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.[1]

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 & Kearl, 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.

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1 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.

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.

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.

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Read the full report at makingcaringcommon.org