

Wellesley Middle School Parent Teacher Organization (PTO)
Minutes from the March 15, 2016 Meeting

President's Welcome: Andra Jensen and Anna Kobayashi Lomes

Thank you for coming out on this cold and rainy night. Last month, the Metro West findings were presented and we learned that one of the key findings is that our kids are stressed. Tonight we have an expert to help us in learning how to help our kids handle stress.

Speaker: Dr. Rob Evans

[PTO Note: The news below are highlight from Dr. Evans presentations. We would encourage those who were not able to attend that if an opportunity arises to hear Dr. Evans speak that you do so. It was a very good presentation with many helpful and concrete suggestions on how to help our child deal with stress. These notes cannot do justice to the presentation.]]

- We are well aware of stress and do not need the Metro West Survey results to tell us we need to be concerned about stress.
- Context matters. It is hard to know what something means when you read increase use of marijuana. The patterns shift a little - certain things go up and certain things go down — and we do not usually see long term trends. Over the past few years, we have been overwhelmed by the number of referrals we have received. There is more evidence of anxiety and depression in kids and that it is starting at younger ages and continuing up to high school
- It is easy to be concerned given the data from the survey. What is hard is to understand where it [the stress] all comes from and what to do about the stress? My experience has been that one of the real complexities is that — (1) life is getting so fast and complicated that it is disempowering parents; and (2) we are also chronically ambivalent about what we want for our kids
- *Ambivalence* — Guidance counselors hear (from parents) we want our kids to be happy but we also want our kids to go to Harvard. We would say we want our children to be fundamentally happy. We would say we want our kids to be good at problem solving. But we do not want our kids to do the things that would allow them to get to that point. We are all crazy about our kids. How do we help our kids manage stress? The trouble is not the “knowing” what to do but rather actually doing it. It is not always rationale. Kids are different. Some kids are responsible and considerate. Some are not always that quiet and considerate. In adolescence, the quiet ones get noisy but the noisy kids continue to be noisy.
- The truth is that it is very hard — it is hard to make a plan full difference. Tonight we will talk about a few things that can help kids grow up to better manage stress and what gets in the ways it.
- What would help a child grow up over time and manage stress? There is no way to stress proof your child and we have to help them gain capacities to handle problems. You cannot do this by simply praising them to death. That will not do it. The kinds of things that can make a difference if they get them in sufficient quantities helps them manage stress and deal with stress when they encounter it. There are three things kids need: (1) nurture; (2) structure; and (3) latitude - freedom to learn from experience.

Nurture:

- When I think of nurture, I think of Julia Child and Mr. Rogers, who are nurturing people. Little babies die if they do not get nurture; kids never outgrow their need for nurture. They just need it to different extent but always need. Nurture gives you what you need to have confidence. Nurture normally happens. Kids do not need lots of it; they need just the right amount.

Structure:

- Kids need structure so they can grown up to manage stress well. They need to know what is inside box which is what they can do and what is outside the box which is what you cannot do. Kids do not 85 rules; they need clarity and a clear box about what they can do. Kids who have it will generally stay in the box and be better able to manage impulse. When you grow up in box that has expectations it tell you things you can do and things that you cannot do and this capacity helps you learn how to manage stressful situations because it teaches kids how to handle such things. (*i.e.*, as a child Dr. Evans had to go to church and visit his grandmother. She was not pleasant to visit but he had to do it and doing so taught him self-discipline.)

Latitude:

- Latitude means giving kids the freedom to learn from experience including from mistakes, errors and noncatastrophic unfairness (*i.e.*, your child is assigned to a teacher they did not want. This experience will help them. No one get through life without having to work for a boss you do not like and your child's experience with not having the teacher they want will help them in the future.) This means kids need to have some room to find out what happens. How does a child become a good problem solver? There are two extremes — (1) you do not protect you child from problems or (2) you never expose your child to problems. You need the in-between, not the extremes. Kids who grown up in the middle tend to grow up to hand problems better.

The challenge in helping your children manage stress is not the knowing what to do. We know all these three things — nurture, structure and latitude. It is doing these three things.

How do we do these three things?

- Nurture: To be nurturing to a child requires you to be with them. Research shows we spend little time with our kids especially if you exclude the time watching them on the sidelines at a sporting event. Kids need time with us because it is one of the ways they learn. We try to give them so many advantages and that requires less from them and we are doing this quickly because we are all stressed for time. We create myths, *i.e.*, quality time — we are so busy that we rarely see each other but when we see each others it is special. This is not good; children need more. Children are born selfish so there is lots of low quality time (which is not real quality time). [Story — My son was always upset because he wanted to see Larry Bird and we had never taken him to a game. One night, I got tickets and took the kids to the game. The Celtics were being beaten so I wanted to leave early and had to pull the kids out of the garden. They did not want to leave. When we got home, I told the kids to go to bed and my son said that he was hungry. I told him to go to bed and my son said “you never do anything i want” — said even though they had just done what he wanted. In these moments, you cannot have quality time. In these moments, you sound like your parents. This is how we pass culture one — this is a teachable moment. When kids do not experience being sent to bed in this situation, life is easier for them but they do not learn the skills necessary. Harder to do this in the exact moment. Kids need enough of our time so that we can tolerate the low quality times with them. Kids need enough of our time to take the pressure off. The problem is that we have so little time because we are swamped and so are they.]

- Structure: We have lots of nice kids for whom “no you cannot” or “yes you must” are novel phrases to them. (*Example* — Dr. Evans was at the Linden Store and he heard a child call his mom. The child yelled at her that he needed money and he needed it now. Kids make demands.) A parent in Weston said that kids act like they are house guests. This is a dilemma. What kids need is not iron rigidity — they need clarity that some things are not negotiable. This teaches them that they can actually tolerate things and teaches them tolerance. (*Example* — Dr. Evans heard a kid shouting and then I heard the psychologist say, “because you goddam father says so.” I debated whether he would be embarrassed by what I heard him say. He wanted his kids to get showered and changed. This man is profane and loved his son, it was his way of saying to his kids get down here. Sometimes that is all you have to say. Explaining your reasoning to the child 3-4 times is not going to change your child’s mind, sometime you just have to say because I said so or because they are my rules — you do not need to start at this point but you do need to get there — they need to understand that some things are not negotiable. If you do not do it, you will not teach them to grow and problem solve.
- Latitude: Parents love their kids and want the best for them. We want schools to prepare the path for the kids rather than teaching the kids how to handle the path. Think back to your childhood, the thing(s) you learned that are most meaningful in your life most often come from loss and learning. If the effort to reduce stress for our kids is focused on making things less stressful than we are missing a key point the missing key point — kids need to learn how to handle the stress. [*Example* — Before leaving for college Dr. Evans was already missing his girlfriend. If he had not had this experience, it would make it less likely that he would have empathy for others going through loss.]

Good News and Recommendations to Help Kids — Simple but not always easy:

- (1) How we set expectations: There is very little difference which college a person attends with respect to success in future. The real importance at college is did the student connect with someone at college or became engage in an important activity. It is important to realize that things that will impact long term success go way beyond H.S. transcript or which college you will attend. **** when it is possible, try to take the longer view — what is the lesson that can be learned here rather than what if she is always miserable **** For kids, give them enough nurturing —more Mr. Rogers in their lives — more attention to whether they try hard rather than whether they outscore each other. Kids who are encouraged to try are more likely to keep trying and this is correlated to success in life. Mr. Rogers cared about what you did but he just liked you. Kids feels that their self-worth is determined by how they perform. Kids to need to know you like them just for themselves. Their worth should not be determined by outside factors.
- (2) Structure: Hold the line on big stuff and you as parents decide what the big stuff is. If your child is consistently doing something that you do not like or that turns your stomach, ask you kids to try it some other way or not to do it. Even if your children goes to do “it” at another kids house, that requires the kids to leave home to do it and know that you did not want them do it. This makes a difference to kids. **HOLD THE LINE** — Kids will not like it or not like you but you must tolerate it. What you need to do is let them get glad again. Send them message that it is not negotiable and move on and give your child the time to accept it — kids need to learn that they can stand this and those kids will learn to handle stress better. If the kids do not like the line that you draw, well, they will have to get glad again.
- (3) Latitude: Do less not more — (i) you want you kids to grow up to be resilient and problem solvers. Teach them to do this by not doing things for them on a regular basis that they can do for themselves; (ii) when they encounter a problem, do not leap to fix it before they have a chance to try to fix it for themselves. [*Example*: A kid comes home upset and says coach is playing kids who are not as good as me. Ask them — what are you going to do about it? If your child’s suggestion is not the best, help them get to a better approach. Help them learn problem solving.)

(4) What may be most helpful? — build on your strength as a parent; shift your focus on your child to see how full the glass is rather than half empty; and understand that there are many things that do not change about a child, *i.e.*, a shy child is not likely going to be a radio personality. Temperament usually stays the same. Bossy at ten then bossy at 45. Almost every way of parenting has strengths and weaknesses. You cannot integrate into your parenting something that is fundamentally at odds with who you are. **** do not need books to tell you how to replace who you are as a parent **** As a parent make a list of your strengths as a parent and your weaknesses. Put the list of weaknesses side under a large pile and put your list of strengths somewhere you can see it and every once in a while, consult it and try to do one of the things on the list a little better.

(5) You are always teaching them: They will learn more from your example more than what you preach to them. The odds are that you kids will grow up like you and me with strengths and weakness and in the long run their success will depend on their capacity to maximize their strengths. Most kids are resilient and they do not need you to be perfect. Teach them resiliency by watching your example.

Questions:

Can you teach generosity or empathy? Yes, but this is better taught by modeling and example than preaching generosity. Ideally, preaching is complimented with the example you set. Let your kids see you being generous with your time — do not talk about it being generous with your time — being generous with your time in front of the kids.

When do you get to the point when it is too much for kids in terms of handling their own stress? Depends on the child and the situation. In general, if it persist and no lessons learned or headway made with stress or problem. Hard for us to let our kids tolerate difficult situations. If it is something where you have a doubt about whether to take action, get advice (partners, doctors, school). Consider whether the issue sustained or not resolved and then figure out a way to get involved but not hopefully by rescuing but by helping them. There are lots of trustworthy people around at school and see if they are seeing the same problem — talk to people and do not be alone with it when you are getting worried about your child.

Last thought from Dr. Evans:

I would be incredibly rich if I could invent a pill and for 36 hours it would be like you are being with your kids as if you are their grandparents — would give you a very different perspective — this distance gives you a wider field of view and a longer lens of perspective. We are too close sometimes. There is a quote from Mr. Rogers — “All of us have special ones who have loved us into being. Would you just take, along with me, ten seconds to think of the people who have helped you become who you are.” Whatever that person did for you is what you need to do for your kids. Simple lessons — most of the kids could stand more Mr. Rogers, more focus on effort and clarity on non-negotiables. Most kids are likely to do better if they can learn and live with things not going well — mistakes or unfairnesses. Model behavior you want to teach them rather than preaching about the behavior.

Notes respectfully submitted by Connie Burton