, and that competition matters more than cooperation." *None of these are values that develop personal integrity or a sense of community.* When performance in academics and athletics becomes more important than these core values, the result can be children who lie and cheat in order to meet their parents' expectations. *In fact, Levine sees integrity, decency, and knowing right from wrong as the core values which are most important in making a person successful.* A number of new studies are strongly reinforcing that she is right. Talk to Dr. John Medina, whose research in *Brain Rules for Baby* indicates that if you want your children to be successful in college and life, teach them *empathy*. (Thought-provoking, isn't it?)

Levine went on to explain that this culture of pressure is destroying what is the most important experience for children – the opportunity to *play*. **She stated that “*play is not inconsequential; it miniaturizes the world and teaches children how to manage it.*”** Levine stated that “play IS the business of childhood.” (Does that sound familiar?) Through play, children internalize the values and skills necessary for success in life. She further stated that the research on homework recommends none in lower school, an hour in middle school and two hours in high school as the optimum for student success. This is confirmed by Dr. Harris Cooper, who has studied and published all of the available research on homework.

Levine also spoke of how over-management of children by their parents significantly slows their growth by robbing children of the opportunity to face challenges and to practice overcoming them. Facing and conquering difficult challenges is one of the best ways for children to build their capacity for becoming resilient, resourceful adults. It teaches children to look *inside themselves for the tools to meet a challenge*. This develops confidence and competence. Robbed of this practice, children will look *outside of themselves for help – and this help, unfortunately, often comes in the form of alcohol, drugs and sex as they move into middle school*. When our children are toddlers, we readily accept that they must practice falling down before learning how to walk; we are rarely as comfortable allowing our children or teens to “fall down” and learn from the experience. Parents need to “be present” for their children without fixing problems for them. Doing so sends the message that you lack confidence in your child’s ability to resolve his/her own problems. Research also tells us that fear of failure is a significant impediment to achievement. At the very least, it certainly can prevent us from trying new things.

So what does Levine recommend? She says that we need to celebrate our children for *who they are*, not for what we want them to become, while also encouraging them to become *good, caring human beings who recognize the importance of being a responsible part of a community*. We should *be present* with our children without taking control of their lives. Families need to share meals, connect with their children and reinforce family values. Daily chores should be assigned to children, as they are key to learning how to be part of a community, and *home is the first community for every child*. Children need lots of time to play and to practice “*falling down*” and learning from mistakes – and that it’s safe to make them. And last, but not least, parents should take very good care of themselves. You are your children’s first role models. You need to safeguard your own health and well-being in order to have the physical and emotional stamina to “be present” for your children as their models for what it means to be a good, healthy person.

It’s big and important work for us all, and we are honored to share the work with you.

Trish