Success At All Costs Including Childhood: Why We Need to Reframe Expectations, Redefine Success, and Rethink the Way We Parent

A review of

Teach Your Children Well: Parenting for Authentic Success
by Madeline Levine
$26.99

Reviewed by
Julie M. Rutledge

Millennials are going to college and entering the workforce less prepared than ever. This statement is counterintuitive, given the countless number of hours America’s children are spending on homework, with tutors, preparing for and taking standardized achievement and college preparatory exams, and engaging in extracurricular activities. How is this possible?

Millennials are burned out as freshmen and sophomores in college. They have been provided every opportunity by their parents and families to get into the best colleges, in the best programs, with the best scholarships. They were provided more opportunities to be successful than their parents were provided. The road to success was paved for them, and all they had to do was walk down it and take advantage of the opportunities; yet, they are
burned out before they are even halfway through an undergraduate degree. How is this possible?

It is possible because, as a culture, we have focused so much on children’s success (by our definition of success) that we have quit focusing on the children themselves. While we have been spending hours thinking we are doing what is best for our children by providing them opportunities for success, we are, instead, robbing them of their childhoods and ourselves of the privilege of enjoying them and knowing them for who they authentically are in that moment.

In Teach Your Children Well: Parenting for Authentic Success, Madeline Levine describes the toll that this “success at all costs” mind frame has taken on our children while also giving tools for parents, educators, and practitioners to use to help our children, as Levine puts it, not just to be happy but to have well-being.

The book begins by exploring how we currently define success and the pros and cons of that definition. Often, when one is discussing children, success revolves around academics. However, as Levine points out, GPAs and standardized exams are not the only measures of intelligence or the only predictors of future success; yet, these are the main focus of children’s education. In fact, “most business leaders are saying that content and technical skills are a distant second to skills like problem solving, communicating well, and asking good questions,” and children will be entering a workforce “where problem solving, innovative thinking, adaptability, and initiative promise [are] of far greater value than the ability to know the ‘right answer’” (pp. 14–15).

This harkens back to Piaget’s research; he was just as interested in the reasons that children gave for their answers as he was in the answers themselves. The current academic system focuses on the latter, but the workplace values the former.

What we can take from Levine’s suggestions is that we should respect our individual child’s talent and uniqueness and accept that those may not be in standardized testing and 4.0 GPAs. “People are productive in all kinds of different ways with all kinds of eccentricities [and] creativity is stifled when we value conformity over individuality and rote learning over enthusiastic exploration” (p. 204). Thus, it is not about everyone parenting one way but about parenting the right way for your child.

The question that may go through the mind as one reads the introduction and opening chapters of Levine’s book is, “Why are we pushing our children to grow up so fast?” She describes the result of this drive to perform as children who are “anxious and depressed [and who] often self-medicate with drugs or alcohol. Sleep is difficult and they walk around in a fog of exhaustion” (p. 12). This may be because we are deciding how children can be successful before they even know who they are (from a developmental perspective)—concepts which Levine explores as she answers the question, “How Did We Get Into This Mess?” (the title of Chapter 2).

Many of the concepts she discusses in Part One (Authentic Success: It’s Not About Bleeding Hearts Versus Tiger Moms) of the book will be familiar as hot-topic issues in
current child development literature: lack of free play, overscheduling children, helicopter parenting, the obesity epidemic, and the effects of bullying, to name a few. In fact, some of these topics are so prevalent in the current social dialogue, they can even be seen in recent documentaries such as *Race to Nowhere* and *Bully*. This portion of the book is an excellent resource for current research on these topics, what the research means (from a practical perspective), how parents and practitioners can use it, and real-life examples with feedback.

In Part Two, Levine focuses on three distinct periods of childhood: elementary school, middle school, and the high school years. In each of these chapters of the book, she summarizes important tasks of this developmental stage. With these tasks, she includes common questions that parents have related to these tasks and practical, easy-to-understand suggestions on how parents can help. Part Two goes into more specifics on the topics she introduces in Part One (e.g., play, bullying).

One of the tasks of early childhood—remembering to play—weaves together many of the important points from Levine’s book. First, understanding where children should be developmentally is important. She writes that due to “misunderstanding of the basics of child development,” we ignore “one of the most important contributors to children’s well-being” (p. 79). Research has shown unstructured play to be associated with children’s mastery of motor skills, social competence, attention, memory, logical reasoning, language and literacy, imagination, creativity, reflection, self-control, and ability to take another’s perspective.

Second, valuing “soft skills” (e.g., emotional competence, creativity, relationship skills) is just as important as valuing academic skills and assuming that children can focus on these soft skills later in life is inaccurate. Many of these soft skills benefit from unstructured play; “it is so essential for healthy child development that it has been recognized by the United Nations as being a right of every child” (p. 79). Third, parents, educators, and practitioners can benefit from direct, practical advice based on these research findings. “Experts recommend two hours of unstructured play [during early childhood] for every hour of structured play” (p. 82). “Children of this age should, at most, have three extracurricular activities—one social, one physical, and one artistic” (p. 83).

Some statements may be hard for parents to read and even harder to accept, but *Teach Your Children Well* takes a head-on approach to issues that should be at the forefront of conversations about our children. Children are “failure deprived”: not given enough opportunities to fail in age-appropriate ways, leading to a sense of overconfidence in abilities instead of being able to recognize where they truly do excel and areas where they need improvement. There is also a mentality of “failure is not an option,” which may drive parents and educators to actions that cause children to be failure deprived.

However, if failure in grade school, middle school, and high school is not an option, when do children have the opportunity to take risks and learn about who they are and what they are good at doing? Resilience (i.e., bouncing back from failure) is not an inborn character trait—it must be learned. Time needs to be spent teaching these skills, along with math and science. Do we care more about performance (grades, GPAs, achievement tests) or
mastery (true understanding)? Would we rather our children be smart (what current practices tend to focus on) or good?

In examining research on parenting, one finds that countless articles and books tout the benefits of authoritative parenting. The relation between this parenting style and positive outcomes in children is well documented. If one had to label the parenting style Levine describes through this book, it would be true authoritative parenting style (Baumrind, 1966), which emphasizes having both high expectations (i.e., demandingness) and high levels of warmth, acceptance, and involvement (i.e., responsiveness; Aunola, Stattin, & Nurmi, 2000; Baumrind, 1989; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). These dimensions include limit setting (e.g., limiting extracurricular activities), listening to your child (knowing your child’s individual talents and uniqueness), being in sync with your child (knowing when he or she is involved in too much, is hurt, is excited, etc.), having high expectations (i.e., expecting your child to do his or her best and encouraging and praising the journey and growth, even if the outcome is not a 4.0).

Parents, in particular, may find the last three chapters especially helpful. They focus on seven coping skills that children need and how we help them develop these skills, defining and living your family values (with actual exercises to help parents identify their values and how to create action plans around those values), and they end with a discussion on becoming the parents we want to be.

Teach Your Children Well is a useful, practical resource, but it is also a battle cry for us to wake up and recognize the disservice that our society is doing to our children. However, it is clear that the blame is placed on the system and that parents are doing what they feel is best to help their children not only survive but thrive in this system. Thus, parents are not to blame, but they are key figures to revolutionize a social structure that is not only unbeneﬁcial to their children but destructive.

In summary, although parents, educators, and practitioners may get the most direct benefits from Levine’s book, the issues she tackles should be important to everyone. Children are the future of our society, and the success of that future is at stake. We are sending children into that future ill-prepared and burned out. It is time to reframe our expectations, redefine success, and rethink the way we parent.

References

