



Education

Julia Steiny: We need the cooperation of children to help them succeed in school and beyond

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Ted Wachtel started his long career in community building with a special empathy for the so-called “behaviorally challenged.” Which is to say, children that we parents and the public think of as the “bad kids.” They have much to teach us. Especially about how little we’re there for them.

Currently in Pennsylvania, Wachtel leads the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP), whose tag line is “Restoring Community in a Disconnected World.”

But his story began in the 1970s while teaching in a traditional public school, but not loving the school’s authoritarian culture. Top-down, my-way-or-the-highway rules offer only two choices: compliance or defiance. Meek compliance is very different from active, engaged cooperation. So students either obey or rebel, and the system effectively separates the “good kids” from the “bad.”

Looking for another way, Wachtel quit his job and began working with older foster kids, a very tough group. They need firm, consistent discipline to counteract the chaotic homes from which they were removed. And like the rest of us, they need support, but by itself, affectionate understanding can become enabling, too permissive. Herewith began the Wachtel gospel of “high structure/high support.” Think: I’m on your side, but that horrible behavior needs to stop. What do you need to be cooperative? I’ll hear you and help you, but if you do it again, there will be consequences.

Soon the courts, schools and distraught parents were sending him a steady stream of scary or destructive kids. Wachtel’s wife, Susan, also an educator, helped him create the Community Service Foundation (CSF), now a network of 7 alternative schools and 12 group homes. CSF kids learn how to cooperate with others for their own self-interest. When they go back to their home communities, they succeed at higher rates than miscreants in other programs.

Even so, they still return to their same old communities, their authoritarian schools and often-clueless families. Some become skilled at finessing around emotion-deaf disciplinary systems and relatives. But others regress to the behavior that got them in trouble in the first place.

So Wachtel expanded his focus to the kids' parents.

In 1981, Wachtel and two therapists, David and Phyllis York, authored "Tough Love," also about balancing the demands of firm parental authority with explicit affection. The book describes how groups of parents can become a team, a mini-community capable of holding accountable their out-of-control kids. The authors write that the impact of the 1960s and '70s, including the antiwar movement and Watergate scandal, "confirmed our already skeptical attitude toward authoritarian leaders. What was torn down has not been replaced, and an air of cynicism and disrespect for authority persists. The police, teachers and parents are no longer held in such high regard as they once were, for we have thrown out authority along with authoritarianism." This is still true today, more than 30 years later.

In an interview with me, Wachtel lamented, "People liked the tough part and forgot the love. They'd say: I did the love thing and threw my kid out of the house. That's not love. They didn't leave a note on the locked door explaining that the kid could spend the night at so-and-so's house." So the "tough love" idea itself got waylaid by a rising tide of authoritarianism.

In the 1990s, the terrified public wanted the growing menace of drugs, drinking and defiance among the young to stop. Prisons became a booming industry. Schools enforced "zero-tolerance" rules, which effectively criminalized what had once been just stupid adolescent behavior. Laying down the law triumphed in schools and courts. While communities, families and relationships continued to crumble.

So in 1999, now founder and president of IIRP, Wachtel shifted his attention to building strong communities in schools. He explained, "We realized that every person in criminal justice (police, courts) expects bad behavior to show up every day. But schools never expected behavior to deteriorate as much or as fast as it has. They're going out of their minds.

"Personally, I think that worldwide we're trying to adapt to an unprecedented social experiment. We are not, for the most part, living within reach of our extended family. Young people tend to leave, and old people are not living out their lives in the community where they grew up. Divorce is not keeping families together. This is not a judgment, just a fact. We don't live in homogeneous communities where people discipline each others' kids. Although," Wachtel laughs, "I did mention that when speaking at a mining town in Wales, and they all assured me they do discipline each others' kids. So it still happens in some places. Still, the biggest single change in all our lives is rebuilding social connectedness."

It's no exaggeration to say that America is losing its kids. One-third of them don't graduate from high school, and another third graduate with skills well below 10th-grade level. And while public concern for education is at a fevered pitch, the solutions are mostly authoritarian — more tests, higher standards, threats, blame, punishment.

We'll never get kids to learn and succeed without their active, self-interested cooperation. Schools can demand compliance and push the defiant out the door. But true success will mean working WITH the kids. Not enabling or coddling them, but being clear about our needs as adults, while taking seriously their needs, too. They aren't just going to do as we say anymore. And that's not a judgment, just a fact.

For more info about IIRP, visit www.iirp.org.

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